

Simulating Disempowerment: The Rhetoric and Reception of Social Realism in Video Games

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Abstract

As the medium's audience has diversified and grown, video games occupy an increasingly significant role in cultural and ideological fabric of society. As a result, the past two decades have witnessed a boom in video game research. Many studies associated with this field have been effective in identifying the role that video games serve as vehicles for ideology and political persuasion. Most, however, have been predominantly theoretical in nature, relying on the development of unverified frameworks and game analysis.

This study seeks to expand this area of research with an empirically grounded methodology. It does this by examining the rhetoric and reception of two games, *Cart Life* (Hofmeier, 2010) and *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013), that attempt to engage players by simulating experiences of disempowerment and which are notable for their politically cognisant content. Drawing on theoretical frameworks developed in the field of audience reception studies, the study examines the ideological encoding of these games before assessing their reception with accounts from participants who played the games. The study argues that the two games utilise experiences of ludic disempowerment, in a manner comparable to the narratological disempowerment utilised in traditional social realist media, to communicate a political message.

The study proceeds, however, to identify how the distinctive features of the video game medium may cause the political content of these experiences to be overlooked or re-interpreted by audience members. In examining the roles of realism, polyvalence and emotion in video game reception, the thesis argues that whilst games of disempowerment can be effective tools for the simulation and exploration of complex political and social problems, the distinctive features of the video game medium may also serve to complicate the reception process.

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Introduction

Over the past four decades video games have grown to become one of the most globally pervasive and influential entertainment mediums. In 2019, the global video games market was estimated to be worth \$152.1 billion (Newzoo, 2019), an increase of 9.3% from 2018's calculation (Newzoo, 2018a). Video game audiences have expanded and diversified significantly. In 2018 an estimated 23.1 to 37.3 million members of the UK population were classed as video game players, with a near even match between men and women (Newzoo, 2018b; ISFE, 2019). Meanwhile, video games and gaming culture have invaded the spheres of other long-established entertainment forms and social structures, including blockbuster films, novels and television programmes, business, education and labour, occupying and influencing the lives of those who do not yet engage with the medium directly (Muriel and Crawford, 2018, pp. 16–50). Video games have therefore solidified themselves as a cornerstone of 21st century entertainment culture. The popularity of the medium itself suggests that video games are worthy of academic study: as time progresses, an increasing number of people are playing video games, engaging with gaming culture, and contributing to that culture, both as consumers and participatory “prosumers” offering their labour and creativity to expand the capabilities of video game content and franchises (Jenkins, 2006; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

Historically speaking, the content of video games has tended to revolve around situations that are unlikely to occur in most people's day-to-day lives. Fantasy and science-fiction are among the mediums most popular genres, while even games with

more familiar settings, such as sports games, tend to elevate players to a level of prestige that they are unlikely to experience in reality. Increasingly, however, game developers are exploring how the medium can be used to explore the everyday lives of ordinary people, in particular those who are in some way marginalised or disempowered in contemporary society. Whilst games that endeavour to explore reality in this way have traditionally been marginalised within the categories of 'serious' or 'experimental' games, they are increasing earning a place in mainstream gaming culture, with *Cart Life* (Hofmeier, 2010) and *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013), the two games that are explored in depth in this study, serving as prime examples. Whilst the growth in the popularity of these types of alternative gaming experiences is clear, a question that remains unanswered is how players respond to these experiences. Do they intimately engage with the situations that these games seek to simulate? Do they engage politically with the messages that are encoded within these experiences? Or are they dismissive of this type of content, engaging with these games on the basis of their entertainment value alone? How might these types of games influence those who play them?

This study seeks to address these questions and in doing so develop a greater understanding of how players respond not only to games that simulate experiences of disempowerment, but of how players respond to the messages and ideas that are conveyed by video games more generally. The remainder of this introduction explores the research themes addressed here in more detail, beginning with an overview of academic research on video games, proceeding with an exposition of the video game reception process and concluding with a summary of the study's key objectives and a breakdown of the structure of the thesis.

Video Game Studies

Given the increasingly pivotal role that the medium occupies in contemporary society, it is of little surprise that a growing number of researchers are committing themselves to developing an understanding of how the popularity of the medium is influencing the societies that we live in. Prior to the growth of video games as a popular entertainment medium, games were granted little significance in academic discourse. However, the advent of video games in the 1970s and the growth in their popularity over the succeeding decades has prompted a great deal of scholarly activity in addition to a renewed interest in the works of scholars writing about games prior the era of digital gaming. Much of the material that emerged in response to the popularity of early home gaming systems such as the Atari 2600 and the Nintendo Entertainment System was reactionary, presenting the video game medium as a cause of aggressive behaviour and proliferator of sexist paradigms. However, as the industry has grown more diverse, and the academic community has likewise come to be more accepting of the multiple ways in which media products are interpreted and consumed, scholarship on the intercourse between video games and society has come to embrace the myriad ways in which the medium can comment on, reflect and influence social relationships.

Academic discourse on games prior to the advent of digital gaming tends to circulate around the works of cultural historian Huizinga and sociologist Caillois. Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (2014) is often cited as the first piece of scholarly work to seriously engage with the role that games have in the cultural and social activities of human beings. *Homo Ludens* focuses on the role of play as a cultural phenomenon, one which not only serves as a means by which human beings create and express

cultural identity, but also one which permeates across other areas of society, such as art, philosophy and law. Caillois' *Man, Play and Games* (1961) builds on Huizinga's work by providing a detailed taxonomy of the variety of experiences and structures employed in games. According to Caillois, games are built on one or more of four key principles: chance, competition, mimicry and vertigo, which Caillois refers to interchangeably with the Greek words *alea*, *agon*, *mimesis* and *ilinx*. In addition to simply using these terms to make sense of and describe the structural make-up of particular games, Caillois places these concepts within a social context by suggesting that the types of games favoured by particular communities may be indicative of that society's underlying social structure (p. 83).

The emergence of video games in the 1970s altered academic discourse on games significantly. Prior to arcade successes like *Pong* (Atari, 1972), *Space Invaders* (Taito Corporation, 1978) and *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980), games were most commonly either flexible products of individual and collective imagination or culturally inherited games played within a group context. Early video games, however, were structured audio-visual products with fixed content and rule systems. Perhaps most significantly, they were also marketed almost exclusively for a young audience. This resulted in a great deal of public concern regarding the impact that video games were having on young people. In particular, many were concerned about the impact that exposure to violence in video games may have had on children's levels of aggression. The principle activity of the academic community regarding video games at this time was to respond to these public anxieties. Psychologists conducted studies in an attempt to ascertain whether or not violent video games fostered violent behaviours (Gibb *et al.*, 1983; Anderson and Ford, 1986; Cooper and Mackie,

1986; Graybill *et al.*, 1987; Schutte *et al.*, 1988; Bartholow, Sestir and Davis, 2005). This approach to the study of video games has endured in the 21st century (Adachi and Willoughby, 2011) and debates on the topic within the public sphere are also ongoing (Ducharme, 2018).

An additional factor that grew to cause concern during the early period of game studies was the representation of gender, sex and ethnicity in video games. This became a prolific issue in the early 1990s with the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System. The system's enhanced graphics and capacity to deliver continuous gameplay over multiple sessions enabled its games to evoke a richer representation of social relationships than its arcade counterparts and more limited home-console predecessors. The fact that this caused concern at this early stage is evident in two publications in particular: Provenzo's Jr.'s qualitative study *Video Kids: Making Sense of Nintendo* (1991) and Gailey's theoretical article 'Mediated Messages: Gender, Class, and Cosmos in Home Video Games' (1993). Provenzo's *Video Kids* examined how the games produced for the popular Nintendo Entertainment System functioned to proliferate and reinforce particular ideologically informed conceptions of gender and violence. The study indicates that whilst the video games format itself does not necessarily negatively influence child development, the games made for the Nintendo system tended to espouse socially regressive messages regarding gender and violence. Gailey's article likewise drew attention to patterns of negative representation used in popular video games, placing emphasis on the way video games of the late eighties and early nineties dealt with gender and class. These issues continue to be among some of the chief concerns for researchers interested in the interplay between video games and

society. Many of the studies listed above, in particular those which tackle problems of representation in video games, have enduring value in their efforts to understand the impact that video games have on their players and continue to inform contemporary debates regarding gender, class and ideology in games.

The 1990s, however, witnessed a further shift in emphasis on video game research. Students who had been playing games since the seventies were entering academia and were interested in gaining a greater understanding of the unique ontology of games. Prior to this point in time resources on games which looked at the unique attributes of the medium were extremely limited, a notable exception being Crawford's *The Art of Computer Game Design* (1984), which explores the unique attributes of the medium from a designer's perspective. Excluding this work, however, the 1980s was largely dominated by the psychosocial discourse on gaming that is outlined above. This began to change in the mid to late 1990s, a period which experienced a boom in games scholarship. Bartle published his now seminal paper 'Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit MUDs' (1996) which explores how players' motives for engaging in online gaming inform the structure of virtual worlds. In the following year Murray published *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997), a text which examines the innovative narrative opportunities afforded by the new medium. In the same year Aarseth published *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), which focused on the novel semiotic processes afforded by digital media. By 2001 a dedicated academic journal titled *Game Studies* had been established with several others quickly following suit.

An understanding of the distinctive features of the video game medium is what has pushed the discourse on video games from the more generalised fields of media studies, sociology and psychology to what may be described game studies proper. However, as this field gained traction, however, an internal debate emerged which has since become one of the discipline's hallmark discussions. The expansion of an academic discourse on video games was influenced by no small degree by the development of scholarly work on the electronic medium of hypertext fiction. In gaming terms, works of hypertext fiction may be regarded as simple text adventure games. The reader is given the opportunity to interact with the text directly by clicking on various hyperlinks which lead to different fragments of text. The medium's modernist aesthetic quickly attracted the attention of literary scholars such as Bolter (2001) and Joyce (1996), both of whom found interest in the medium's ability to offer interactive, non- and multilinear literary experiences. Much of the literature on video games that emerged in the mid-90s is indebted to these scholars and is consequently concerned primarily with the role of narrative in video games and how the medium may be used to offer new narrative experiences.

However, this narrative-centred approach to video games has been met with a backlash by other researchers, in particular those who were also game developers, who perceived the narratological approach to games to be a belittlement of the distinctly 'ludological', or game-like, aspects of the medium. Commentators such as Juul (2005), Koster (2013) and Frasca (2003) argued that video games are best studied not as simply forms of interactive literature but as a distinctive medium. These scholars have focused on how the mechanics and dynamics facilitated by the game system contribute to the player's experience of a game. For some ludologists,

the narrative tied to a video game is an almost supplementary addition to the fundamental components of the game system. Increasingly, however, researchers are taking what might be called a dialectical approach to video game analysis, taking into account both the narrative elements of video games and their ludological features and at times focusing on how these two elements interact with each other (Jenkins, 2004; Hocking, 2007; Malliet, 2007).

Video Game Rhetoric and Reception

The development of specific analytical frameworks for understanding the structural features of video games has significantly influenced the way in which contemporary video game scholars explore the relationship between games and society. A heightened understanding of the features of the language of video game design within academic circles has created opportunity for video game research to transcend both the reductive psychological studies of video games that dominated the field during the medium's formative years and to go beyond the textual study of video games as simply a new iteration of traditional narrative forms. One line of enquiry to have emerged within this area of research examines how games can be used to influence players' attitudes towards social and political issues. In his 2007 work *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*, Bogost explores how game mechanics can be employed by designers to express specific political attitudes and ideas. Bogost argues that games communicate ideas via an algorithmic form of expression that he names 'procedural rhetoric'. Bogost's concept is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two. For now, however, procedural rhetoric can be described in terms of the understanding that video games convey discrete messages about the way the world is or should be, and that they do so in a way that utilises

the distinctive ludological and narratological features of the video game medium. The concept of procedural rhetoric therefore opens up a space for considering how video games can communicate political and social ideas using semiotic processes that are distinct from purely narratological and visual forms of representation and can therefore also have a role in cultivating their players' perceptions of social reality and political beliefs.

As will be explored further in Chapter Two, a growing body of literature is now considering the role that video games have as vehicles of political rhetoric and social ideology. This approach to the study of video games has the potential to reveal a greater insight into the role of the medium as a vehicle of politically informed communications than has previously been the case and may also be instrumental to uncovering how other forms of contemporary communication channels, such as social media, utilise digital technology as a form of social and political influence. The study of procedural rhetoric as a means of understanding the capability of digital media to persuade individuals of the legitimacy of an idea or worldview, however, is often missing a crucial component: the reception process. Across the multiple disciplines that engage with the concept of rhetoric, including media and communication studies, literary and film studies, and the social sciences and humanities more broadly, there has historically been a significant imbalance between the analysis of rhetoric and meaning as it is identified by the researcher and the study of how broader audiences respond to mass communication, with more sustained focus on how researchers interpret texts than the interpretive processes of audience members. An extensive body of theoretical literature has arisen to highlight the determining role that audiences have in the interpretation

process, including classics of literary and media studies such as Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' (2008), Derrida's *Dissemination* (1981) and Hall's 'Encoding/Decoding' (2001), but also more contemporary works such as Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (2012). Despite this, however, studies into the ideological power of particular media texts are more often than not addressed from a purely textual perspective, considering, for example, the political implications of how gender, social class and ethnicity are represented in the media but failing to incorporate direct empirical evidence of how audiences respond to these forms of representation.

As this thesis seeks to demonstrate, understanding the reception process is fundamental to understanding the influence of mass media on broader trends in society and politics. Given the present political climate, where, as a number of commentators have argued, populations are increasingly divided and polarised over key social and political issues (Pew Research Center, 2017; West, 2019), it is of growing importance to understand not only how academics understand the meaning conveyed in the media, but how interpretations of texts may differ depending on the beliefs and lived experiences of audience members. Political communication is likewise becoming increasingly divisive, and as a result terms such as 'dog-whistling', where public communications are designed with the explicit purpose of being interpreted differently by different segments of the population, are becoming increasingly commonplace in communications within the public sphere (Haney-López, 2015).

The proliferation of digital technology also presents new challenges, and a growing need, for the study of media reception. As with more traditional media forms, a vast

amount of theoretical literature now exists which discusses the distinctive features of digital media and how these features may contribute to different semiotic processes, social influences and audience engagements (Athique, 2013). Technology driven media such as video games, for example, are commonly noted for their interactive qualities – their capacity to be receptive towards and respond to the individual player’s input. As will be explored further in Chapters Two and Four, the interactive nature of the video game medium has the potential to significantly alter cognitive aspects of the reception process.

Video games have also been characterised for their capacity to deliver distinctive emotional experiences (Isbister, 2016; Anable, 2018). The interactivity of video games adds a level of responsibility on the part of the player which may in turn lend itself to experiences of frustration, pride and even guilt, which are less forthcoming in traditional media. Another feature of the medium that may facilitate enhanced emotional experiences is the widely discussed concept of immersion. Immersion refers to the sensation of being submerged in a virtual world to the extent that the player may momentarily forget about their physical surroundings (Brown and Cairns, 2004). Immersion is an experience that is common to a variety of media and narrative forms, including film and literature (Visch, Tan and Molenaar, 2010; Martínez, 2014). However, video games are often noted for their enhanced immersive qualities, a trait that stems partly from the medium’s multisensory nature but also the sustained cognitive and physical engagement it demands as an interactive medium (Crick, 2011). The quality of immersion has the potential to heighten the emotional experiences that audience members have with a media text,

which can in turn significantly influence their overall perception and interpretation of a media experience.

To demonstrate in broad terms how a player's cognitive and emotional experience of a video game may affect the meaning they attribute to their experience, consider the following situation which plays out in a 2002 episode of the popular sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle* (Melman, 2002). Malcolm, the show's adolescent protagonist, becomes preoccupied with a fictional computer game called 'The Virts'. As a transparent parody of the popular game *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000), The Virts allows Malcolm to reconstruct his own family in digital form and fast-forward to observe how their personality attributes and Malcolm's own management decisions influence their lives. Similarly to *The Sims*, characters in The Virts are programmed according a series of sliding personality scales. Malcolm, academically gifted, albeit often vain and competitive, designs his family members according to what he perceives as their worst attributes. His domineering but ultimately caring mother is ranked a ten for aggressiveness, whilst his bullying brother is also given ten for aggressiveness and zero for personal hygiene and intelligence. Malcolm allocates his own avatar with consistently high scores for positive attributes, tens in intelligence, social skills and appearance.

In creating his family members with significantly inferior characteristics to his own avatar, Malcolm's motivations for playing the game are clear: the game serves as an opportunity to solidify Malcolm's perception of his own self-worth and to demonstrate the disconnection he feels between himself and his family. Malcolm's expectations about the outcome of the simulation are quickly overthrown, however,

when his family members become inexplicably happy and successful, whilst Malcolm's character regresses. His mother goes to Law School and becomes President of the US, his brother becomes the King of China, his father, funds a successful search for extra-terrestrials and Malcolm's younger brother becomes Pope. Much to Malcolm's frustration, Malcolm's character goes through successive phases of self-harming, alcoholism and over-eating. Meanwhile, the real Malcolm becomes increasingly invested in the game, deciding to "level out the playing field" by moving the family to Arkansas to become chicken farmers. Malcolm tries a number of other interventions, but nothing appears to rectify the situation. The problem, Malcolm concludes, is the game's "idiotic programming".

Malcolm's obsession with the game ends when, in a heightened peak of frustration, he commands his avatar to take a knife and kill his family members. After some attempts, Malcolm's avatar eventually takes his creator's words to heart. Instead of killing the other family members, however, the digital Malcolm kills himself, leaving a bulk of pixels on the floor of the kitchen for a forklift to promptly collect and bury in the garden. At this point Malcolm's frustration gives way to anger. Attempting at first to throw the computer out of the window, he resigns to pushing it off the desk and into the bin, declaring to his friend Stevie: "This means nothing!"

Though a fictional reaction to a fictional video game, Malcolm's response reveals a lot about the video game medium, its ability to convey meaning and how players perform as recipients of video game meaning. Malcolm's immediate reaction to *The Virtues* will be familiar to many video game players who, having seemingly done everything in their power to reach a desired outcome, find that the game system

continuously thwarts their efforts. Malcolm, having deliberately programmed his character to have vastly superior attributes to those of his family members, evidently expected his own avatar to perform significantly better than those based on his family members. Upon being confronted with a vastly different outcome, Malcolm rejects the game's logic, suggesting that the programming is faulty, and that the simulation is an inaccurate representation of reality.

There are, however, several other ways in which Malcolm may have interpreted his gameplay experience. Having identified the apparent dissonance between his character's positive characteristics and ultimate success, Malcolm may have begun to question what, if any, meaning could be ascribed to the game's outcome, and whether this meaning was an intentional feature of the game, an error, or even a joke on the part of the game developers. One possible interpretation that Malcolm may have made was that the outcome of his character was the 'revenge' of a system that identified an apparent bias in Malcolm's allocation of positive characteristics between his characters. In the actual game *The Sims*, players are limited in their allocation of positive characteristics, meaning that players are prevented from making super-humans of the type that Malcolm designs for his own avatar. Perhaps the decline of Malcolm's avatar could be the game resisting the imposition of an unrealistically perfect person into its simulation and reprimanding Malcolm for his vanity. Another approach that Malcolm may have taken in interpreting the simulation could have been based on a philosophically grounded view of human nature. In having Malcolm's 'perfect' avatar fail where his imperfect family members succeeded, the game may be making a statement about the characteristics of human beings that are necessary to live a well-balanced and fortuitous life. In this

case, the meaning conveyed by the simulation becomes a prescriptive account of the necessity of imperfection for success, wellbeing and prosperity.

A final interpretation sees the game as a critique of the legitimacy of meritocracy as an accurate assessment of the social and economic structure of American society and a direct critique of games like *The Sims* that present a highly optimistic, and more-or-less utopian, view of economic opportunity in American society. According to this perspective, *The Virts* presents an inversion of the belief that individuals in American society can achieve success based on merit alone. Malcolm's positive traits do little to help his avatar, whilst the negative traits of his family members appear not to be hindered by their high levels of aggression and low intelligence. On one level, this feature of the game may be read as a commentary on the arbitrariness with which success is achieved in contemporary America. An even more cynical interpretation, however, may view the game as making a statement about the particular traits that lead to success, both in America and globally. If Malcolm's intelligence did not benefit him in *The Virts*, it is because intelligence more generally is not a precondition of success. It is instead anti-social traits such as high aggressiveness that benefit those living in a competitive world economy.

Clearly there are a wide variety of interpretations that Malcolm may have reached from his experience. Malcolm's experience with *The Virts* illustrates both the breadth of interpretations that players may make of a video game and the essential role that a player's cognitive and emotional experiences with the game have in determining which of these interpretations the player ultimately fixates on. Malcolm's refusal to recognise any further meaning in the game was clearly

motivated by his own personality traits and environment, as well as the show's screenwriter's need to turn the situation into a comic incident. Contextual and psychological factors, however, are only one determining factor in the reception process. As this thesis will seek to show, the features of particular video games, as well as the distinctive features of the medium as a whole, play a significant role in determining both the variety of possible interpretations that players may make from interactions with games and also the likelihood of some being more dominant than others.

The Reception of Disempowerment

The purpose of this thesis is to provide an empirical exploration of the social and political influence of video game experiences by means of an in-depth exploration of one of the preliminary stages of the way in which video games influence society – the reception process. As was demonstrated in Malcolm's experience with *The Virts*, and as has become a commonplace understanding in media studies, the way in which a media product or video game influences the social world around it is by a large degree influenced by the way in which the audience, or player, interprets the meaning of a media experience. The purpose of this thesis is therefore to explore the process of video game reception and identify how the design features of specific games, as well as the distinctive characteristics of the medium itself, may serve to influence the reception process. As suggested in the previous section, the reception process can also be influenced by a number of other factors, such as the social and psychological characteristics of participants, the state of mind they are in when they engage with the game, and even direct environmental factors such as the location in which they are playing the game.

By focusing on the features of the video game experience rather than on these contextual factors, however, this study will attempt to consolidate contemporary game studies with the concept of media power, acknowledging, on the one hand, that players may experience video games in vastly different ways, but that these experiences are to a large degree structured according to the design principles of the game. At the same time, focusing on gameplay experiences rather than player characteristics will enable the study to maintain focus on the influence that video game rhetoric may have in the reception process, whilst avoiding the creation of generalisations about the relationship between player demographics and the outcomes of the interpretation process based on a discrete set of data.

As a case study, this thesis focuses on how video game players respond to an emerging pattern in game design, where players are invited to engage with a situation of social or political disempowerment. As will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Four, this thesis follows the suggestion that is being made in a growing number of publications, most notably Muriel (2016) and Muriel and Crawford (2018, p. 72), that the psychological appeal and commercial success of the video game medium rests not only on immersive and escapist capabilities, but also in its promise to provide players with an experience of psychological empowerment. According to this argument, video games owe a large segment of their popularity to their ability to enable players to feel that they have an augmented level of power and control in their environment, an experience which they may be lacking in their everyday lives.

As will also be explored further in Chapter Four, the fact that the mediated experience of empowerment remains one of the principle design goals of the global

games industry has significant cultural and political connotations, especially where the experience of empowerment is contextualised within a familiar social setting. As Muriel and Crawford (2018) suggest, the dominance of the experience of empowerment in video games may have a significant role in securing the hegemony of the increasingly widespread ideology of neoliberalism, in that it “casts players as powerful subjects, who are able to control the outcome of their actions in ways they could only imagine in their daily lives” (p. 72). Despite this, however, over the past decade a number of games have emerged which deliberately seek to subvert these expectations by placing players in a position of disempowerment. Whilst many of these, including action games such as *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) and survival games such as *Don't Starve* (Klei Entertainment, 2013), situate the experience of disempowerment within a fantasy context, and often put players in a position of disempowerment to provide a delayed but heightened sense of power and control, others facilitate an enduring experience of disempowerment in a familiar or realistic social setting in a way that may be seen to challenge the dominant ideology of neoliberal individualism reinforced in mainstream video games. Examples of games such as these include the retail simulation game *Cart Life* (Hofmeier, 2010), the political puzzle game *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013), the war-time survival simulator *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014) and the ‘post-Brexit dystopia’ *Not Tonight* (PanicBarn, 2018).

Whilst this trend in game design has to-date been only loosely defined, its development within the burgeoning independent games industry has received significant critical attention and raises a number of interesting questions regarding the video game medium and gaming culture which will be explored throughout this

thesis. Primarily, however, this gaming genre was chosen for this study because one of its defining features involves the incorporation of a discernible political rhetoric deliberately designed to challenge players' perceptions of social reality. This study examines two games in particular - *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* - in order to provide a close analysis of the influence that these types of video games may have on individuals and, by extension, broader society. A detailed description of the rationale behind this choice of games is presented in Chapter Five of this thesis. In brief, however, these games were selected due to the combination of their success within the independent games industry, and how they utilise the distinctive features of the video game medium in order to provide ludic simulations of disempowerment that are contextualised within the framework of contemporary social and political issues. *Cart Life* deals with several pertinent themes that are rarely addressed with significant depth in video games, including poverty, homelessness and social mobility, whilst *Papers, Please* closely explores the politics of immigration and practices of border control, situated within a pseudo-historical cold war setting but nonetheless engaging with themes and circumstances that are contested in contemporary politics.

The thesis approaches these games as cultural artefacts that subvert some of the prevailing ideologies of contemporary society and which do so in ways that utilise the distinctive features of the video game medium. As discussed above, this thesis also acknowledges that the sociological influence of any form of mass media communication is highly dependent on the process of reception, and that textual analysis will inevitably differ from the diverse range of possible interpretations made by audience members. This study therefore aims to place a greater emphasis on

audience members' responses to video games than has generally been the case in video game research. It seeks to identify ways in which the video game medium may engage players in the lives of individuals experiencing economic and social disempowerment and, in doing so, potentially foster a higher sense of empathy towards those experiencing disempowerment and concurrently challenge the neoliberal ideology of individualism that has come to be dominant in western society. This thesis therefore has two core objectives: firstly, to develop an understanding of the how the distinct features of the video game medium result in a distinct process of audience reception; and secondly, to discover how players respond to game design practices that attempt to place players in a position of social and/or political disempowerment.

The thesis is organised according to a three-part structure, with the first section offering a review of relevant literature, the second section outlining a methodology for the study, and the final section providing analysis of the data collected. Chapters One, Two and Three provide a review of academic literature on the subjects of video game rhetoric and reception, the distinctive aesthetics and rhetoric of social realism in traditional media such as film and literature, and how the genre of social realism has been remediated for the video game format. Chapter One provides an overview of the concept of rhetoric, how it has been utilised in media and communication studies, and how it has recently been applied to the study of video games. It then proceeds to discuss the various approaches that researchers have taken in studying the impact of video games, and media more broadly, on society, considering in particular the methodologies of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies and how they may be applied to the study of video games. Chapter Two explores the tradition

of social realism in the history of artistic expression, examining in particular the aesthetics associated with social realism and the political rhetoric encoded within these works. Chapter Three develops this discussion by considering how the tradition of social realism has been remediated for the video game medium. It begins by exploring how an aesthetic of empowerment has historically dominated the video game medium and discusses the political implications of this prevailing pattern in game design. It then proceeds to identify examples of games that seek to create experiences of disempowerment for players, demonstrating the relationship between these experiences and the aesthetic and political principles of social realism.

Chapter Four presents a multi-method qualitative approach to understanding how these types of games, and the impact they have on their players, can be analysed. It provides a systematic approach to the analysis of the design video games adapted from existing approaches to game analysis. It then presents an approach to understanding the impact that experiences with these games have on their players through the process of a formal audience reception study, adapted for the medium from the tradition of audience reception research of television and film. The chapter provides details of the exact procedures used in this study, including a rationale for the decisions made and discussion of the study's limitations.

Chapters Five to Eight provide detailed analysis of the findings of the study. Chapter Five provides a textual analysis of the distinctive features of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*, comparing them to more conventional video game design practices and drawing on participants' responses to the games in order to explore the types of

gameplay experiences these features may contribute to. The chapter concludes with an analysis of critical political rhetoric that will be argued is encoded within each of the games. Chapter Six proceeds to take a closer look at how participants interpreted the meaning underlying the content of the two games and identifies the role that the polyvalent nature of the medium had on the reception process. Chapter Seven presents a closer analysis of participants' reception of the games by focusing in on their perceptions of video game realism. Following on from the discussion of the realism as an aesthetic and rhetorical device presented in Chapter Two, it examines the degree to which participants of the study felt that the content of the game was realistic and what features of the games contributed to or undermined a sense of realism. Chapter Eight develops this discussion by focusing on participants' emotional experiences of the two games, in particular the most dominant feelings of empathy and frustration and addresses the role that these experiences had in the reception process. Chapter Ten provides a conclusion of the study's key findings and suggestions for ways in which this field of study could be developed further.

Understanding the video game reception process is a crucial aspect to developing a thorough and contextualised understanding of how the medium influences the mindsets and behaviours of video game players. Examining the design and reception of games such as *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* may reveal much about how the video game medium may draw on the rhetorical strategies of traditional media in order to convey a particular social or political viewpoint in a persuasive manner. Doing so may also produce insights regarding the reception of these types of games and provide an understanding of their efficacy as persuasive media but also produce

indications of how meaning in politically engaged games may go astray or be actively rejected by players. More broadly, however, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on the semiotic functioning of video game design and innovate the practice of player reception studies with an empirically grounded and sociologically-driven qualitative methodology.

Literature Review

1. Video Game Rhetoric and Reception

The influence that mass media products can have on the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and behaviours of their audiences is profound. Over the past century, a number of theories have emerged which attempt to identify the ways in which media experiences influence their audiences and broader society. In more recent years these ideas have begun to be applied to the study of video games. In order to understand how games that simulate experiences of disempowerment are interpreted by and potentially influence their players, it is necessary to first build an understanding of the processes by which video games convey meaning and consider how this meaning is recognised and interpreted by their players. This chapter therefore presents an overview of the academic literature surrounding the fields of media rhetoric and audience reception studies, considering the literature that exists on the role that media may have in forming and altering the social and political beliefs of audiences. The chapter begins by presenting the concept of rhetoric as a cornerstone of the study of political persuasion and media influence, tracing the term and its usage from its original Aristotelean context to its use in contemporary media studies. The chapter then explores how the concept has been utilised in the study of video games and how the distinctive features of the video game medium may be utilised to express to players social and political meaning. Following this, the chapter explores literature associated with audiences' reception of the media, examining key theories that address the reception process and likewise considering

how the ideas and methodologies developed in this field can be adapted to the study of video games.

Media Rhetoric and Persuasive Texts

The origins of the term rhetoric are often associated with classical Greek culture and, in particular, the writings of Aristotle. Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric* (2004) presents the concept as the skill of persuading an individual or group of individuals of the merits of a particular proposition or way of thinking. Aristotle describes the practice of rhetoric as "the power to observe the persuasiveness of which any particular matter admits" (p. 74). The 'art' of rhetoric is therefore the practice of identifying in any possible argument the resources and means that can be used to propagate this world-view in the minds of other people. Traditionally, the term rhetoric has referred to a form of political or otherwise persuasive argument that is written or orated. This use of the term has endured, and political commentators continue to routinely comment on and debate the rhetoric used by politicians. The term has also, however, been extended to apply to a broader range of mediums. Booth's work of literary criticism *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1991), for instance, examined the role that the novel may have as a means of expressing a certain view point of view, not by directly telling its readers how to interpret reality, but by showing them the world from a perspective that implicitly prioritises a particular view-point. Booth's work preceded that of Marxist film scholars such as McCabe's essay 'Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure' (1976), which explored how narrative film, and the process of character-identified in particular, could effectively persuade audiences of a particular understanding of reality. The concept of rhetoric has since developed into a mainstay of media analysis as a way of

describing how the distinctive features of media texts can be used to enforce a particular understanding of reality (Long and Wall, 2012, pp. 28–68). In these contexts the study of rhetoric has developed into an endeavour to understand how all forms of communication, including visual, can be used as vehicles for persuasion.

The contemporary use of the term rhetoric has, therefore, evolved significantly from the art of speech-making examined by Aristotle. At its core, however, the term still holds the connotations of persuasion remains fundamentally concerned with the power that various forms of communication have to influence the way people think and behave. Industrialisation over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries changed the contexts in which acts of political persuasion took place significantly. Geographic centralisation and the development of forms of mass-communication such as the industrial printing press, photography, film, recorded music, radio and television led to the development of an industry of mass media and communications. Whilst these developments often resulted simply in a wider-spread distribution of existing vehicles of political rhetoric, they also paved the way for new forms of socio-political persuasion in the form of mass-produced entertainment media. As radio, film and television developed during the twentieth century, the practice of speech-giving reached wider audiences in increasingly vivid forms. However, new mediums also gave rise to a multitude of other forms of mass-communication, most notably entertainment broadcasting, which ostensibly served not to persuade or in any way influence a population, but rather to provide audiences with an easily accessible source of recreation and culture.

Up to the midpoint of the twentieth century, academic enquiry into these developing forms of mass-communication had largely been directed towards the study of propaganda – media texts such as posters, films and radio broadcasts that served the explicit function of attempting to persuade audience of the truth or validity of a political position. Communications researchers began to assess the impact that mass forms of political persuasion could have on the beliefs and behaviour of individuals. For some key contributors to this body of research, most notably the marketing pioneer and socio-political theorist Bernays (2005), propaganda was regarded as an essential component to maintaining social order and cohesion in an otherwise chaotic democratic society. As authoritarianism and deep political divides arose across the world and in Western Europe in particular, however, communications researchers such as Adorno began to examine the potentially catastrophic capability of propaganda, examining in particular the psycho-social structures exploited in anti-Semitic propaganda (1994).

In the decades proceeding the Second World War, traditional propaganda continued to play a role in domestic and international politics (Welch, 2013). Increasingly, however, mass-communications researchers in Western Europe, and the United States in particular, turned their attention towards the development in the production of mass-produced entertainment media that was taking place in these regions. Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School, a cohort of Marxist academics who had emigrated to the US from Europe to escape the rise of fascism, directed their efforts towards understanding how the liberal media of the United States could have a social function of control comparable to that of the authoritarian propaganda of Nazi Germany (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002).

Working more-or-less synchronously with the Frankfurt School's investigations of the role of the media in the maintenance of political control in Western democracies, mass-communications researchers in Europe were developing analytical concepts that could be used to better understand and articulate the ways in which meaning is articulated in mass communications platforms and, moreover, how media texts can serve to influence social and political reality. These endeavours, associated with structuralist and post-structuralist theorists such as Barthes and Foucault, utilised the theoretical groundwork of semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, in order to demonstrate the profound power that the burgeoning culture industry could have on the ideological and material fabric of socio-political reality.

The theoretical and analytical developments outlined above have contributed to what is now often described as a study of the rhetoric of mass media. In using the term rhetoric to describe how media products convey meaning to audiences, it is acknowledged that the media invariably has a political bias that results in an effort to persuade audiences of the truth of a contingent view of reality. The study of mass media as rhetoric therefore attempts to recognise and dissect the distinctive aspects of particular mediums and media genres that contribute to this persuasive function. In the same way that Aristotle sought to identify the various aspects of oration that served to persuade audiences of the speaker's message, a researcher of media rhetoric analyses the distinctive features of a particular media product, genre or medium to assess its performance as a persuasive form of communication. Examples of early publications that acknowledge the role that mass media can have as a platform for distinctive forms of social and political rhetoric include Barthes'

collection of essays *Image, Music, Text* (1977), which influentially explored the semiotic functioning of images, as well as analytical works published within the field of communication studies, such as David M. Berg's 'Rhetoric, Reality and Mass Media' (1972) and Craig R. Smith's 'Television News as Rhetoric' (1977). In contemporary media studies, the persuasive nature of mass media is routinely taken for granted. Popular student readers, such as Hall, Evans and Nixon's edited volume *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (2013) and Long and Wall's *Media Studies: Text, Production, Context* (2012), explore how various platforms of mass communications can serve to reinforce contingent social and political viewpoints.

The Rhetoric of Video Games

As discussed in the introduction, the video game medium plays an increasingly significant role within the mass media industry. Despite this, however, for much of the medium's history as a popular entertainment platform, video games have received relatively little recognition as a medium for mass communication. Academic enquiry and public discourse surrounding the medium has instead focused on concerns over the perceived psychological effects that video games may have on those who play them. As the medium developed during the 1980s to become a staple of home entertainment, concerns were raised in particular about the impact that violent content in video games could have on the behaviour of young people, who were both the primary target audience of the gaming industry and also widely seen as particularly susceptible to media influence (as evidenced in studies such as Bandura's now-famous 'Bobo doll' experiments (Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1963)). A number of studies during the period of early video game research were conducted

to address these concerns by attempting to quantify levels of aggressive behavioural tendencies in young people and identify correlations between these behaviour traits and exposure to violent video games (Dominick, 1984). The results of these studies varied, but often lacked sufficient data to demonstrate a causal relationship between violent video game exposure and violent behaviour.

During the 1990s research began to emerge which placed the video game medium more concretely within the fields of mass communication and media studies. Like previous studies, Provenzo Jr.'s (1991) *Nintendo Kids: Making Sense of Nintendo* addressed concerns that had been raised with regard to the impact of video game content on young audiences. Provenzo Jr.'s study, however, focuses only partially on the impact of video game violence, instead broadening the enquiry to include issues more consistent with the concerns raised by sociologically influenced communications researchers. Provenzo Jr.'s work homes in on the narratological content of video games and how common patterns in the representation of gender and race in the medium may serve to reinforce regressive attitudes towards gender roles and ethnic minorities. Not long after Gailey (1993) published a comparable article on the representation of gender and class in video games. Gailey's article, titled 'Mediated Messages: Gender, Class and Cosmos in Home Video Games', is notable for its use of sociological theory to explore the impact that the medium may have not just on individual sociability, but on social and political power relationships more broadly.

The efforts of these researchers demonstrate an incentive to understand how video games can act as persuasive media forms in the same manner as television and film

had been perceived over the previous two decades. Whilst they represent laudable attempts to understand the sociological significance of particular patterns of character representations in popular video games, however, they did little to further an understanding of how the distinctive features of the video game medium itself may lend itself to particular forms of persuasion. As is now commonly discussed in video game research, video games are not simply technological extensions of more traditional media forms but possess a number of features that make audience members' engagement with the medium qualitatively different from other media formats. Although game designers had been familiar with these distinctive features for many years prior to this point (for example Crawford, 1984), these aspects of the medium only received significant attention in academic communities towards the end of the 1990s. Aarseth's *Cybertexts: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997) is often cited as one of the founding texts of what has since come to be known as game studies, an autonomous discipline that seeks to better account for the unique structural properties of the video game medium and the types of engagement it facilitates with its audiences. *Cybertexts* approaches video games from a literary perspective, but continually points to ways in which interactive digital media is structurally distinct from traditional narrative media.

Cybertexts preceded a wide range of significant publications on the study of the video game medium, much of which addressed what came to be known as the ludology/narratology debate, a discussion led by games researchers and designers regarding the significance of narrative within the video game medium. During this period of game studies, several works emerged to introduce analytical terms and concepts that have since become staples of video game analysis. In 2004, game

developers and researchers Salen and Zimmerman published an account of the key design features of video games in their comprehensive work *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2004). This line of enquiry has since been developed by researchers such as Malliet (2007), who developed a systematic approach to the analysis of video game design.

The research described above has made significant progress towards developing a lexicon for what may be described as the constitutive elements of the 'language' of video games. Structural concepts expanded upon during this time, such as goals, agency, rules and difficulty, have provided researchers, critics and audiences with the vocabulary and conceptual understanding to better articulate both the distinctive features of the video game medium and how audiences engage with them. These works, however, often lack the level of critical analysis required to understand the influence of video game content on society more broadly. Game researcher and designer Bogost's book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (2007), makes a significant step towards addressing this shortfall. Bogost suggests that it can be productive to consider game design features as contributing factors of the medium's potential to convey persuasive arguments, using the term 'procedural rhetoric' to describes the distinctive qualities of a video game's persuasive capacities. His use of the term stems from the understanding that whereas traditional media such as literature and film convey meaning through verbal, visual and aural forms of representation, video games are able to convey meaning through the computational representation of processes.

As an example, Bogost (2007, p. 87) discusses Frasca's web-based game *September 12th: A Toy World* (2010), an application that confronts the discourse of the 'war on terror' and practices of counterterrorism. The game presents players with an isometric view of a bustling middle-eastern settlement. When the game starts, the majority of the people in the city are civilians dressed in blue and purple, whilst some are represented as 'terrorists', armed with assault rifles and dressed in white and black. The player is able to order missile strikes in the settlement in order to eradicate the terrorists. However, there is a significant delay between the command being given and the missile meeting its mark, making civilian loss of life inevitable. Moreover, when civilians witness the loss of life caused by the missile strikes, they in turn become radicalised, transforming into fighters and serving as additional targets for the player. *September 12th* represents a situation where long-ranged military intervention has a detrimental role in combating the threat of global terrorism. According to Bogost, this message is conveyed by means of the application's procedural rhetoric: it is through the processes that occur, and the results that they yield, that meaning is expressed, rather than purely by means of visual and/or aural representation.

Figure 1



September 12th: A Toy World (Frasca, 2010)

The usefulness of Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric lies in its appreciation of how the video game medium (and programmed applications more generally) can convey meaning in ways that are not native to other media such as film and the written word. Combined with a broader understanding of how individual game design features influence gameplay, procedural rhetoric can be used to explore the political dimensions of game design choices and the potential impact that these design decisions may have on audiences.

Towards Player Reception Studies

Game analysis of the type advocated by Bogost and Malliet can be an effective way of building a preliminary understanding of the types of gameplay that can emerge

from interactions with a given game. It is limited, however, in its ability to describe the cognitive, emotional and semantic processes that players undergo in response to gameplay experiences and in the interpretive processes of meaning making. Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric suffers from this shortcoming in particular, as it risks universalising the analyst's idiosyncratic understanding of a game's political meaning. As Bogost himself points out: "simply playing a videogame need not entail the player's adoption of the represented value system; the player might oppose, question, or otherwise internalize its claims" (2007, p. 284).

Throughout the history of mass-communication and media studies, a central research objective has involved developing an understanding of the dynamics of interactions that take place between media texts and audiences. This body of research, broadly known as audience studies, has developed around arguments regarding the basic nature of the mass media audience. The origins of audience studies are often attributed to the interwar period of the 1920s and 30s (Brooker, 2002). During this time, the ubiquity of mass media communications increased as radio broadcasting developed a strong footing in people's homes. Perhaps even more significant, however, was the understanding developed by academics and politicians that the outcome of the First World War may have been, to a greater or lesser extent, determined by the Allies' use of propaganda. Early audience studies were therefore often directed towards understanding the power that mass-communication can have in influencing the minds and behaviours of the masses (discussed in Bratich, 2013).

Following this initial period of mass-communications research, this approach to audience studies extended into other research avenues. Works by members of the Frankfurt School became preoccupied with the workings of the mass media and popular culture in the US and their apparent role in politically pacifying the American masses. Among the most notable concepts to emerge from the works of the Frankfurt School was the notion developed by Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) that popular culture in the US was governed by a 'culture industry' that profits from selling the masses entertainment products that replace and overshadow the more intellectually stimulating and politically cognisant cultural objects of 'high art'. The concept of the culture industry offered unprecedented insight into the relationship between popular culture and capitalist production and continues to be a popular means of analysing mass media. However, the way in which the members of the Frankfurt school conceptualised the audience had changed little from the one assumed by early audience studies researchers. For Adorno and Horkheimer, those who consumed mass media were essentially the deluded victims of the mass media's capitalistic ideology. The position of the consumer, to use Adorno's (1975, p. 12) words, "is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object". Within the framework of the culture industry, the producer of mass media has total control over both its products and the process by which they are consumed.

Over the following decades, the theoretical assumptions underpinning much audience studies research undertook several developments. A number of left-wing academics pursued the theoretical study of the mass media as an instrument of power that had been laid out by members of the Frankfurt School. Althusser (1971),

a notable Marxist social scientist, drew on the ideas of the psychoanalyst Lacan to offer a psycho-political theory of the role that various social institutes, including the mass media, have in upholding a particular social order. This research was expanded by the 'Screen' theorists, named after the British film studies journal in which a number of their works were published. These theorists developed Althusser's perceptions of the role that the mass media has on the formation of audience subjectivity by focusing in particular on narrative film. MacCabe's essay 'Realism and the Cinema: Note on Some Brechtian Theses' (1976) examined the role film in making certain social and political states of affair appear natural to audiences. It was within this context that Mulvey published her now famous essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), which introduced the concept of male gaze as a means of understanding the way in which visual media may instil patriarchal ideology in the minds of audience members.

Concerns about the impact of media consumption on audiences during this period were not, however, held exclusively by left-wing theorists. As mass media technologies embedded themselves more and more deeply into people's homes and lives, a public discourse developed around the perceived (and in some cases imagined) effects that the consumption of specific media products could have on audiences, in particular children. A key concern during this period of time was connected with the growing accessibility of violent media and the impact it may have on violent behaviour. As indicated above, a number of psychologists and mass-communications researchers began to direct their efforts towards the design and execution of studies that aimed to test the hypothesis that exposure to violent media frequently results in more aggressive behaviour (Steuer, Applefield and

Smith, 1971; Dominick, 1984; Gunter, 1994). This line of research is commonly referred to as 'media effects' research and continues to be a popular area of research, in particular for psychologists interested in the psychological effects of exposure to various types of media.

Although it is possible to see a clear divide between the empirical and theoretical approaches to audience studies during this period, the way in which they position the mass media audience differs little from the approaches that came before them: under both the Marxist critique of mass media as an instrument for ideological control, and the media effects paradigm, audience members are typically regarded as empty vessels whose only significant response to mass media can be to directly assimilate or imitate it. Within the media effects paradigm, this is so transparently clear that the model is at times called the 'hypodermic needle' approach, indicating that audience members are metaphorically injected with a particular message, behaviour or ideology without any form of active reception. For this reason and others, media effects research has been scrutinised by a number of media theorists in recent years. Media theorist Gauntlett's article 'Ten Things Wrong with the Media Effects Model' (1998) stands as one of the most commonly cited attacks on media effects research. As the title suggests, Gauntlett identifies a number of problems with media effects research, but his most convincing argument pertains to the way in which causality tends to be presumed in media effects research. The media effects model conflates causality with correlation. A piece of media effects research may convincingly demonstrate that there is a positive correlation between a particular type of behaviour and the consumption of a particular type of media. However, to then conclude that this behaviour is the effect of media consumption

would be unfounded, as it is just as probable that individuals with a higher propensity for, for example, violent behaviour are more drawn to violent texts.

Although conceptualisations of audiences as passive consumers remain popular for many researchers in the field of psychology, within media and mass-communications studies there has been a clear shift towards a conceptualisation of the audience as an active party in encounters with mass media. This shift from a conceptualisation of the audience as passive to active is often associated with the publications of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), a research group based at the University of Birmingham established in 1962. The centre's most notable contributions to audience studies, however, are usually attributed to Stuart Hall. Hall's 'Encoding/Decoding' (2001) became a landmark work of audience studies research due to its acknowledgement of the active role that audiences have in interpreting media texts. Following the legacy of literary theorists and semioticians such as Iser (1974) and Barthes (1977), Hall argues that although media texts can be 'encoded' with a particular meaning or message, audiences may 'decode' a media text in different ways that perhaps may even contradict the text's intended meaning.

Within Hall's encoding/decoding framework, it is possible to see a clear transition in the way in which audiences are conceptualised by media theorists. With this transition has come a clear shift from attempts to understand the 'effects' of media consumption on audiences to an interest in how audiences cognitively and emotionally respond to media texts and also in how contextual factors, such as an audience member's cultural context, lived experiences and experiences with other

media text may influence the process of media reception. This theoretical transition can be seen as the origins of audience reception studies, which is now one of the dominant lines of enquiry in audience studies research.

The theoretical developments established by the CCCS also manifested in a change in the methodological practices of audience studies research. The active audience framework developed by Hall inspired a resurgence in qualitative methods that focused on capturing the variety of ways in which audiences interpret media texts and on understanding the contextual factors that might influence these interpretations (Bratich, 2013, p. 476). This is commonly referred to as the 'ethnographic shift' in audience studies and can be identified in projects such as Morley's (1999) study of the cultural factors that influence audience members' decoding of news media and Ang's (1985) study of the pleasures and meaning-making processes that soap-opera audiences engage in.

The conceptualisation of audiences as groups of active individuals and a focus on the contextual factors influencing decoding processes places audience studies on a stronger theoretical foothold than it has occupied in the past. However, these developments have also presented media studies researchers with various problems, the most significant being the impact that this revised understanding of the relationship between media producers and media consumers has on the concept of media power. For much audience studies research, it is the concept of media power that makes the study of interactions between media texts and audiences a worthy scholarly pursuit. The introduction of this thesis in fact argued that video games may have a significant role in influencing the thought processes and

behaviours of those who routinely play them. Do we have to choose between either the concept of media power or the active audience, or is there some way that we can reconcile the two notions?

In actuality, it is possible to argue that the suggestion that the encoding/decoding model undermines the media's ability to exert political and social power is a misinterpretation of audience reception studies' basic claims. Just because an audience member takes up an 'oppositional' reading of a particular text does not necessarily mean that they are immune to the influence of the media more broadly, or even the influence of the media product they are protesting against. Ang demonstrates this in her analysis of viewers of *Dallas* who claim to dislike the programme, but who still watch it routinely (1985, pp. 101–102). More recent research that reconciles the concept of media power with that of the active audience can be found in the work of the Glasgow Media Group. The GMG employs qualitative, empirical methods such as interviews and focus groups in the attempt to identify the influence that mass-media communications has on individuals' perceptions of social and political issues, such as mental illness, sexual abuse and the political conflict, whilst acknowledging that audiences are often active in the way that they engage with media texts. One of the group's advocates, Kitzinger (1999), points out that:

...the active audience is not immune from influence. Indeed, the way in which people use the media (and incorporate soap opera plots, media stories or slogans from advertisements into their everyday lives) can strengthen, rather than weaken, media effects.

The way people re-read individual texts or take unexpected pleasures can actually *reinforce*, rather than undermine, broad media influence over public understandings. (p. 19)

The fact that audiences are active in their consumption of mass media products does not, therefore, nullify the potential influence that the mass media has on individuals and society. Media products convey predesigned meanings and experience. How these meanings and experiences will be interpreted by audiences is often uncertain, but by analysing particular accounts of interactions between media texts and audiences it is possible to gain a greater understand of the type of influence that individuals and develop an awareness of the factors that may influence the process of interpretation.

Audience reception studies developed during a period of time where television dominated mass media consumption. Accordingly, much of the theoretical and empirical research conducted within the field to date has been centred on this medium. Although traditional television broadcasting maintains a crucial role in the world's mass media infrastructure, the past four decades have witnessed a rise in the variety of media technologies available to consumers, many of which facilitate different types of interaction between media texts and audiences. Within game studies, much has been made of the qualitative differences between video games and what may be called more 'traditional' media types such as film and literature. The key concept that has tended to underscore this difference is that of interactivity. Video games have been heralded as a particularly interactive medium due principally to the fact that players of video games are often able to modify the

textual world of video games with their choice of input (Ryan, 1999, p. 121). It is on these grounds that Galloway describes video games as “polyvalent” (2006, p. 105), meaning that video games can not only be interpreted in different ways, but also played in different ways. Some critics, such as Crawford (2011), have suggested the concept of interactivity, and its use as the defining feature of the video game medium, tends to exaggerate the differences between video games and other media formats. Crawford argues that:

“...the interactive potential of video games is often greatly overestimated, while audiences of media forms such as films and literature are too readily dismissed as passive. This is not to say that playing a video game and reading a book are necessarily the same, as of course they are not, but merely that the differences here have been somewhat exaggerated in an attempt to distance video game scholarship from disciplines such as cultural literary and media studies”. (p. 7)

The video game medium undeniably has much in common with many of the mediums that came before it. Moreover, as Crawford also identifies, the quality of interactivity can often depend as much on the media product being examined as it can on the distinctive qualities of the medium itself, with some video games being highly linear and non-participatory and some literature being highly complex and cognitively demanding (pp. 75-76). The concept of interactivity remains a key topic in game studies and remains a useful tool in identifying how the material fluidity of video games often differs from other media types. However, its overemphasis risks

both exaggerating the level of control that players have in their gaming experiences and undermining the active role that audiences of other mediums have in processing and engaging with media content.

One result of the conceptualisation of video games as a distinctly interactive medium has been the rise of a variety of audience research that focuses more on what players do with video games than on what video games do to players. In a similar vein to the uses and gratifications model of traditional media studies (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1973), this 'player-centric' approach to game studies examines the active role that players have as both consumers and producers of media and how players make use of video games to meet extrinsic needs. Behrenshausen (2013) argues that this approach to game studies emerged largely as a reactionary movement against the media effects research that dominated the study of video games in the medium's early decade. According to Behrenshausen, the purpose of the player-centric model has been to "protect the subject from complete determination by the game-structure, guaranteeing its resilience in encounters with that structure" (p. 878). Examples of this type of research include work on the active role that audience members have in the construction of fan cultures (Jenkins, 2006), explorations of the active roles that players assume when communicating with each other in multiplayer games (Pearce, 2009) and studies games that allow players to create their own content by means of 'modding' (Morris, 2003). This model has also made its way into popular discourse on video games, as evidenced by the popularity of publications such as McGonigal's *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2011).

Although this approach to game studies has gained popularity in recent years, it has also been the subject of criticism. Behrenshausen (2013) argues that the player-centric model of game studies is representative of a false dichotomy that has developed around the issue of players' autonomy in interactions with video games which views the player as either entirely active or entirely passive. In other words, the player-centric approach to game studies is an exaggerated response to the dominance of the passive audience model of audience studies that dominated video game research during the medium's formation years. Behrenshausen acknowledges the advantages that the player-centric model has when compared to traditional media effects research but, like the Glasgow Group, argues that to consider audiences as active participants in interactions with video games does not preclude the reality that a video game's design has a significant role in the types of interaction and activities that are available to its players. Borrowing a term used by Deleuze and Guattari (2004), Behrenshausen argues that we should look at video gameplay as "assemblages" (p. 882) of interactions between the many different facets and agencies of gaming - such as video game structures and players but also broader aspects of gaming culture such as marketing discourses and signifying narratives. Behrenshausen's approach follows a broader posthumanist trend in its indication that gameplay is an emergent, and often unpredictable, product of the complex exchanges of information between multiple agents.

Reception and Emotion

Historically speaking, the study of audience reception of media texts has tended to focus on what may be described as the cognitive processes that inform audience members' interpretations of texts. Hall's metaphor of decoding, for instance, carries

connotations of an encrypted message that is to be deciphered according to a procedural, if culturally contingent, process of thought. Even in Du Gay et al.'s (2013) updated concept of the cultural circuit, co-written by Hall, the role of emotion in an audience's interpretation of media products receives little direct reference. Increasingly, however, this approach to reception studies is proving to be incomplete. It is increasingly clear that emotion plays a pivotal role in how audiences interact with and interpret media texts. The popularity of the term 'post-truth' as a means of describing a state of affairs where the at-times confusing and often problematic concept of truth is increasingly being supplanted by audiences' emotional responses to messages being conveyed by politicians and the media (Davies, 2018) is evidence of the fundamental role of emotion of political and social reality. If a theory and methodological approach to the study of player reception studies is to endure, therefore, it is vital that emotion is recognised as a key aspect of the meaning-making process.

Whilst the role of emotion in audience reception has been traditionally afforded less attention than other aspects of the reception process, it has by no means completely been overlooked. Ang's study of audience members' reception of *Dallas* (1985) makes a significant contribution to the study of appeal that the emotional experiences offered by media products have for audience members. Theoretical and analytical work in textual studies has also made developments in understanding the role of emotion in the meaning and influence of mass communication. Much of this research has revolved around the impact and politics of the emotional experience of empathy. As will become apparent in subsequent chapters, empathy has a strong role in the rhetoric of the two games that are examined in this thesis, *Cart Life*

(Hofmeier, 2010) and *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013). Empathy can be broadly defined as a response in which an individual shares in the emotional experience of another individual or group of individuals. Batson *et al.* (2002) define empathy as "an other-oriented emotional response elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone else" (p. 486). Literature on empathy, and in particular its relationship to visual and narrative culture, can again be traced back to classical criticism. The term empathy has an etymological relationship with the Ancient Greek 'pathos', which is used in Aristotle's writings on rhetoric as a broad term to refer to the role of emotion in acts of persuasion.¹ Aristotle's use of the term in his work *Poetics* (2013) to describe the emotional structure of tragic story arcs has, however, established a specific relationship between pathos and an observer's emotional response to unwarranted or unjust instances of human suffering. Whilst the term empathy can refer to any situation where the emotional state of one individual is in some way shared by an observer, it is used most commonly to refer to an observer's response to a negative emotional or situation.

Because of this, empathy has been of particular interest to contemporary researchers exploring how representations of suffering may influence an audience's engagement with social reality. These enquiries have emerged from multiple disciplines, including media studies but also film and literary studies. Taking Dickens' realist novels as a case study, Harrison (2008) explores the impact that an emotional

¹ Most modern translations, including Lawson-Tancred's (Aristotle, 2004), translate the term directly as 'emotion'. The term 'pathos', however, continues to be used in academic commentaries (for example (for example Enos and Agnew, 1998).

engagement to fictional representations of urban poverty may have on a reader's relationship to real world poverty, indicating that it is within the author's power to build connections between the lives of fictional characters and those of unknown, non-fictional others. Keen (2006) takes a more critical stance towards the role that empathetic experiences of narrative media can have in influencing social behaviours, describing the relationship between empathy in fiction and real-world altruism as "tenuous" due principally to the fact that "the very nature of fictionality renders social contracts between people and person-like characters null and void" (p. 212).

Another significant contribution to the study of empathy and its role in audience reception has come from Dunn (2004), who focuses on how social movements and NGOs have utilised representations of victims of abuse in order to promote political change. Dunn develops a typology of the various ways in which victims of domestic abuse have historically been represented, ranging from "precipitating victims", who are shown to be in some way responsible for their own abuse, "ideal victims" who are entirely stripped of their agency in an effort to emphasise their helplessness and innocence, and "heroic victims" whose individual agency and determination enables them to endure despite their mistreatment. Dunn's analysis of these types of representation provide speculations of the different responses they may elicit in observers and may therefore provide an effective framework for consider how video game audiences respond to ludic simulations of disempowerment.

In recent years, empathy has also become a topical concept in video game studies. As the critical perception of video games has gradually transitioned from its status as a purely escapist entertainment experience into a complex and expressive medium

(Clarke and Mitchell, 2013), video game researchers have been keen to identify how developers have used the platform to create emotional experiences that are more traditionally associated with high art. Anable's *Playing with Feelings* (2018) draws attention to the fundamental role of emotion in the experience of playing video games. Anable's work attempts to break from the pure formalism of proceduralist approaches to game studies, exemplified by concepts and analytical tools such as Bogost's notion of procedural rhetoric by including audience's emotional responses in the video game reception process. According to Anable: "the player as a feeling and active subject goes missing from strict proceduralist accounts, or is there only as the thing that pushes the buttons to activate the code" (p. xiv). Anable instead presents a view of video games as experiences that "engage and entangle us in a circuit of feeling" (p. xii) with both game systems and broader social and representational structures, suggesting furthermore that "video games as pervasive and popular media are uniquely suited to giving expression to ways of being in the world and ways of feeling in the present that can tell us something about contemporary digitally mediated and distributed subjectivity".

Isbister's *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (2016) makes a similar case for examining emotion as a key aspect of the video game experience, drawing attention in particular to the role that the video game player's unique sense of agency has in facilitating emotional responses that are uncommon in traditional media. Comparing the experience of gaming to that of running a race, Isbister states that:

"When I run, I make a series of choices about actions I will take that might affect whether I win. I feel a sense of mastery or failure

depending on whether I successfully execute the actions in the ways I intended. My emotions ebb and flow as I make these choices and see what happens as a result. I feel a sense of consequence and responsibility for my choices. In the end I am to blame for the outcomes, because they arise from my own actions."

(p. 3)

By implicating the player in the action of the game, video games are therefore able to create emotional experiences that vary in both intensity and quality to those commonly facilitated by other non-interactive media, such as the joys of success and mastery, but also the potential guilt and frustration of failure.

Concurrently to these theoretical studies, anxieties concerning the relationship between violence in video games and violent behaviour that have been prevalent in public discourse on gaming concerning have inspired a reactionary new generation of researchers to examine the potentially prosocial outcomes of playing certain types of games. In recent years, there have been multiple studies that explore the role that video games may play in encouraging players to extend feelings of empathy towards people in real-life situations. Examples of these studies include Bachen et al.'s (2012) study on the impact of time spent playing the educational simulation game *Real Lives* on students' levels of empathy, Greitemeyer *et al.*'s (2010) study of the impact of playing the PC game *Lemmings* on players' empathy, Hughes' (2014) study of the use of a purpose-built game to encourage the development of empathy in children with autistic spectrum disorder and Nash's (Nash, 2015) exploration of players' responses to playing a game about immigration and border control in

Australia. Each of these studies indicated that video games can have a positive impact on an individual's propensity towards empathy.

Whilst the theoretical literature on audience interactions with video games has grown increasingly rich, studies that attempt to empirically explore audiences' reception of the social and political content of video games remain relatively scarce. There is, therefore, significant scope for development in the emerging field of player reception studies, especially when framed within the combined context of the video game medium's distinctly procedural means of communication, critical approaches to audience reception and theoretical explorations into the role of emotion in the reception process described above.

2. The Aesthetic and Rhetoric of Social Realism

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, political persuasion can come in a variety of forms. An understanding of how the concepts of rhetoric and persuasion can be applied to the study of narrative and entertainment media provides a greatly enhanced understanding of the role of the media in contemporary society. The reception of rhetoric, however, is a complex and multifaceted process, relying not only on the logical coherence and persuasiveness of the argument or world-view that is presented, but also the emotional experiences that the text evokes from its audience. There are therefore many ways in which a media experience can be designed to convey a political or social argument.

Cart Life (Hofmeier, 2010) and *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013), the games that will serve as the principle subjects of the analysis in the thesis, are distinctive in their use of the aesthetic and narratological principles of the genre of social realism as a means of creating unconventional gaming experiences and of conveying to audiences a persuasive political rhetoric. The precise way in which the two games do this is explored in greater depth in Chapter Five. For this to be clear, however, it is first necessary to explore the defining features of social realism as a narratological and visual genre and examine the debates surrounding its key concepts. This chapter begins therefore by exploring the theoretical debates that surround the tradition of social realism in film and literature, exploring in particular the arguments that call into question the genre's legitimacy as an authentic representation of reality, and then proceeds to identify other ways in which social realism can be categorised as a distinctive and meaningful genre within the study of visual and narrative culture.

Realism and Representation

Realism is one of the most notoriously problematic and highly-theorised concepts in the study of narrative and visual culture. The term has been described variously as “spectral” (Porton, 2003, p. 164), “slippery” (Overbey, 1978, p. 20), “highly variable and inherently complex” (Williams, 1977, p. 61), “confusing” and even “unruly” (Hill, 1986, p. 57). Such comments are largely the result of the fact that the term realism is used in a variety of different contexts. In its most common usage, realism is used to refer to the degree to which a representation visually resembles its referent. It is this use of the term that is generally implied when a spectator in a gallery describes a painting as realistic, or when a video game player describes the graphics in the latest iteration of the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise as realistic. The term realism may also, however, be used in reference to representations that have a more obtuse visual relationship to reality, but which resemble the material world in other ways. A text may be entirely fantastical in its fictional context but retain a sense of realism throughout the psychological and emotional authenticity of its characters, or the familiarity of its social and political environment. The concept of social realism tends to be more synchronous with this latter understanding of realism than the ‘photorealistic’ conception described above. Works of social realism may exhibit a close visual relationship with the material world, but what is more characteristic of the genre is that it represents the work’s social context with a perceived level of accuracy.

This conceptualisation of realism, however, has a fundamental problem: whereas a purely visual representation can often be mapped directly and simply against its real-world referent, a representation of a social structure or contextual experience

can present a number of uncertainties. The very fact that throughout history there have been many different artistic movements associated with the genre stands as a testament to this. How can both the French realist art movement of the 19th century and the British New-Wave, which express significantly different aesthetic values, both be considered equally accurate renditions of reality? Even within a single movement of realist media, differences between director's stances on social issues are prone to differ significantly. As Armes suggests: "Each great realist director evolved his own pattern of realism and used it to interpret a chosen facet of reality, and though collectively the important films of the neo-realists reflect the whole variety of Italian life, always the hand of the director is apparent, shaping the inchoate mass of material into an appropriate and satisfying form" (1971, p. 22). Similarly, Hill describes of the terminology of realism as a whole that "such has been the diversity of art-works to which it has been applied, or for which it has been claimed, that its continuing use-value as either a descriptive or explanatory concept would often seem to be in question" (1986, p. 57).

Moreover, the postmodernist turn, and the development of cultural studies during the twentieth century, has directed significant scrutiny towards the authenticity of representations, particularly those which are widely distributed and revered. Baudrillard's provocatively titled *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995), for instance, makes the case that representations in contemporary media are often highly disconnected from their referents. Hall, whose work has become synonymous with the cultural studies movement, similarly draws attention to the way in which the media can be used as instruments of power by creating ideologically-informed representations of social and political reality (Hall, Evans and Nixon, 2013). The crux

of these arguments is that textual representations can never be entirely free from the biases of both their creator and the social and economic fabric of their conditions of production, and that it is important to be sceptical when confronted with any form of representation that claims to offer a wholly precise, or objective perspective of reality. These ideas have been applied directly to the analysis of allegedly realist media. The art critic Rieser (Rieser, 1957) argued that any attempts to authentically represent the "totality of reality" are beyond "any possible artistic representation" (p. 239) and that accordingly any attempts to represent a social context in an art form must involve a "distortion of reality" (p. 248). Williams (1980), referring to realism in film, similarly stated that "the real world can never be 'restored' or 'correctly' rendered in the cinema" (pp. 10-11).

Overbey makes a similar claim, but directs his argument directly at the neo-realist movement, one of the most prolific movements of realism in film. Overbey states that "film must of necessity be manipulated by someone which implies that whatever 'reality' is recorded on film is different from, and is only a fragment of, the endlessly wide and complex 'reality' of common existence" (1978, p. 20). Similarly, film theorist Marcus states that "the mimetic accuracy of a work of art can never stand alone as the measure of realism, since no representation can give an unmediated rendering of objective reality" (1986, p. 5). Referring to the British New-Wave, another notable realist movement in film, Hill (1986) writes that:

No work can ever simply reveal reality. Realism, no less than any other type of art, depends on conventions, conventions which, in this case, have successfully achieved the status of being accepted

as 'realistic'. It is this 'conventionality' of realism that also makes its usage so vulnerable to change. For as the conventions change (either in reaction to previously established conventions or in accordance with new perceptions of what constitutes reality) so too does our sense of what then constitutes realism. (p. 57)

Against these claims, therefore, the legitimacy and value of the realist art form appears to be placed under question. If the value of films such as *Bicycle Thieves* (Sica, 1948) and *Kes* (Loach, 1969) lies in their ability to create an accurate, or 'mimetic', reproduction of reality available to the mass audience, how can we comfortably engage with these texts as works of realism whilst accepting that all representations involve some degree of distortion and, likewise, that all representations possess some degree of truthfulness?

To approach this problem, it is possible to draw on a select number of theorists whose work is both critical of the mimetic claims of realism's creators and supporters, but also identifies ways in which realism continues to have a meaningful artistic and political function. In the first instance, some theorists have challenged the notion that to recognise the mediated nature of realist texts is necessarily paramount to dismissing their representations of society as entirely fabricated and fictitious. Contemporary film theorist Rushton (2011) dismisses this notion by arguing that this viewpoint falsely assumes that the social reality that we comprehend outside of representations is itself invulnerable to mediation. In his words:

The overarching fallacy of the mediation argument is quite simply that it presumes a reality that is out there in some kind of pure and unmediated form. For their part, the media can thus only deform this pure reality because the media are subject to codes, conventions and technologies. For the mediation argument to make sense, a pure and unmediated reality must be predicated as irretrievably distinct from its mediated representations. (p. 45)

On this basis, Rushton argues that film constitutes a part of what we perceive as reality and that, accordingly, has as much importance and significance in the fabric of reality as do the objects, social conditions and events that are represented in the film (p. 2).

If we accept, then, that the mediated nature of the realist text is not by necessity a reason to reject such works as meaningless products of an artist's individual fantasy, an additional problem remains: if the realist text does not possess the heightened relationship to reality claimed by a number of the genre's artists and admirers, what makes its genre distinct from other works? In other words, if we accept that the realist film or novel bears, in principle, no greater intrinsic relationship to reality than more conventional forms of representation, what sense is there in assigning it a label that attempts to highlight its allegedly privileged relationship with reality? To answer this, it may be useful to refer back to some common definitions of realism. For a number of commentators, realism is not defined purely by the artistic intent to portray what is perceived as realistic, but also in terms of a disassociation from other

forms of representation. Marcus (1986) points out that throughout the history of the term's usage:

...realism is always defined in opposition to something else, be it romanticism in nineteenth-century literature, modernism in twentieth-century art, nominalism in medieval philosophy, or idealism in eighteenth-century thought. In film, realism is set against expressionism, aestheticism, or more generally, against illusionism. (p. 4)

Hill (1986) likewise comments that "realist innovations take place in a kind of dialectic with what has gone before, under-writing their own appeal to be uncovering reality by exposing the artificiality and conventionality of what has passed for reality previously" (p. 127). These sentiments indicate that there may be something more to realist forms of representation than simply a discernible intention to show the world mimetically. Realism is distinguished here by its difference to more mainstream forms of representation. Regardless of the authenticity of the content of the realist text, its genre is discernible in the unadorned way in which that content is presented. In other words, realism possesses a distinctive aesthetic, a contingent form of representation that distinguishes it from other forms of expression. As indicated above, the exact style in which the realist work takes shape can vary significantly depending on the medium, social and historical context, and particular style of the artist. The remainder of this chapter will focus, however, on the category of realism often described as social realism and begins by examining some of the key traits of this form of representation.

Social Realism and the Aesthetics of Disempowerment

As has been established, a significant cause of the perplexity with which academics and critics have approached the topic of realism is the uncertainty that has stemmed from the variety of contexts and uses for which the term has been applied. It should also now be clear that the term realism, when used alone, is highly diffuse, and does little to convey much about the nature of a media product, or other form or representation, without further clarification. The purpose of this thesis does not intend to go any further into the theoretical landscape of realism in itself, and its associated epistemologies and ontologies, but focuses instead on the distinctive genre of social realism.

Social realism is a term that critics typically apply to describe media texts, literature and artwork that represent the 'everyday' lives of 'ordinary' and most commonly working-class people as they struggle to achieve their goals, or simply continue to exist, in a predominantly uncaring social environment. Like other forms of realism, works of social realism are typically intended, by their authors, to convey something true about reality. Unlike some other varieties of realism, however, social realism typically presents a specific focus on the lives of individuals experiencing hardship as a result of their social, political or economic context. The concept is most commonly associated with European and American works produced in the past two centuries, and therefore is often concerned with the impact that the social, political and economic forces of capitalism (and now neoliberalism) have had on the lives of individuals.

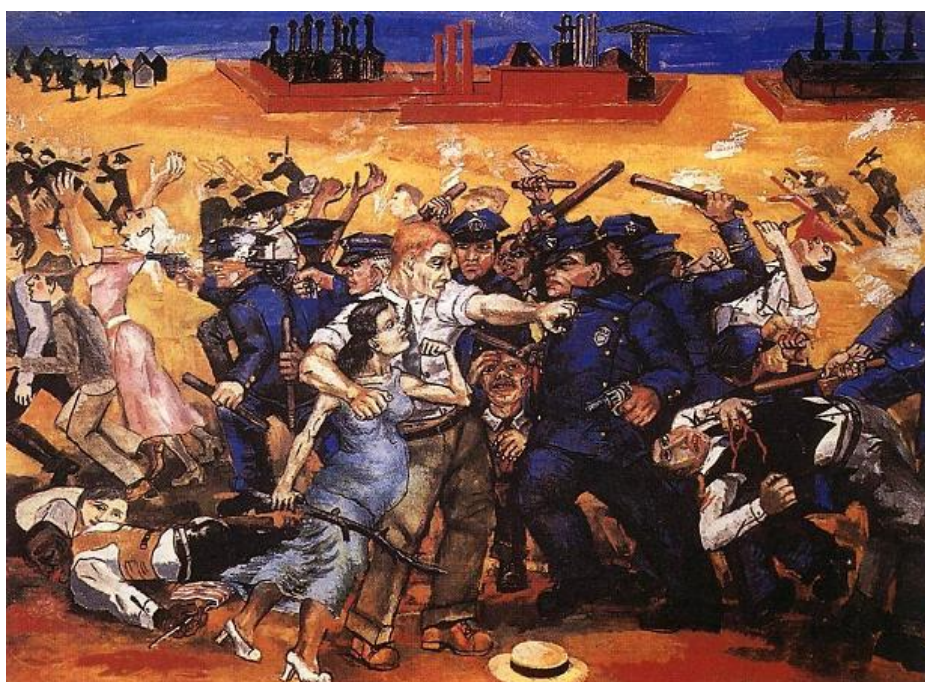
Whilst there are common themes in definitions voiced by critics, social realism, like realism, does not possess a standardised meaning, nor is it restricted to a particular geographical or historical context (Williams, 1977). As Lay points out, works that display elements of social realism can be found in a variety of contexts (2002, p. 8). These include the nineteenth-century novels of authors such as Charles Dickens and Gustave Flaubert, the 'naturalist' writings of Emile Zola and Thomas Hardy, the works of French artists such as Courbet, the Social Realist movement of 1930s America, the neo-realism movement in post-war Italian cinema and the British New-Wave realism of the mid-twentieth century. In the present day, the tradition endures in the works of British filmmakers such as Mike Leigh and Ken Loach, as well as in mainstream media such as television dramas and soap-operas.

To reduce these movements under the single umbrella of social realism may therefore appear reductive. There are, however, some clear themes that span across the theoretical literature on social realism. The principle, and most obvious, feature of the social realist genre can be described as an evident interest in achieving an authentic representation of reality, with a particular focus on the relationship between the day-to-day lives of individuals and social factors that influence their existence. Armes (1971) consequently describes the genre broadly as "a desire to adhere strictly to the truth" (p. 17). Ayfre (1985) likewise frequently positions the genre as a "neutral" way of observing social reality.

Rather than a discrete artistic movement, therefore, social realism may be understood as an umbrella term that encompasses a range of historical movements and styles of representation. These various styles and movements have a number of

significant distinctions. For some of these movements, visual faithfulness to the object of representation is of clear importance. As Overbey (1978), of the neo-realist director Rossellini, states: "an abiding interest in the 'reality' of details that explode into an understanding of 'social reality' was at the core of Rossellini's work" (p. 26). Other forms of social realism, in particular the movement that dominated US art in 1930s, adopt far more impressionist approaches, with some artists, such as Philip Evergood, displaying a distinctly expressionist style. In a similar fashion, the so-called 'naturalist' writings of Emile Zola exhibit a strong preoccupation with detail, whereas social realist works from other authors are more concerned with creating, as Lukács describes, a "totality" of the world they seek to represent (1963, p. 96).

Figure 2



An American Tragedy (Evergood, 1937)

As with the concept of realism more generally, the mimetic aspirations of social realism have justifiably been placed under scrutiny (Armes, 1971, p. 17). In truth,

works of social realism tend to be highly selective of the areas of society they seek to represent. Works of social realism are likely to represent areas of society where there is a clear imbalance of power. Whilst the various traditions of social realism are distinct in many ways, all are concerned with the distribution of power within the social structure inhabited by their authors. Evergood's iconic painting *American Tragedy* (1937, Figure 2), for instance, violently depicts a police assault on striking union members during the Great Depression. Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1992) explores the exploitation and neglect of impoverished children in nineteenth-century London.

More than this, however, social realism almost invariably explores these power relationships from the perspective of those who lack power: the disempowered. From the novels of Zola to the films of Loach, the social realist label is routinely assigned to works of fiction that seek to provide an insider voice on the lives of individuals and communities suffering some form of deprivation at the hands of far-reaching and impersonal socio-political forces (Shapiro, 1974, p. 14). As Overbey (1978) describes:

"the proper subject of neo-realism then becomes that which is actually happening in society, and in particular, the representation of the conditions of the poor, with the unemployed, prostitutes, and the destitute as typical characters suffering the problems of a class." (p. 21)

Common protagonists of social realism therefore include members of the working classes and poor, but may also more specifically include victims of war (*Germany, Year Zero* (Rossellini, 1948)), welfare dependents (*Umberto D* (Sica, 1952), *I, Daniel*

Blake (Loach, 2016)) and sex workers (*Nana* (Zola, 1992)). What all protagonists of social realist media have in common is that they are experiencing some form of contextually-driven disempowerment. They are not the exceptional heroes of most mainstream media, but ordinary, average and downtrodden. This is a trait that is discernible across the spectrum of social realist art and theory, and is expressed in provocative terms by Zavattini (1978), screenwriter of some of the most prolific works of the neo-realist movement:

I am against exceptional persons, heroes. I have always felt an instinctive hate towards them. I feel offended by their presence, excluded from their world as are millions of others like me. We are all characters. Heroes create inferiority complexes throughout an audience. (p. 76)

Williams (1977) describes this as a form of “social extension”, stating that in early forms of social realism:

"There is a crucial argument in the early period of bourgeois tragedy about the need to extend the actions of tragedy from persons of rank, to whom by convention and precept tragedy had hitherto largely been confined, to - as it was put — ' your equals, our equals '. This movement of social extension - ' let not your equals move your pity less ' - is a key factor in what we can now identify as a realist intention." (p. 63)

A key component of the social realist aesthetic, therefore, is the representation of ‘average’ characters who find themselves unable to control their lives and social environments, and who often serve passively as observers, or even victims, of their

circumstances. As Deleuze points out in relation to neo-realism, this is in stark contrast to the conventional “movement-image” media of the twentieth-century that effectively empowers audiences by inviting them to identify with a figure of heroism (Deleuze, 1989, p. 3). In neo-realism this process is reversed:

...the character has become a kind of viewer. He shifts, runs and becomes animated in vain, the situations he is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action. He records rather than reacts. He is prey to a vision, pursued by it or pursuing it, rather than engaged in an action.

Deleuze proceeds to note children are commonly given central roles in neo-realist works, precisely due to the fact that “in the adult world, the child is affected by a certain motor helplessness, but one which makes him all the more capable of seeing and hearing” (p. 4). This is a trend that is evident across a wide breadth of other social realist media, from Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* (1992) and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1899) to British New-Wave works such as Tony Richardson’s *A Taste of Honey* (1998) and Ken Loach’s *Kes* (1969).

The lives of these protagonists are also considered to be representative of the experiences of a broad range of individuals. Lukács, praising the works of what he describes as the “critical realist” tradition in literature, refers to one of the distinctive features of these works as the “typicality” of their protagonists:

What is the key to these 'typical' heroes of [realist] literature? [...]

A character is typical, in this technical sense, when his innermost

being is determined by objective forces at work in society. Vautrin or Julie Sorel, superficially eccentric, are *typical* in their behaviour: the determining factors of a particular historical phase are found in them in concentrated form. (1963, p. 122)

If social realism has a core, guiding aesthetic, therefore, it is one of disempowerment. Works of social realism display a common interest in representing human beings who are disempowered by their social, political or economic environment. In most of the examples discussed above, this disempowerment is demonstrated most saliently in its narratological form: the protagonists of *Oliver Twist*, *A Taste of Honey*, *Kes*, *Bicycle Thieves* and *Germany, Year Zero* are repeatedly represented as unable to bring about substantial positive change in their own lives and, often, the lives of others. They find themselves stuck in a state of deprivation that they appear to have no control over. In visual media, however, the experience of disempowerment is also frequently reflected in the text's visual style. The filmmakers of the neo-realist movement frequently chose the most deprived urban areas as their backdrops, with Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero* (1948), for instance, being filmed in the ruins of post-war Berlin (Figure 3). As described above, the works of the American Social Realists tended to adopt more expressive art styles and yet still, as Shapiro (1974) describes, their work was:

...not an art of the studio - rarely does one see a painting of the model, costumed or nude, and even less frequently is a still life encountered. Social Realism's only landscapes are at least partly

cityscapes - a decaying mining village, or shacks along the railroad tracks. (p. 14)

Figure 3



Germany, Year Zero (Rossellini, 1948)

This aesthetic of disempowerment refers not a consistent visual style in these works, nor does it simply refer to a particular narrative theme. Rather, it is used in the more phenomenological sense as an aesthetic of experience: a way of describing the type of perceptual experience that manifests when we engage with and seek value in a discrete object of representation (Beardsley, Wreen and Callen, 1982). This includes visual and narratological experience, but also accommodates emotional experiences, such as the claustrophobia we may feel as the result of identifying with a powerless protagonist or the pathos we experience when we see someone struggling to make ends meet. It may even include the haptic physical responses that our bodies make a

result of the experience. It is argued in this sense that the overriding aesthetic of social realism is one of disempowerment and, to be more precise, disempowerment at the hands of far reaching, but ultimately mundane, social and political forces.

Social Realism as Political Rhetoric

Despite the implications of the genre's label, social realism should not be presumed to be an impartial or neutral view of the world. Social realism possesses a distinct aesthetic and enforces a contingent view of social reality. As has been identified by numerous commentators, Hall (Hall, Evans and Nixon, 2013) and Berger (1972) being among the most prolific, representation cannot avoid having a political basis. Works of social realism, however, appear to engage with politics differently to most mainstream media. Whereas in the contemporary action, fantasy or science-fiction film the ideology governing narrative event and the process of representation is often hidden by glamorous locations, stunts, special effects and professional acting, social realism brings the political issues of contemporary society to the foreground by the means of its rough aesthetic of disempowerment. However, social realism does more than simply highlight social and political problems. Rather, social realism frequently presents a view of the world that serves a discernible and expressive rhetorical function. Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* directs an unambiguous attack on the bureaucratic apathy of particular aspects of the British social support system. King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928) undermines the promise of opportunity that has dominated the American ideological landscape since at least the 1900s. This aspect of social realist may be described as its rhetoric.

A fundamental aspect of social realism, as identified by numerous commentators, is that it employs some form of political rhetoric. This rhetoric is often implicit within the very aesthetics of social realism, which present a bleak and pessimistic view of society, whilst encouraging audiences to identify with individuals experiencing a state of disempowerment. Far from being politically neutral, therefore, social realism concerns itself heavily with individuals and communities who suffer at the impersonal, and often anonymous, hands of social, political and economic circumstance. In doing so, works of social realism often serve as a platform of a clear political rhetoric regarding its object of representation. For some social realist artists, this was function of their work was even regarded as a moral obligation. Rossellini (1978) described his style of film-making as first and foremost a practice of ethics, indicating that the goal of neo-realist filmmaking is to pose “problems for us and for itself in an attempt to make people think” (p. 90). Zavattini (1978) similarly argued that the process of authentically representing social reality inevitably forms the basis of a political rhetoric: a means of persuading audiences to view aspects of society they might otherwise have ignored even “analyse” (p. 69) the social and political context that led, in the case of the neo-realist movement, to the deprivation and disempowerment of the working class in post-war Italy.

World cinema specialist Nagib (2011), similarly to both Rosellini and Zavattini, presents the intention to produce a work of art that mirrors reality as in itself an ethical decision, stating that:

My proposal is to define realist modes of production and address, typical of new waves and new cinemas, as an 'ethics'. By this, I am

certainly not referring to an 'ethics of representation', or even less to 'ethical' or 'unethical' films, which find in their passive spectators their 'victims' and in the critic, their 'judge' [...] I would say that to choose reality instead of simulation is a moral question, but one which concerns casts and crews alone in their drive to merge with the phenomenological real, and this is why the stress on modes of production and address is here of the essence. (p. 10)

Rossellini, Zavattini and Nagib's position indicates that the drive to represent the world in its most base and unadorned form is in itself an expression of morality, and also suggests that it carries with it the weight of rhetoric: to represent the problems facing society is in itself to issue a political statement directed at the complacency of the entertainment industry and the general ease at which members of a society are able to overlook and dismiss the suffering of others.

For many theorists and artists, the political rhetoric of the social realist work has been seen as implicit in the alleged truthfulness of the representation. Lukács praised the "critical detachment" (1963, p. 96) that was attained by realist writers and which allowed them to attain a "concrete" image of "the development, structure and goal of society as a whole" and thereby develop a critical attitude towards modern social structures. Zavattini similarly stated that the purpose of the neo-realist film was to encourage audiences to reflect "upon what they are doing and upon what others are doing; that is, to think about reality precisely as it is" (1978, p. 68). As explored in the preceding section, the postmodern turn in cultural theory has led to a significant, and perhaps healthy, degree of scepticism regarding

the authenticity of representations of reality. However, it remains clear from the remarks of both film theorists and the neo-realists that the driving force of social realism has largely consisted of efforts to convey a critical political rhetoric from the very act of representation.

Far from stemming from a politically neutral standpoint, the representation and rhetoric delivered by social realist films almost invariably originates from a left-wing political perspective. As several theorists have indicated (Shapiro, 1974, p. 28; Todd, 2003), the encoded rhetoric and culture of production of works of social realism is characteristically critical of capitalist structures of social and economic inequality.

Writing of the American Social Realists, Shapiro writes that:

As artists, they came to see as their duty the exposure of privilege.

Their paintings were to be both a demand for justice and an exhibition of the misery of unemployment, the fortitude of workers, the corruption of the ruling class, and the humiliation caused by poverty. Once they saw their role in this way, many artists deliberately divorced themselves from the still persuasive nineteenth-century idea of art as primarily a means for self-expression and self-fulfilment; instead they embraced the idea of art as a means of communicating social values. (p. 14)

Lukács (1963) similarly argues that for a realist writer to produce a work that engages authentically with the present they must be at least partially sympathetic to left-wing politics, stating that:

It is enough that a writer takes socialism into account and does not reject it out of hand. But if he rejects socialism - and this is the point I want to make - he closes his eye to the future, gives up any chance of assessing the present correctly, and loses the ability to create other than purely static works of art. (p. 60)

As has already been suggested, the political motivations of these artistic movements necessitated a series of narratological themes and patterns. To engage the viewer in a critique of their own social context, the social realist work necessitates a degree of tragedy, of unfairness and inhumanity. Referring again to the Social Realist movement of the 1930s, Shapiro (1974) states that:

...Social Realism takes as its main subject certain significant or dramatic moments in the lives of ordinary poor people. The moments in their lives selected (and it is always a moments in someone's life - it is hard to think of Social Realist painting that does not include a human being) are almost always those that in some way focus on the indignity or pathos of their situation - the hard work they perform, the inadequate rewards they receive for it, or the miserable conditions they work under. (p. 14)

As Shapiro suggests in reference to the “pathos” of the social realist protagonists’ situation, the primary source of deprivation cannot be the fault of the protagonist: it may be that the protagonist could have avoided a dire fate if they had acted differently, for example if *Bicycle Thieves*’ Antonio had kept a closer eye on his possessions. However, the ultimate cause of Antonio’s situation as it is presented in

the film is not Antonio's carelessness, but rather the economic inequality and desperation that succeeded the Nazi occupation of Rome during the Second World War. The critical rhetoric of social realism emerges from the empathy the viewer feels towards the protagonist, meaning that pathos and tragedy are recurring tropes in social realist narrative structures.

Social Realism and Social Transformation

Both the critical discussion surrounding social realism and the creative momentum behind the works have been fuelled by the possibility that social realism can have as a force for social and political transformation. Shapiro's *Art as a Weapon* (1974) takes as its primary argument the notion that the American Social Realists believed their works could have a positive role in the redistribution of power in 1930s America:

They confidently believed that art was a weapon - a phrase that became a rallying cry - and they were convinced that art could communicate ideas, change thinking, and free the imagination in ways that would benefit mankind. (p. 18)

The neo-realists often likewise presented their works as vehicles for social change. Zavattini described the "ambition" of the neo-realist movement as being "to strengthen everyone, and to give everyone the proper awareness of a human being" (1978, p. 76). British social realism has also often been associated with the same endeavour. Creeber describes how "British social realism has always been traditionally associated with a form of 'moral realism' – one that had a sense of ethical responsibility that can often be motivated by political change and

transformation” (2009, p. 428). In recent years the question of whether a work of art that attempts to demonstrate reality ‘as it is’ can be a motivator of social change has again risen to public consciousness. Ken Loach’s *I, Daniel Blake* became a catalyst of multiple calls for social change and fundraising events across the United Kingdom, making its most prolific mark when the Labour opposition leader recommended that the Prime Minister watch the film in a publicly broadcasted session of parliament (Stewart, 2016).

Despite this, however, both critics and admirers of the genre have expressed doubt regarding the positive impact that social realist works may have on both audiences and society more broadly. A critical line of argument regarding these claims can be traced back to the critical reception of the neo-realist films at the time of their release. Despite his interest in the neo-realist movement, Overbey himself appears doubtful of the impact of the social realist film on society. Overbey argues that:

The moral position of 'seeing things as they are' accompanied by a corresponding analysis in order that the whole of reality might be understood, existed, in fact, more in the theory and criticism of neo-realism than it did in the films themselves, which failed to analyse the lies of Fascism. Although social problems form the basis of content in many neo-realist films, few are dealt with in any depth; many of them end with either desperate resignation or a sentimental mysticism at odds with the means of expression itself.

(1978, p. 10)

Overbey proceeds to single out De Sica’s work in particular, indicating that:

...his background was as an entertainer - any and every device to divert and move an audience was fair. How else can one explain the constant use of children as an entree into the adult world he was supposedly attempting to analyse, save as emotional and theatrical devices to pull easy tears, tears indeed which are used as substitutes for analysis and understanding? (p. 22)

Comparable criticisms and concerns regarding the ultimate impact of social realist media have been directed at other artistic movements. Williams (1977), referring to social realism in television, writes that:

There is a sense in which what was earlier called the drama of 'low life' is a minor intention of bourgeois drama itself, where 'to see how the other half lives', as it was often put, was in itself a particular intention, even a particular form of entertainment. (p. 68)

Similar concerns have been raised over the broader genre of so-called 'poverty porn', an understanding of media that conveys suffering as a form of voyeuristic gratification. As Dean (2003) describes, the use of the term pornography to describe media representations of suffering has been used by critics to admonish what they see as "the reduction of human beings to commodities, the exposure of vulnerable people at the moment of their most profound suffering, and thus their victimization all over again" (p. 91). As a genre that shares a number of the aesthetic and semantic features of so-called poverty porn, social realism is susceptible to similar criticisms.

An additional criticism of the progressive ambitions of social realist media creators has been expressed by Hill (1986). Hill argues that "the [British New-Wave] films, and the views of the world which they promoted, may well have obscured as much as they enlightened, and obstructed as much as they initiated the potential for social change and reconstruction" (p. 2-3). Hill's key argument is that British social realism is restricted by the individualistic, conflict-resolution narrative structures of mainstream cinema. According to Hill (1986):

Two main consequences stem from this stress on the individual as agent of causality. One the 'making of things happen' is seen to derive from the actions of individuals rather than societal groups or collectives (or if the group does undertake an action it is usually under the wing of a distinctive leader). Secondly, the origins and explanation of actions and events are seen to result primarily from the features of individual psychology rather than more general social, economic and political relations. (p. 56)

Hill continues to argue that social realist texts often present social problems as supplementary to society as a whole. In Hill's own words:

The social problem is a problem for society, rather than of it. And, obviously, if the causes of problems are located in the individual, then, *prima facie*, there is no necessity for a reconstruction of the social order. As a result, the endings characteristic of the social problem film tend to oscillate between one or other of two types,

stressing, alternatively, the re-establishment of social order or the achievement of social integration. (p. 56)

There is a risk, therefore, that in closely representing the plight of individuals (a process that is necessary to create the experience of 'pathos' that is a guiding aesthetic principle to these texts) social realist works reduce broad, integral social problems to the problems of individuals. Producers of such works must therefore strive to maintain a difficult balance between placing their audience's emotional attention on the individual protagonist and making it clear that the problems faced by these individuals are not idiosyncratic, but representative of broader social inequalities.

Debates surrounding the perceived impact that these types of media products have on society are therefore likely to continue, as will concerns regarding the alleged authenticity of their representations. However, as with much of the scholarly materials on the arts, whilst there is ample literature to demonstrate how critics have interpreted the key traits and motivations behind the development of representational trends, the actual impact that these novels, paintings and films have had on audiences has received far less attention. It is clear, however, that social realist texts engage with social reality in a way that is distinct from and often more direct than mainstream forms of media representation and that, as a result, the way in which audiences engage with these texts is worthy of attention.

3. Remediating Social Realism

Video Games and Empowerment

As will be clear from the previous chapter, for several decades scholarly discourse on social realism has been largely preoccupied with the medium of film. The reasons for this are not necessarily difficult to divine. From the 1930s onwards film has developed into what many would agree has become the world's dominant entertainment and artistic form. The result of this has not only been an increase in scholarly attention towards the medium but has also heralded a range of artistic and commercial experimentations for the medium, including the development of the numerous social realist film movements discussed in the preceding chapter. On top of this, there is some evidence that the medium of film may be particularly suited to particular aesthetic demands of social realism. As was also discussed in the previous chapter, the claim that social realist media should be seen to possess an objective, mimetic relationship with social reality possesses some significant flaws, the most obvious of which being that all media, whether social realism, news broadcasts, or high cinematic fantasy, to a large extent mediates, and thereby alters, the representation of its real-world referent. Despite this, the media of film has been regarded as some to be highly suited to the narratological and artistic tradition of social realism. As Bazin (1960) describes, the mechanical processes of photography, and film by extension, results in an image that shares a "common being" with its real-world referent (p. 8). The fact that the camera and microphone record the real-life movements and sounds of human actors undeniably lends the medium a degree of authenticity that may be absent from painting and literature.

Where then does this leave us in terms of identifying the role that video games may have in remediating the narratological and aesthetic values of the social realist genre? Video games are, as Kirkpatrick (2011) points out, aesthetic media forms, and so are theoretically capable of producing comparable experience to those created by more traditional media such as film, literature and art. In stark contrast to the aesthetic principles of social realism, however, video games have a reputation as the escapist media form par excellence. In situations where the perception of the video game medium as a pointless, if innocuous, pastime is less pronounced, a more aggressive stance has taken hold. As discussed in Chapter One, video games have faced significant scrutiny for their use of violent gameplay and imagery amidst fears that young players will imitate these actions in real life. Within both public and academic discourse, therefore, a common perception has emerged of the video game medium as a purely gratuitous medium, at best a means of diversion and at worst the cause of moral panic. Given the medium's often controversial history, the latter perspective is not entirely unwarranted. As has been illustrated by a number of media researchers and commentators, the mainstream video game market has been (and to a large extent continues to be) home to game genres that continually rely on what have been seen as racist (Höglund, 2008; Šisler, 2008); sexist (Provenzo Jr., 1991; Kennedy, 2002) and elitist tropes (Gailey, 1993). Bogost summarises this perception of video games concisely with the remark: "Videogames are considered inconsequential because they are perceived to serve no cultural or social function save distraction at best, moral baseness at worst" (2007: p. viii). If these claims are to be taken sincerely the video game medium appears to be ill-suited to the demands of social realism.

More important perhaps than either of these perspectives, however, is the fact that the experience of video game play often appears to be entirely at odds with what the previous chapter argued is one of the defining characteristics of social realist media: that it conveys, and encourages audiences to identify with, individuals in a position of disempowerment. When considering games that attempt to place players in the perspectives of people dealing with real-life situations, the role of interactivity adds an additional theoretical dimension to consider. An environment in a game may be extremely faithful to a real-world location and the player-character may be emotionally complex and visually convincing, but the way in which the player is able to interact with that environment may completely dispel any sense of realism that the game may otherwise have emanated. *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013), for instance, contains a highly rich and detailed world, complete with dynamic non-player characters and realistic infrastructures. This is undermined, however, by the unrealistic way in which the player is able to interact with the world: the player can use their character to commit heinous crimes with little consequence, scour the environment to find sophisticated weapons with which they can freely kill their enemies or random bystanders, and effectively return from the dead for the small price of a hospital bill.

The developer's decision to grant players affordances that clash with the realism of the game, however, has a clear design purpose. The mechanics and abilities the player is able to utilise in *Grand Theft Auto V* enable players to possess a sense of mastery that they would be unlikely to experience outside of the game context. The cities depicted can become playgrounds for the player's sadism, spaces where violence and humorous disruption becomes inconsequential, but which manifests

realistically enough for players to temporarily feel as though they are above the law. In providing this type of experience, the *Grand Theft Auto* games present players with an experience of empowerment. The vast majority of video games attempt to offer the same kind of experience, one of control over a virtual environment.

Theoretical discussions regarding the experience of empowerment in games have received less attention than they deserve. There are, however, a few important works that engage with the issue. Aarseth's 'Allegories of Space: The Question of Spatiality in Video Games' (2000) discusses how digital space is structured and interacted with in video games. The article deals principally with the computer games *Myth: The Fallen Lords* (Bungie, 1997) and *Myst* (Cyan, 1993), exploring how the two games utilise virtual space. Whilst introducing these games, however, Aarseth makes a very telling statement: he suggests that both games are about "conquering landscapes" in different ways (p. 164). In *Myth*, a real-time strategy game, this goal is achieved through military conquest: the player generates units and directs them in battle in order to control the game-map and wipe out their opponent. This pattern of empowerment via conquest can be applied to a number of other types of games. Lammes (2003) places the idea within a political context in his exploration of the colonial themes in the turn-based strategy game *Civilisation III*: the game instructs the player to gain some form of dominance over neighbouring civilisations, either in terms of military conquest, geographic domination, technological prowess, diplomatic savvy or cultural hegemony.

Muriel and Crawford (2018) develop these ideas further by considering the dominance of empowerment in video game design within the context of

contemporary political ideology. According to Muriel and Crawford, this pattern of game design can be seen as an expression of the increasingly pervasive ideology of neoliberalism, described by the authors as a political system that emphasises the agency of individuals and in which political power is “aimed at empowering entrepreneurial individuals capable of choosing for themselves” (p. 69), as opposed to encouraging collective and institutional organisation and change. Referring in particular to open-world video games, Muriel and Crawford argue that:

These games are based on the idea of giving freedom to players in order to explore the universe of the game and act without following a pre-established script, allowing players to choose what missions they want to accomplish and in which order, and flooding the story with secondary tasks and mini-games [...] [this] articulates the gameplay experience around the idea of free will, which is nothing else but the maximization of the principle that rhetorically governs every video game: player's freedom (even if that freedom just consists of moving a pad vertically on a screen). (p. 70)

Because of the prevalence of these types of design practices, which present “players as powerful subjects, who are able to control the outcome of their actions in ways they could only imagine in their daily lives” (p. 72), Muriel and Crawford describe the video game medium as expressive of “neoliberalism *par excellence*” (italics in original) and regard them as endorsements of the idea that “players, if they are accomplished enough or try hard enough, are able to succeed and triumph” regardless of contextual obstacles.

Empowerment through dominance can be applied to virtually any game that involves direct conflict between players (or the player and computer-controlled opponents), including platformers, shoot-em-ups, first-person and third-person shooters. In other games, however, the process of player-empowerment is subtler. As Aarseth (2000, p. 164) discusses, in the point-and-click adventure game *Myst* conquest of the landscape is achieved through puzzle solving rather than violent conflict. The game is set on a depopulated fantasy island filled with puzzles and mysteries that the player must solve in order to access new areas and gain information. As the player progresses, they gain a greater understanding of the history of the island and are able to traverse it more efficiently. By uncovering its secrets, the player gradually gains mastery over the mysterious island. The same logic may in fact be applied to more abstract puzzle games. A classic game like *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1984) challenges players to gain control over the game space by quickly placing blocks in an ordered fashion. As the player progresses through the levels, and the blocks fall more quickly, the player will eventually be overwhelmed. Through repeated plays, however, the player's skills will develop, allowing them to go for longer without being overcome and potentially enabling them to immortalise their momentary dominance of the game space in the high score table. The inevitable loss of control of the primary game space is compensated for by the high score table, which acts both to empower the strongest players and serves as a challenge for newcomers.

These examples demonstrate that the fun that emerges from gameplay is very often tied to experiences of conquest, mastery and player empowerment. These experiences are also often the orchestrated products of particular game design

practices. For a number of years, a key topic in academic and technical approaches to game design has been the psychological phenomenon of 'flow'. The concept of flow originates from the work of the Russian psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (2002). Csikszentmihalyi uses the term flow to describe the state of mind that human beings enter when immersed in an activity that has a clear goal, offers immediate feedback and has a difficulty level that appropriately matches the individual's level of skill. Flow can be experienced when engaged in a wide variety of activities but is particularly apt at explaining the pleasure that players gain from playing video games. This comparison has been developed most notably by game designers and commentators Chen (2007), Koster (2013) and Rigby (2015).

The experience of flow is geared towards creating a situation where individuals can enjoy developing skills and overcoming challenges. In a situation like a video game, where participation is usually voluntary, the experience of flow serves to empower players: it encourages them to enhance their abilities, overcome challenges and eventually conquer the virtual space of the game world. If flow is the dominant mode of enjoyment in gaming, then it is likely that the majority of games are geared towards creating an experience of empowerment. This experience of empowerment may or may not exceed the boundaries of the game. In the case of a game with a public high score table a high-performer may, to a degree, be socially empowered as a result of their abilities. Performing well at some games may allow players to improve specific skills, thereby enabling them to fulfil various goals and objectives outside the game more efficiently. Playing a game may increase players' overall levels of confidence or, at the very least, give them a moment of respite from the lack of agency they may feel in their day-to-day lives. Whatever the overall impact

that the experience has on players, it is clear that the games industry has been driven by a desire to offer empowering gameplay and that the psychological state of flow is the means by which this empowerment most frequently takes place.

From what has been discussed regarding the psychological state of flow and the experience of empowerment in video games, it should be apparent that developers interested in creating games that put players in the shoes of people enduring difficult real-life situations are faced with a problem: real life is not always empowering. People are routinely faced with problems that have no clear and easy solutions and that do little to enable individuals to improve their lives. There is undoubtedly a place for games that attempt to teach players ways in which difficulties and conflicts can be overcome. However, a game that allows players to experience poverty whilst giving them the easy opportunity to escape it is unlikely to spark a great degree of sympathy for the player-character. Rather, it is likely to perpetuate the viewpoint that poverty is a symptom of lack of will or ambition.² This is a perspective that has been discredited by numerous political and sociological theorists, but perhaps most comprehensively by McNamee and Miller (2014). The prevailing logic of empowerment, therefore, has the potential to reinforce a problematic perception of the individual's relationship to society and the ease with which the socially and economically disempowered are able to surpass financial and contextual difficulties.

² *The Sims* (2000), with its unrealistically strong job market, may be seen to endorse this ideology.

Video Games and Disempowerment

It is clear, therefore, that to date the video game industry has been largely built around a desire to offer players an experience of simulated empowerment. As a result, the concepts and features that are commonly regarded as key components of the video games medium, such as goals, scores and achievements, have developed to become instrumental to the players' emotional experience of empowerment and achievement. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the video game medium is incapable of producing experiences of disempowerment. The work of some commentators, in fact, suggests that disempowerment can play as significant of a role as empowerment in video game experiences, albeit often with the ultimate goal of heightening the ultimate experience of empowerment. Juul, for instance, sees the primary role of failure in games as a means of providing feedback for when the player does something wrong and as a way of indicating to the player that their actions in the game world have meaning (2013, p. 122).

Moreover, the level of experience and ability that the player possesses can have a significant role in determining the emotional and cognitive experience that emerges from their gameplay. Comparing this to the position of the audience in film, Grodal *et al.* (2008) state that:

When viewing a film the labeling of the emotions felt is determined by the viewer's passive appreciation of the film character's coping potentials. But when the situation is part of a video game, it is the player's assessment of his own coping potentials that determines the emotional experience. The

unskilled player may feel despair when confronted with the lion,
but the skilled player will fuel the arousal into a series of
courageous actions (p. 201)

By the same standard, a game's difficulty can have an overriding impact on the level of empowerment that is experienced by the player, with higher difficulty levels often leading to a heightened experience of disempowerment.

In games journalism the term disempowerment is occasionally used to describe horror games that put players in life-threatening situations whilst giving them limited resources with which to evade or confront their foes (for example Stubbs and McAllister, 2015). Examples of such games include *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Frictional Games, 2010), *Outlast* (Red Barrels, 2013) and *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly, 2014). In each of these, gameplay is contained within some form of isolated and haunting location, such as a haunted house, abandoned hospital or ravished space station, whilst they are hunted by an overpowering and aggressive enemy. In these cases the player is at a significant physical disadvantage when compared to their foes and must rely on stealth and cunning to reach the end of the game, at which point the enemy may be defeated or the player-character may escape the threatening situation.

Other examples of mainstream games where disempowerment is a key aspect of the overall experience of gameplay include games that are simply difficult. Survival games such as *Don't Starve* (Klei Entertainment, 2013) and *The Long Dark* (Hinterland Studio Inc., 2017), where players must hunt and gather in an inhospitable natural environment may be placed in this category, as can other

notoriously difficult games such as *Dark Souls*. Rogue-like games, such as *Dwarf Fortress* (Adams and Adams, 2006) and *NetHack* (The NetHack DevTeam, 1987), likewise offer a degree of disempowerment by taking away the conventional mechanic of providing player-characters with multiple lives and save points, instead implementing a 'permadeath' feature that means that once a character has died they become permanently unplayable.

Although the level of difficulty and resulting anxiety produced by these types of games can create gameplay experiences that are much more aligned with the aesthetic principles of disempowerment, in each of the examples described above disempowerment serves the ultimate function of heightening an eventual sense of empowerment. Horror games typically end in the protagonist's eventual escape, and even defeat of, their pursuers. Survival games likewise enable players to gain dominance over and even colonise what once appeared to be a hostile environment. Difficult games and rogue-likes likewise use the player's repeated failures to heighten the eventual moment of triumph. Consequently, to describe these examples as games with an overall aesthetic of disempowerment may be only partially accurate, as, whilst much of the gameplay delivered by these games is likely to involve a degree of disempowerment, the overall aesthetic of these experiences is more likely to consist of empowerment.

Games that provide more authentic and enduring experiences of disempowerment do exist, however, and can be identified in both mainstream and more experimental video games. Within the mainstream and independent video game industries, disempowerment has been utilised to add complexity to game narratives and

provoke strong emotional reactions. One notable example of this is Dontnod Entertainment's *Life is Strange* (2015). *Life is Strange* is a narrative-driven adventure game in which players takes the role of Max Caulfield, a high school student who spontaneously develops the power to travel short distances back in time. At first, taking control of Max's newfound abilities is a highly empowering experience. The player is able to utilise them to improve the lives of Sam and her peers, exact revenge on bullies, and even save lives. However, as the story progresses the player is also faced with situations where their abilities are not enough to solve Max and her friend Chloe's most pressing problems, such as Chloe's abusive stepfather and their fellow student Kate's declining mental health. These types of situations escalate to a point where what appeared to be a highly empowering gift is revealed to be far costlier than anticipated.

Another example of how the aesthetics of disempowerment have been utilised in mainstream video game design practices can be found in *Spec Ops: The Line* (YAGER, 2012). *Spec Ops: The Line* is a third-person shooter game set during the aftermath of a fictional storm that has brought the city of Dubai to chaos and ruin. The player takes the role of Captain Martin Walker, a US Army Operative who has been tasked with leading an elite group of soldiers into Dubai in order to discover the fate of a battalion which became trapped in the storm. The player traverses the ruinous city engaging in combat with armed locals using cover-based shooting mechanics that are characteristic of the genre. As the game progresses, however, the player is routinely exposed to the severe consequences of their violent actions and is ultimately forced to question whether their intervention in the region resulted in far more harm than help.

In both of these examples the experience of empowerment that is typical of the video game medium is offered to players before being undermined. These games serve as the inverse of games such as *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) and *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly, 2014), where disempowerment is utilised to create a heightened sensation of empowerment, in that empowerment is used to build up the player's sense of achievement and mastery before stripping them of the sense of power and heroism that has accumulated. These examples therefore demonstrate also how the interactive nature of the video game medium can be utilised to provide players with an enduring sense of disempowerment. The fact that a video game can empower a player with the ability to meaningfully alter the fabric of the game world means that the medium can also highlight to players the restrictions that the possession of even superhuman abilities have in terms of solving some of life's most significant problems. Such experiences are made all the more powerful through the fact that it is not just the player-character, but also the player who must bear the burden of this powerlessness. The very interactivity that makes video games highly attractive vehicles of the experience of empowerment, therefore, can also be utilised in order to create a heightened experience of disempowerment, where the player's complicity in tragic events, and the accompanying sense of remorse or guilt, grounds the player in powerlessness.

Simulating Realism

As was argued in the preceding chapter, the representation of an individual or individuals who are experiencing some form of disempowerment is a central aspect of the overall aesthetic of the social realist genre. Based on the evidence presented in the previous section, it is clear that although video game design practices have

tended to be geared towards creating experiences of empowerment, the medium does have the capacity to put players in a position of disempowerment. Moreover, due in combination to the fact that the video game medium is highly effective in establishing a close relationship of identification between the player and in-game player-character and because players have often been conditioned to expect an experience of empowerment from the video game medium, video games may in fact be a highly effective medium with which to provide mediated experiences of disempowerment. In-and-of-itself, however, media texts which represent and even simulate experiences of disempowerment do not necessarily constitute what art, literary and film theorists have described as social realism. For a media text to be considered a work of social realism the source of the protagonist's experience of disempowerment is generally considered to be ingrained within his or her social and political environment and, in addition, the context in which this takes place is expected to be convincingly realistic to its audience.

Even if we accept, therefore, that video games may be a suitable vehicle for the exploration of experiences of disempowerment, the possibility a video game that conforms to the political and artistic values of social realism may, for many, be a problematic notion. Within video game scholarship, however, a clear trend can be identified of researchers and commentators looking for ways to understand how the video game medium can be used as a form of enacting social and political change by attempting to construct accurate simulations of social and political scenarios and structures. Frasca (2004), for instance, calls for the development of "games of the oppressed" – a experimental form of video games that might be used to create simulations of circumstances of oppression in order to better understand and

resolve imbalances of power. Comparing the video game medium to traditional linear mediums, Frasca identifies potential in the fact that:

Unlike narrative, which is constituted by a fixed series of actions and descriptions, videogames need the active participation of the user not just for interpretational matters, but also for accessing its content. Narrative is based on semiotic representation, while videogames also rely on simulation, narrative is about what already happened while simulation is about what could happen.

This approach to game design is exemplified in Frasca's own browser-based application *September 12th: A Toy World* (Frasca, 2010). *September 12th* presents players with an isometric view of a bustling middle-eastern settlement. When the game starts, the majority of the people in the city are civilians dressed in blue and purple, whilst some are represented as 'terrorists', armed with assault rifles and dressed in white and black. The player is able to order missile strikes in the settlement in order to eradicate the terrorists. However, there is a significant delay between the command being given and the missile meeting its mark, making civilian loss of life inevitable. Moreover, when civilians witness the loss of life caused by the missile strikes they in turn become radicalised, transforming into fighters and serving as additional targets for the player. *September 12th* therefore creates a simulation where users can explore the impact of western military intervention by directly interacting with a controlled and observing the result of their actions.

Other scholars and video game critics have made similar calls for games that attempt to directly engage players with social and political issues. Bogost presents a

similar line of argument as Frasca, arguing that video games and programming systems more generally, can be particularly apt in enabling users to explore dynamic social structures and processes (2007). In *Persuasive Games*, he argues that:

Because computers function procedurally, they are particularly adept at representing real or imagined systems that themselves function in some particular way - that is, that operate according to a set of processes. The computer magnifies the ability to create representations of processes. (p. 5)

In one of Bogost's own games, this is demonstrated by means of a ludic simulation of the global oil industry. In *Oil God* (*Persuasive Games*, 2006), players assume the role of a powerful oil tycoon whose actions can significantly influence the profitability of their oil extraction and sale. Players are able to create political and economic instability in oil-rich regions in order to raise their excessively high profits levels. The game as a whole simulates an economic system where fossil fuel industries have a clear incentive to disrupt global peace and security in order gain higher profits.

Galloway presents a comparable account of how we might consider the video game medium to be an effective platform for the exploration of social and political structures (2006). Galloway argues that in order to effectively consider the possibility of a socially realistic game theorists must withdraw from a focus on the role of representation and shift to an exploration of the actions players perform in games, the outcomes of these actions, and how congruent they are with players' lived experiences, stating that:

Whereas the visual arts compel viewers to engage in the act of looking, video games, like a whole variety of digital media, compel viewers to perform acts. Any game that depicts the real world must grapple with this question of action. In this way, realism in gaming is fundamentally a process of revisiting the material substrate of the medium and establishing correspondences with the specific activities existent in the social reality of the gamer. (p. 84)

Galloway's proposal resonates strongly with Bogost's suggestion that video game rhetoric should be regarded as distinct from traditional forms of representation, which itself is congruent with the broader argument in game studies regarding the relationship between video games and non-interactive media. However, Galloway's writing shirks from the political rhetoric of social realism, seeing social realism in video games as a condition of the similarity between a ludic simulation and the lived experience of the player rather than as a distinctive, politically motivated form of representation.

The types of games proposed, celebrated and designed by authors and developers such as Frasca and Bogost are often referred to as 'serious games'. Serious games attempt to depart from the escapist conventions of mainstream games by dealing with content more commonly represented within reality media genres such as news media and documentary. They often strive to politically engage their players in a comparable way to traditional social realist media. They also often possess some form of political message or rhetoric that is expressed in the process of simulation.

As short, focused experiences, however, these types of games often lack the aesthetic qualities that are traditionally associated with social realism, such as an interest in the mundane, everyday lives of its subjects and a desire to immerse the audience emotionally in the plights of its protagonists.

Whilst a potentially effective means of encouraging players to cognitively engage with a variety of social and political issues, therefore, serious games are far from absolute remediations of the social realist genre. In recent years, however, there has been an undeniable growth in the development of games that do possess significant aspects of social realism. *Cart Life* (Hofmeier, 2010) and *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013), which form the basis for the research conducted in this study, are notable examples of this. Like serious games, both *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* deal with social and political issues of contemporary significance and attempt to encourage players to reflect on and engage with these issues. Unlike serious games, however, they focus to a greater extent on the lives and emotional states of individuals affected by their subject matter.

In this regard, games such as *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* have also been described as 'empathy games' (Boltz, Henriksen and Mishra, 2015). The category of empathy games is often used to refer to games where there is a clear objective on the part of the developer to provoke an empathetic response in the player. These games are often created with the intent purpose of drawing attention to certain social and political issues and vary in terms of their scope and status within the video game market. Some, such as *Darfur is Dying* (Take Action Games, 2006), are low-budget products that can be played for free within a web browser, whilst others, such as

Gone Home (The Fullbright Company, 2013), have been released commercially on a range of video game platforms. The reason why this study has focused on social realism as a video game genre rather than empathy games is because social realism was deemed a more precise descriptor for games such as *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*, which may elicit feelings of empathy for their players, but do so in a manner that is characteristically consistent with the aesthetic and rhetorical qualities of social realism. Identifying the connections between the artistic tradition of social realism and contemporary trends in video game design also, as has been made clear, provides a vast range of theoretical literature which can be used to better understand the rhetoric and reception of these products.

Based on this review of the literature, it is clear that whilst video games have traditionally been regarded as a highly escapist medium, there is a mandate for considering how the aesthetic features of the social realist genre have been remediated for the video game medium. What remains to be determined, however, is how audiences respond to their experiences with these types of games. The following chapter examines in detail how researchers in the field of media studies have approached the study of audiences' receptions of and responses to media texts and will proceed to examine the precedent of such research in the study of video games.

Methodology

4. Game Analysis and Player Reception Studies: A Multimodal Approach to Video Game Reception

The purpose of this study is to build an impression of the types of experiences that players have when they engage with video games that place them in situations of social, political or economic difficulty. Furthermore, it seeks to understand how the design features of particular games influences the experiences that players have and the meaning (or lack of meaning) that emerges from those experiences. At the centre of this enquiry is the concept of gameplay. Gameplay refers to the process of interaction that occurs when players engage with video games (Gillern, 2016; Vahlo, 2017). It exists neither entirely on the part of the player nor the game, but rather in the emergent product of the interaction between the two bodies. Gameplay is fleeting; existing only in these restricted moments of contact, but it is also at the core of how games interact both with individuals and the social and cultural worlds. It is how players respond to gameplay that determines the influence that video games have on video game audiences and society more broadly.

This chapter outlines a methodology designed to capture and analyse players' experiences of, and responses towards, the gameplay that emerges from video game interactions. Given that gameplay is a phenomenon that takes place between two key parties, this research proposes a multimodal methodology approach consisting of two discrete but interrelated methods: game analysis and player reception studies. The following sections describe how these two methods have

been adapted from approaches to traditional media in order to meet the particular demands of study video games. The chapter begins with an outline of the practice of game analysis, drawing on material from Chapter One to demonstrate how the method has developed from the textual analysis of traditional media. The section presents a framework for analysis which is advocated as a means of breaking down individual game design features and assessing both what their structure and interactions convey about reality and how their idiosyncrasies may influence gameplay experiences. The second part of the chapter outlines the practice of player reception studies, representing it as an adaptation of methods used within the field of audience reception studies. It provides a brief history of audience reception studies and outlines the theoretical issues involved in reorienting the study of audience reception towards interactive media. The section also describes the practical details involved in conducting an audience reception study of video gameplay and comments on the limitations and generalisability of the results gained from the study.

Game Analysis

In order to understand the role that a particular media product has on a particular culture or society, and to understand the impact that consumption of that media product has on individuals, it is advantageous to gain an in-depth understanding of the text being studied. The most direct way to achieve this is to look at the text itself, observe how the media text functions and take note of the experiences that engaging with the text facilitate and what these experiences convey about the world outside of the text. For the researcher, this involves immersing oneself in the world

created by the text, exploring the text to its limits and exposing the underlying structures that govern how the text manifests itself to its audience.

This form of textual analysis follows a long tradition, from the study of ancient religious texts to the analysis of contemporary popular culture. Although the overarching goals of textual analysis will tend to remain unchanged regardless of the object being studied, the way in which the analysis is conducted can differ significantly. Within game studies there has been a push for a framework of textual analysis that emphasises the features of games that are absent in more traditional media such as film and printed text. This push can be seen as an outcome of the debate between scholars that take a narratological approach to video games and those who take a more ludological approach. As discussed in Chapter One, this study follows a dialectical approach to the ludology/narratology debate, exemplified by game analysts such as Jenkins (2004), Hocking (2007) and Malliet (2007). Within this framework the video game is regarded as a site of interaction between narrative and rule-based structures, rather than being an exclusively narratological or ludological object. The term game analysis has been deemed preferable to textual analysis due to the association that exists between the concept of the text and narrative studies. By departing from the traditional terminology of textual analysis, it is intended that narrative will be considered as only one part of the whole analysis and that the distinctly ludological features of the video game medium, such as rule systems, goals and player agency, will be given equal priority in the analysis of the games chosen for this study.

Over the past decade, several publications have emerged that seek to provide researchers with the tools to effectively analyse video game content. Many of these, such as Juul's (2002) dichotomic distinction between games that facilitate heightened experiences of emergence and those that tend to manifest in more linear experiences of progression, have been built to understand some of the specific qualitative differences between different types of video games. Others, however, such as the comprehensive lists of design features identified by authors such as Salen and Zimmerman (2004) and Malliet (2007), attempt to offer comprehensive toolkits for game analysis that can be adapted to suit a variety of research focuses.

For the purposes of rigor, this study utilises Malliet's game content analysis framework as an overall structure with which to understand the distinctive features of *Cart Life* (Hofmeier, 2010) and *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013). Malliet's framework offers a concise, comprehensive coverage of game design features which, when applied in analysis, can be used to build an inclusive picture of a game's ludic and narratological structure. Malliet divides the elements of his framework into two categories. The first category encompasses elements of game design that pertain to traditional forms of representation, encompassing a game's audiovisual style and its narrative structure. Within this category, attention is paid to the narrative events that occur in the game, how objects, characters and settings are represented to the player, and how the game's story unfolds. Malliet's second category focuses on the distinctly ludological elements of game design, the elements of simulation. This category incorporates the game's rule systems, goals, control systems and other elements of video games that are distinctly characteristic of the video game

medium. Malliet presents his framework in a table that includes information on how specific design elements can be examined in relation to his own object of study, representations of violence in video games. Figure 4 shows a version of this table which retains Malliet's category descriptions but includes an extra column with notes on how these design elements can be examined in application for the study of video game disempowerment.

Figure 4

Elements of Representation

Design Element	Malliet's Description	Application for this Study
Audiovisual style	Within this category, the audiovisual elements of the user interface are described. With respect to violent activity, this study will focus on graphical explicitness and level of graphical detail, in addition to the filmic atmosphere that is created.	In the context of this study, attention will be given to the meaning encoded within audiovisual representations of characters and locations and to the level of graphical and audio realism conveyed by the games.

Narration	Within this category the narrative is studied. Within this study there is a focus on the moral justifications that are given to violent behaviour, on the importance of action scenes in the narration that unfolds, and on the demographics of the perpetrators and victims of violent behaviour.	This study examines how narrative structures can be used to convey meaningful statements regarding the conditions of political and/or economic disempowerment simulated within the game and the extent to which these narrative situations may be perceived as realistic.
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Elements of Simulation

Design Element	Malliet's Description	Application for this Study
Complexity of controls	Within this section the mental and physical efforts are analyzed that are required of a player in order to successfully and efficiently interact with the game program. Included here are the commands a player disposes of, and the out-of-game information that is given about the goals and missions of the game.	This study considers how the complexity of the games' control systems, and the way these systems are explained, serve as meaningful abstractions for the processes represented in-game.

Game goals	Generally three main types of game play are identified: competitive play, explorative play and narrative play. Within this study, the question will be posed of how much importance is given to a competitive, adrenaline-driven game play, and to what degree other modes of play are also included.	The focus of this study differs somewhat from Malliet's. This study examines the types of goals that presented to players, how difficult it is achieve them and what this dynamic conveys about the difficulties that people face in out-of-game contexts.
Character and object structure	Within this section, there is a focus on the character and object systems that have been elaborated. More specific (sic.), the complexity of these systems is investigated, as well as the ideology that is hidden in the rewards a player is given.	This study considers how the player-character is controlled and used by the player to interact with objects in the game world. As Malliet indicates, much is conveyed by the types of rewards that are given to players and the tasks players must complete in order to obtain those rewards. Rewards have a large role in offering video game players a psychological experience of empowerment. Consequently, this study will consider if, and how, the games under study use reward systems in unconventional ways.
Balance	This section addresses the issue	As discussed in Chapter Three,

<p>between user input and pre-programmed rules</p>	<p>of how much freedom of action players are granted, or in other words, to what degree players are obliged to follow a pre-programmed sequence of events, and to what degree they have the liberty to exercise an influence on the action that takes place.</p>	<p>the freedom that players have in their exploration of game space has a close relationship with the psychological experience of empowerment. Within this study, close attention is paid to the allowances that are allocated to players, with particular focus on the representation of player restrictions.</p>
<p>Spatial properties of the game world</p>	<p>Within this section, characteristics of the world map(s) are investigated. With respect to violent activity there is a focus on the fighting styles that are stimulated in the geography of a game, and on the realism of the environments that constitute the game world.</p>	<p>As Aarseth (2000) indicates in his analysis of real-time-strategy games, the ways in which players are able to interact with in-game spaces can have a significant impact on the level of control they have within game systems in general. Within this study, attention is paid to how game maps are presented to players and how game spaces are navigated and controlled by the player.</p>

Analytical framework adapted from Malliet (2007)

These game design aspects were considered in the analyses of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* in order to systematically reveal how the two games differ from more conventional video games and to identify how these differences may be interpreted

as efforts to remediate the social realist genre for ludic experiences. The results of this analysis will also be used to identify the rhetoric that is encoded within each game and the potential meaning that is therefore conveyed to their players.

Player Reception Studies

As suggested in the previous section, much of the empirical audience research conducted in relation to video games follows the theoretical and methodological conventions of the media effects paradigm. Much effort has therefore gone into attempts to ascertain correlations between violent behaviour and individuals' exposure to violent video games. Other studies have adopted a more positive attitude towards video games and have attempted to gauge the potential positive effects that exposure to the medium can have (for example Gamberini et al. (2008)) or else collect data that may be used to improve the quality of video game experiences (such as Cairns et al.'s (2006) study on video game immersion).

When used appropriately, quantitative research can provide a useful indication of the frequency and intensity of broad response types that emerge from players' interactions with video games. What the quantitative approach typically does not do, however, is give players an opportunity to express their gameplay experiences on their own terms. These studies rely on the measurement of fixed categories of meaning and experience, which are either directly recorded by participants or else are inferred based on other data. One result of this is that the quantitative method rarely provides a good, empirically grounded indication of why a gameplay experience manifested in the way it did. Projects such as Cairn et al.'s (2006) study of video game immersion may give researchers an indication of the broad impact

that experiences of immersion may have on players' cognitive faculties, but they cannot then inform us why a particular game is more immersive than another without delving into the qualitative analysis of game design and players' individual experiences of games. If our goal is to understand how and why the interactions between video games, players, and a variety of other (possibly unknown) contextual factors manifest in distinct gameplay experiences then it is necessary to consider gameplay experiences in their entirety, without restricting the scope of the study to prefabricated hypotheses.

Though often drowned out by the saturated field of media effects research, qualitative player reception studies do have a meaningful position in video game research. Some noteworthy studies include Kilmmt et al.'s study of how players manage morality when playing violent games (2006), Taylor et al.'s (2015) study of character-identification in Telltale's *The Walking Dead* game (Telltale Games, 2012), Nash's (2015) exploratory study of players' receptions of a game that places players in the position of a refugee in a fictional scenario set in Australia, Gortari et al.'s (2011) study of how video games influence players on a day-to-day basis and Muriel and Crawford's (2018) exploration of the role of video games in contemporary culture. These studies do not discredit the role that video games can have in influencing players' beliefs and behaviours but take a more nuanced stance towards understanding how players experience video games and how these experiences influence them in the context of other mediated and lived experiences.

This thesis takes the lead of qualitative video game researchers as well as media studies researchers in their use of the interview method to develop an

understanding of how audiences respond to specific media experiences. Thirty playthrough sessions were arranged that were designed to allow participants to spend time playing either *Cart Life* or *Papers, Please* and discuss their experiences with a researcher in an interview setting. Participants for the study were recruited from a social sciences lab database at the University of Essex, which gathers participants through the distribution of flyers, word of mouth and public events. Calls for participants were sent to random batches of participants in the database until all spaces had been filled. The study was open to all students, staff and members of the public who were registered on the database, but participants were asked to register for the study only if they had some experience playing games on a PC. This was requested to ensure that participants had sufficient gaming literacy to play their allocated game without too much assistance. However, it was also communicated that participants did not need to identify as gamers to take part in the study. This decision was made partly to broaden the study's demographic and thereby increase the chances of collecting a wide range of responses. Although the demographics of people who play video games are broad, encompassing men and women on a nearly equal level (ISFE, 2019), surveys have indicated that the demographic of those who self-identify as gamers is more restricted to young men (Duggan, 2015).

The decision not to specifically target gamers was also made because this action would erroneously suggest that those who engage with and are influenced by games and gaming culture are exclusively those who identify as gamers. Surveys indicate that gamers are a minority within the population of those who routinely play games (Duggan, 2015). Within the group of participants recruited for this study, although

the vast majority had experiences with video games that they could happily discuss and reminisce about, only nine out of thirty identified as gamers. To position all people who play video games within a single, coherent culture would be erroneous. Although the study may be considered ethnographic in that it considers the influence of contextual factors, such as participants' individual values, experiences, and preconceptions about video games may have on their experiences with a particular media text, the study was not conceived as an ethnographic audience study of the gamer sub-culture. Of the thirty participants who took part in the study twenty-eight were university students. One of the remaining participants was a university staff member (P2) and the other was a member of the public (P24). Sixteen participants were male and fourteen were female. Depending on the amount of time participants spent taking part in the study they received between £12 and £28 in compensation for their time.

The process took place at the University of Essex campus in a social sciences research lab. The lab setting was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, to research players' responses it is necessary to ensure that the study's participants have spent some time with the game. Unless the game being studied is a recent, popular release it is likely that it will be necessary to either distribute copies of the game to participants or to set up a dedicated terminal with the game installed. Although *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* are both relatively new games from an academic perspective, the games industry and gaming culture moves much faster than academic research, meaning that it would be a problematic task to identify and reach out to individuals who are currently playing either game. Secondly, conducting the study at a dedicated PC terminal reduces the risks of technical and legal problems that can

arise if games are distributed to participants for use on their own systems. *Cart Life* and its source code were made freely available to the public in 2013 and could therefore have been distributed to participants without cost or legal repercussions. *Papers, Please*, however, remains copyright protected. In order to safeguard against any possible legal implications of providing access to the game via a dedicated terminal permission was gained from the developer to use the game in the described research context.

On arrival at the lab, participants were asked to sign a consent form and complete a short survey. The survey was designed to build a picture of participants' gaming habits and to ascertain whether they have had any previous knowledge of their allocated game or any personal experiences with the situations represented in the game that could influence their gameplay experience (Appendix A). This information was used simply as a point of reference during the interviews and was not processed any further. A deliberate decision was made not to include extensive data on the participants' social demographics in the player reception analysis in order to maintain focus on the impact of game design features on reception. As stated in the introduction, players' psychological characteristics and social categories have an indisputable influence on the process of reception. However, including this information extensively in the analysis risks the development of generalisations about the influence of these qualities with a limited range of qualitative data. A limited amount of demographic information, including participants' gender, age and occupation, are provided in the analysis to provide context for the study, but not to suggest that there is a direct relationship between these qualities and participants' comments.

The structure for the first fifteen sessions consisted of roughly two hours of gameplay followed by a thirty-minute interview. However, during these sessions it became clear that some interviews could have extended beyond the thirty-minute period. Consequently, for the following fifteen interviews the gameplay time was reduced to one hour and forty-five minutes and the interviews were extended to forty-five minutes. At approximately thirty minutes into each session participants were briefly interrupted to ensure that they were comfortable and happy to continue with the study. From this point onwards, participants were left to play the game undisturbed.

Interview Protocol

At the end of the playthrough, participants were invited to discuss their experience in an informal semi-structured interview setting. The interview design for this study was modelled on Merton and Kendall's (1946) "deep interview" framework, which uses pre-written interview guides to collect data on audiences' responses to mass communication products that have been previously analysed by the researcher. A separate questionnaire was constructed for each game to accommodate for differences in the games' content. Interview questions were developed on the basis of the results of game content analysis. Participants were asked questions that encouraged them to reflect on their gameplay experiences. Based on the analysis of games, the questionnaires were constructed with a particular focus on three aspects of the games, and participants' experiences of the games, in particular: 1) the level of enjoyment the games offer, 2) the level of control participants felt they had in the games, 3) the games' 'realistic' or 'unrealistic' qualities, and 4) the social and political meaning expressed in the games. The questionnaires also included more

specific questions about features of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*, such as the games' sounds and visuals.

Although the interviews followed the basic structure set by the questionnaires, their primary purpose was to gain an idea of the aspects of participants' gameplay experience which they felt were most salient. The questionnaires were therefore designed to give participants the opportunity to discuss the aspects of their playthrough that they felt were most significant by covering as many aspects of the games as possible. Questions related to these topics were included in order to gain the richest possible responses from participants. However, as the study was in the first case designed as an exploratory research project, priority was given to the aspects of the game that participants felt were most important in their playthrough. For this reason, the first question participants were asked was deliberately open-ended ("How was it?"). Questions were then improvised to clarify and develop upon the participant's initial response. In order to gain the most natural responses possible, it was also deemed important that participants were able to relax and did not feel that they were expected to respond to questions in ways that did not feel natural to them. The tone of the interviews was therefore kept as casual as possible. Participants were encouraged to make comparisons between their allocated game and games that were more familiar to them both as a way of gaining insights regarding their playthrough experiences and as a means of encouraging them to relax and speak openly.

The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. The original transcripts record participants' responses as accurately as

possible. However, where participants' comments are presented in the analysis chapters some language use has been lightly edited to ensure clarity. These edits have been conducted as conservatively as possible and high consideration was given to ensure that the participant's intended meaning has not been compromised.

Coding and Analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Transcripts were then coded according an inductive thematic analysis (Ezzy, 2002, pp. 86–94), where research themes were generated according to the most salient patterns in participants' responses. The purpose of the coding practice was to identify the key aspects of the games that defined the participants' gaming experiences and also to identify the variety of interpretive processes that participants underwent in their reception of the games. While some of the research themes generated in the coding corresponded with Malliet's typology of game design features, others were developed during the review of participants' responses. The research themes identified were: (dis)empowerment, mastery and control; audio, visuals and user interface; boredom, confusion and frustration; empathy and identification; enjoyment and involvement; gaming context; meaning; motivations; realism; and rewards. A complete delineation of these themes is presented below in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Research Theme	Description
(Dis)Empowerment, Mastery and Control	Comments relating to participants' sense of agency and power within the game world. Inclusive of decision-making processes, difficulty levels and gameplay affordances.

Audio, Visuals and User Interface	Any comments relating to the game's audiovisual presentation and its influence on participants' experiences.
Boredom, Confusion and Frustration	Comments indicating that the participant became bored, frustrated or confused during the playthrough.
Empathy and Identification	Comments relating to participants' relationships with in-game characters, including those not controlled by the player.
Enjoyment and Involvement	Comments that indicated that participants experienced enjoyment, immersion or other forms of involvement during their playthrough. This category also included comments relating to whether participants appeared to enter a flow state.
Gaming Context	Comments relating to gaming culture and the video games industry more broadly. Includes comparisons made by participants between their allocated game and those they have played previously.
Meaning	Comments suggesting that participants had identified a particular meaning or ideology being expressed in their allocated game.
Motivations	Comments related to why participants have been motivated to play video games in the past and why they would or would not be motivated to play their allocated game outside the context of the study.
Realism	Comments related to participants' perceptions of how realistic their allocated game was.
Rewards	Comments related to how rewarded players felt for successfully performing tasks in the game world.

Interview Content Research Themes

After the interview transcripts were coded, the data categories were analysed to identify both recurring patterns and idiosyncrasies in participants' reception of the games. The primary purpose of this study has been to identify how the content of the games themselves (as revealed in the game analysis process) may have influenced the participants' experiences of gameplay and overall reception of the meaning conveyed in their allocated game. The key focus of the analysis, therefore, was to attempt to identify causal relationships between participants' responses, the games' design features and the distinctive features of the video game medium as a whole. However, as discussed in Chapter One, the meaning that audiences take away from mediated experiences can rarely, if ever, be considered in isolation of their experiences with other media texts, their own lived experiences and other cultural and social contexts. Accordingly, attention was also given to contextual factors that may have influenced the reception process, including participants' previous experiences with video games, but also their experiences with other media and their own lived experiences.

During both the interview and analysis processes, participants were regarded as active contributors to the study. In this sense, analysis began not after the data had been transcribed and coded, but during the interviews, in which participants were invited to interpret and articulate their own thoughts and feelings about their allocated game and consider how these responses may have been the product of the game's design. In her classic exploration of television audiences in *Watching Dallas*, Ang (1985) writes of her respondents that:

...though the ideas of each of the letter-writers are of course personal, they cannot be regarded as a direct expression of their 'motives' or 'reasons' for watching *Dallas*. They can at most be regarded as indications or symptoms of deeper psychological incentives and orientations. Furthermore, although these ideas can *appear* to be strictly personal for the letter-writers themselves, ultimately all these ideas are structured in a specific socio-cultural manner. And so we must take a look behind these ideas; we must subject them to a 'symptomatic reading' to be able to say something about the pleasure of *Dallas* that rises above the merely individual level. (p. 26)

Similarly to Ang's study, the purpose of this research is to identify the deeper structures at work in participants' interpretations of the two games. Unlike in Ang's study, however, participants' responses were regarded as more than symptomatic of a more general, deep-seated truth about the reception process. As stated above, the study recognises the work that participants engage in during the interview process and acknowledges the active contribution they make in analysis. Where appropriate, however, this study attempts to go deeper into participants' comments, to identify the patterns between participants' responses, the results of game analysis, and the theoretical concepts and ideas that have been developed in existing studies, in order to generate an understanding of the video game reception process that can be applied to a variety of situations.

Bias and Limitations

No study can be completely free from influences derived from the context in which the study was conducted. A range of research biases can have an invisible impact on participant responses in any research project that relies on interactions between researchers and human participants. As with any research project using an interview-based methodology, there is also a risk that participants will perceive the interviewer's own attitude towards the subject matter and that this may have influenced their responses, a phenomenon that is commonly included in the category of interviewer bias (Cannell, Miller and Oksenberg, 1981, p. 391). In order to maintain focus within the time constraints of the interview, the set questions were designed to respond directly to the results of the game analysis. A potential result of this may have been that participants' responses were disproportionately influenced by the results of the game analysis rather than from their organic playthrough. In order to address this, an active listening approach was utilised in the interview process and time was allocated to enable the interviewer to follow up points raised by the participant which may not have been directly related to the interview topics. A number of open questions were also utilised, including a broad opening question at the start of the interview, were included to invite participants to convey their experience in their own words.

A similar problem that is often discussed in relation to the collection of social sciences data is a phenomenon in which participants provide responses to questions that they feel will present them in a better moral light than if they had answered the question entirely honestly and organically (Nederhof, 1985). Commonly known as social desirability bias, this can be a potential problem for a range of research

methodologies, but in particular those which seek to obtain data that relates to social norms, attitudes and behaviours. Social desirability bias is more commonly discussed in relation to quantitative than qualitative data collection. However, it remains a potential problem in qualitative research, particularly in situations where the opportunities provided by what might be perceived as a less socially desirable response may be crucial in gaining an understanding of the reality of the situation or object under study. In the case of this study, social desirability bias may have resulted in the collection of exaggerated responses describing what are often considered pro-social and desirable emotional responses to the suffering of others, such as sympathy and empathy. In order to address this potential bias, it was important that participants did not feel as though their actions and responses during the playthrough and interview were being monitored in a way that might have influenced their in-game behaviour or interview responses. An active effort was also made to keep the tone of the data-collection process casual. The questions were consistently focused on the players' experiences of the games and did not directly address their existing social and political attitudes.

The geographical setting of the study, and the fact that the majority of the participants were students, may also have influenced the data collected. The University of Essex has a strong reputation for social sciences research and education and has a historical association with left-wing politics. It is reasonable to assume that these students may be more attuned to the issues represented in *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*, and the social impact of mass media in general, than the broader video game audience. In addition, the setting of the study, in a university lab, and the contextualisation of the study as a social sciences research project may

also have resulted in a higher degree of consciousness of the social and political implications of their gameplay experiences. The increasingly marketised status of UK universities, however, has resulted in the University becoming far less politically left-leaning in recent years. The participants involved in the study were also recruited from a wide range of academic disciplines, some with a strong social and political focus and others with more technical specialisations, meaning that there is little evidence that the cohort recruited for the study were exceptionally politically mindful.

The use of the lab setting in media studies research has been the subject of some criticism, most notably by Gauntlett (1998), in that the artificial setting may result in the collection of unrepresentative data. Whilst Gauntlett's argument is directed primarily at quantitative media effects research, the impact that the lab setting may have on participants' responses is still worth considering here. As researchers such as Shaw (2015) have shown, the social context of gameplay can have a meaningful impact on how players engage with video games and gamer culture. However, as Shaw (2013) also identifies, the solitary gaming experiences of casual players are often overlooked in favour of sociological studies into the group cultures of more 'hardcore' gaming communities. Many, if not most, gaming experiences are primarily solitary, especially at the principle point of reception where the player is directly engaging with the game. The data collected in this study will therefore be used to present participants' experiences of the game with the understanding that participants' experiences of the games in the lab can reveal insights into how players experience these games in more natural settings. This assumption is made with the knowledge that although gaming can often be a highly contextual and social

phenomenon, the act of playing a single-player game alone is in many ways comparable to the situation created in the lab. Most players of single-player games will play alone and, if the game is enjoyable, they may do so for a significant amount of time without interruption.

Gauntlett's criticism is primarily targeted at experimental psychological studies that attempt to record spontaneous behaviours, often using children as test subjects. This is significantly different to the methodology of audience reception studies in that the audience member is not observed or measured as an object of study, but rather contributes to the research through their own process of active cognition and reflection. Whilst this act of reflection may in itself be considered an artificial product of the conditions of the study, the interview's purpose is not to test the participant's ability to analyse the game in accordance with the analytical framework adopted by the researcher, but rather to uncover the semi-conscious acts of interpretation that occur in the moments of gameplay and moments of subsequent reflection. The interview process undeniably creates a situation of heightened reflection on the part of the participant but is conducted in order to bring to the surface and give voice to the thoughts and feelings that govern their interpretive process. Within the context of this study, the lab setting provided a quiet and controlled space in which this reflection could take place, whilst the interviews were conducted in an open manner to ensure that the participants' responses were not unduly influenced by either the physical environment of the study or the interviewer's bias.

A more significant way in which the lab setting may have influenced participants' experiences of the games is that it introduced time restrictions that prevented participants from experiencing the entirety of their allocated game. The length of time it takes to complete a video game is highly variable, depending on amount of content that exists in the game, the difficulty of the game, the skill and play-style of the player and numerous other factors. Because of this, and the polyvalent nature of the video game medium, it is not unusual for a player to only experience some aspects of a game before losing interest or moving on to another game. The time limit of 1 hour and 45 minutes employed in this study prevented participants from experiencing the full breadth of content offered by the two games but was considered a long enough period of time for participants to gain a meaningful experience of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*'s core gameplay. Ultimately, the practical advantages of conducting the study in the social sciences lab were considered to outweigh the impact that the artificial environment had on the data collection.

Despite the efforts that were made to exclude bias from the results of the study, there remains no guarantee that participants' responses to the interview questions were entirely organic. Because of this, and more importantly the relatively small number of participants that was necessitated by the financial and time constraints of the project, it would be erroneous to assume that the participants' experiences of and responses to *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* could be generalised to a broader population. As a qualitative project, however, the purpose of this study is not to demonstrate which responses to the games were more dominant than others, but rather to explore the variety of different responses that can emerge from player experiences of these games and to understand how the design features of the

games may have contributed to these responses. Any biases involved in the collection of participant responses are therefore unlikely to distort the results of the study in the manner that could undermine the results of a large-scale quantitative study. Rather, the impact of any biases that may have been present in the study will have in the worst-case scenario resulted in less rich and varied, but not misleading, results.

Acknowledging that the results of the study cannot be generalised in the way that is typically desirable in quantitative research does not mean that the results collected in this study have no relevance beyond the thirty participant experiences that are analysed in subsequent chapters. The results discussed in the analysis chapters describe processes of video game reception that can be applied to the study a variety of reception contexts, including the reception of other video games, the reception of the same video games by different players, and the reception of a broader ranging of interactive and traditional media. Referring to the mandate for generalisation in qualitative research more broadly, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state that:

If we are interested in generalizing [...] we may ask not whether interview findings can be generalized globally, but whether the knowledge produced in a specific interview situation may be transferred to other relevant situations. (p. 262)

Whilst not generalisable in a quantitative sense, therefore, the results gained from effective qualitative research maintain an indisputable generalisability in their

pragmatic application to a variety of situations and use for developing and supporting theory.

Analysis

5. **Disrupting the Flow: The Design and Rhetoric of *Cart Life and Papers, Please***

The active audience model, which emphasises the agency of the individual audience members in the reception process, has gained significant weight in media studies. Given the interactivity of the video game medium, it is unsurprising that game studies scholars often pay a great deal of attention to what players do with video games and the active role they play in influencing the gameplay experience. As an increasing number of scholars are identifying, however, the new possibilities that are enabled by the video game medium are necessarily met with restrictions: game maps are cordoned off with invisible barriers, interactions that might be imagined by players are denied and cut-scenes and scripted actions often leave players entirely lacking in control (Grodal, Zillmann and Vorderer, 2008). The way in which a game is designed maintains a crucial level of influence over how players experience and interpret gameplay. It is for this reason that video games continue to be classified by the games industry, academics and players according to their design features, with genre labels such as first-person shooter, role-playing game and roguelike maintaining a meaningful and commercially fundamental role in communicating the type of experience players are likely to encounter when playing a game.

The gaming genre of social realism is no exception to this observation. As suggested in Chapter Three, there are a number of ways in which game designers may adopt the principles of social realism in order to create ludic experiences of

disempowerment. Utilising the analytical framework adapted from Malliet (2007) and presented in Chapter Four, this chapter begins the analysis of *Cart Life* (Hofmeier, 2010) and *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013) by examining how the design features of the two games routinely differ from those of conventional video games, and how these design features contribute to an experience of simulated disempowerment. This chapter therefore includes a combination of game design analysis of the two games and comments from participants of the study which indicate the types of experiences that are likely to manifest from interactions with the two games.

Players' responses to *Cart Life* and *Papers' Please* in this chapter will focus on players' experiences of the games rather than the meaning they attributed to them. The intent of this chapter is to show, through analysis of the design of the two games, how they differ from conventional video games and, by analysing participant responses, reveal the impact that the games' design features may have on players' experiences. The chapter then proceeds to consider how the design features and player experiences of these games contribute to the expression of a discrete procedural rhetoric that engages with the politics of poverty and social mobility (*Cart Life*) and immigration and border control (*Papers, Please*). The chapter is organised in four sections. The first three sections cover analysis of the elements of game design that were most salient in both the analysis of the distinctive features of the two games and in participants' responses to the gameplay. These have been categorised into sections on game goals and instructions, player rewards and difficulty, and player agency and control. These sections begin by providing a brief reiteration of the role of these features in game design and how they typically

manifest in mainstream, commercial games. They then proceed to demonstrate by way of comparison how *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* subvert these conventions to provide experiences that simulate disempowerment. The analysis in these sections is supported with references to participant responses that directly address how the design features of their allocated game influenced their gameplay experience. The final section of the chapter brings the structural analyses of these design features together to present an argument concerning the overall meaning and rhetoric that is conveyed by the two games. This understanding of the games' rhetoric will be used in subsequent chapters as a benchmark for exploring the different ways in which participants interpreted the games and building an understanding of how the games' design features contributed to these interpretations.

Game Goals and Instructions

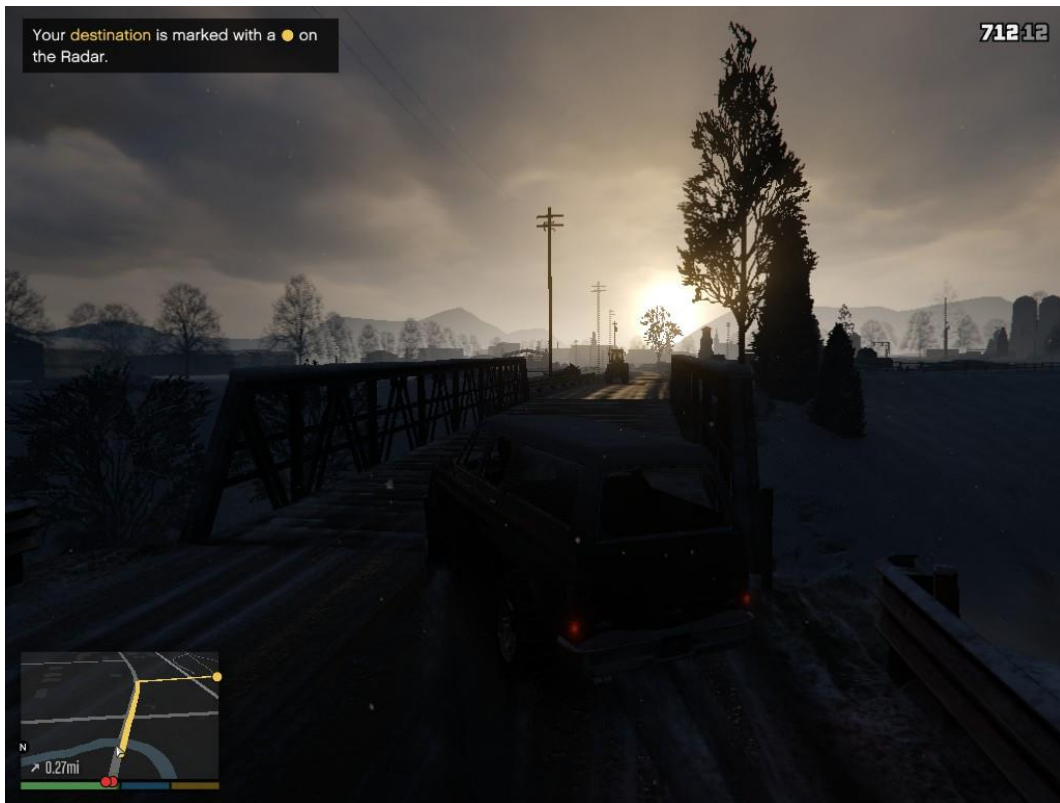
Goals are one of the key organising structures of game design and are almost ubiquitous in video games. As discussed in the previous chapter, goals in video games may be described as the tasks set by the game which must be completed if the player wishes to progress through the game, achieve a high score, or else unlock additional game content. The nature of these goals has a crucial role in determining the type of gameplay that is likely to ensue in the interaction between the player and the game world. If the player's prescribed goal is to kill all their enemies, it is most likely that the gameplay will be centred on violence. If a goal is to reach a certain place within a certain time-frame, then players can expect the action of the game to consist of a race format.

Goals are also a central aspect to understanding some of the psychological nuances of video games and to understanding the process of cognitive and emotional engagement more generally. Goals occupy a central role in the first of Csikszentmihalyi's three prerequisites for flow. According to Csikszentmihalyi (2002), if an individual is to enter a state of flow, the "optimal experience" of performing a task freely and happily, then the activity that they are engaging with must contain goals that are clear to the individual. If it is true, as is now almost common wisdom in game design theory, that the sense of enjoyment that comes from playing video games is largely dependent on the player entering a flow state, then it follows, as Chen (2007) suggests, that effective design for an enjoyable game should possess clear goals.

It is also easy to identify that having clear goals in a game is necessary for players to gain a sense of mastery over the game space, which is itself instrumental to an overall ludic experience of empowerment. The player's sense of mastery comes as a result of their completion of various goals. It is through the act of completing goals that players experience what designers often refer to as "fiero", the moment when we "throw our arms over our head and yell" after completion of a difficult task (McGonigal, 2011, p. 33). Completing goals which have been clearly set out by the game contributes to the player's sense of competence in a game environment which in turn satisfies a desire for mastery and ultimately empowerment. Some degree of clarity regarding the goals and objectives that the game expects the player to complete in order to progress is therefore necessary to facilitate the enjoyment that arises from mastering an activity or space.

The way in which this clarity takes form can differ significantly depending on the type of game being considered and the context of its production. In mainstream video games, goals will usually be relayed explicitly to the player at the beginning of the game or stage in the form of a diegetic dialogue between characters or a non-diegetic instruction to the player delivered via the game's user interface. In many games, both methods will be used. Players may then be consistently reminded of the goal until it has been completed. In *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013), for instance, the objectives for various missions are usually first indicated in cut-scenes which provide context for the ensuing action, and then by a more explicit line of text which is displayed pervasively via the non-diegetic user-interface. In addition to this, a marker appears on the player's mini-map which indicates explicitly where the player needs to go in order to complete the mission, the colour of which is dependent on the action the player must perform on the given target. If a target is yellow, then the player must navigate to the location to complete the objective. If it is blue, the target is either an ally or an object that the player must interact with. If a target is red then the player must kill or destroy the target to proceed, whilst if the target flashes between blue and red the player must chase the target but not kill them.

Figure 6



GTA V's (Rockstar North, 2013) user interface tells players clearly how to complete objectives

In conventional “games of progression” (Juul, 2002) such as *Grand Theft Auto V*, clarity of goals is ensured to guarantee that players are able to continue to make progress in the given game. Even in a relatively open-world game such as *GTA V*, the continuation of a flow-state is dependent largely on the player’s ability to progress through the game’s narrative arc, which in turn requires that players have a clear sense of where to go and what to do. Not only do these games presume that players need to be told what to do, they also presume that players need to be told how to do it. In most contemporary games, this is dealt with early on by means of an integrated tutorial. The player is tasked with a simple objective which they must perform whilst accompanied by on-screen instructions containing information about

how the user-input will influence the action that takes place on screen and possibly how these actions in turn may influence the game world. In *GTA V*, for instance, the player is tasked with completing a mission that forms an integral part of the game's narrative, but which also teaches players the basics of the gameplay.

Figure 7



The opening 'tutorial' mission in *GTA V* (Rockstar North, 2013)



Not all video games, however, offer the degree of clarity of goals and instructions that is present in the *Grand Theft Auto* series. In the first instance, there are many instances in game design history where in-game goals and the methods that should be used to complete them are not relayed in the game itself but in paratextual artefacts such as instruction booklets. The original *Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1987) game for the Nintendo Entertainment System is a notable example of a popular

game that offers very little guidance in the game itself, but which offers detailed information in the instruction booklet. This practice, however, has been largely phased out by developers, for reasons that have attributed to attempts to cut production costs and a widespread belief that players rarely consult instruction booklets (Totilo, 2017). However, recent years have also seen experiments in ways in which goals can be made clear to players without the need for explicit instructions, whether within or outside of the game space. These games often rely on the player's willingness to explore the game space and experiment with different actions, as well as a familiarity with video game conventions, to find out the goals of the game. In Thekla, Inc.'s widely acclaimed puzzle game *The Witness* (2016), for instance, players are required to experimentally interact with mysterious panels dotted around the environment in order to develop an understanding of the game's goals. In *The Witness*, finding out the goals and even the rules of the game are as much part of the process of gaining mastery over the game space as are actually solving the puzzles. Goals in video games do not, therefore, always have to be directly explicit in order to be clear enough to maintain flow and offer players a sense of mastery over the game world.

Cart Life uses a combination of explicit and implicit goals to direct player action. The overall goal of the game is presented to players directly on the character selection screen and is dependent on the character the user chooses to play as. Each character has seven in-game days to complete their task. For Vinny, the player must pay the \$500 rent for his host's flat. Melanie is tasked with making \$1000 in sales by the same date and must also take care of her daughter. Andrus' goal is to raise enough money to sign a lease for a property in Georgetown to escape the motel

room he occupies at the start of the game. During the character selection screen, players are also provided with a short biography for each character, a description of their character traits and information about their current circumstances.

Figure 8

CHARACTER SELECT			
	NAME:	VINNY	
	OPERATION:	BAGEL CART	
	PRODUCT:	QUALITY	SPEED
	MONEY:	\$202.60	
VINNY + HIS CART	NOTES:	VINNY'S BACK IN TOWN AND HE'S LOOKING TO SELL A FEW BAGELS FROM THE OLD PUSHCART. CAN HE MAKE ENOUGH MONEY IN HIS FIRST WEEK TO STICK AROUND FOR GOOD?	
	CHALLENGE:	CULTIVATE A GOOD REPUTATION, MAINTAIN THE CART, AND PAY THE \$500.00 RENT BY MONDAY NIGHT.	
	SPECIAL:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - WHILE CAFFEINATED, VINNY WALKS FAST. - HE CAN COOK MANY TYPES OF BAGELS. EXPERIMENT! - VINNY OWNS A CART ALREADY. HE JUST HAS TO FIND IT. 	
	ADDICTION:	VINNY ONLY RECENTLY BEGAN DRINKING COFFEE, AND NOW HE'S ADDICTED TO THE CAFFEINE. WITHOUT CAFFEINE, HE GETS FATIGUED AND WALKS SLOWLY.	
<p>PRESS THE LEFT OR RIGHT ARROW KEY TO NAVIGATE THIS MENU.</p> <p>TO CONFIRM YOUR CHOICE, PRESS ENTER.</p>			
CHARACTER SELECT			
	NAME:	ANDRUS PODER	
	OPERATION:	NEWSPAPER STAND	
	PRODUCT:	PRICE	SPEED
	MONEY:	\$2250.00	
ANDRUS SMOKING	NOTES:	FOLLOWING MONTHS OF TURMOIL, ANDRUS IS SEEKING TO REBUILD HIS LIFE BY STARTING A NEWSPAPER STAND IN A NEW TOWN WITH HIS CAT, MR. GLEBOVSKI.	
	CHALLENGE:	FIND A PLACE TO LIVE IN GEORGETOWN BY MONDAY NIGHT BY RAISING ENOUGH MONEY TO SIGN A LEASE.	
	SPECIAL:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - HIS GREAT WORK ETHIC MEANS LONGER WORK DAYS. - ANDRUS WILL EAT ANYTHING, AND HE DOESN'T GET HUNGRY AS QUICKLY AS THE OTHER CHARACTERS. 	
	ADDICTION:	SINCE HE FIRST BECAME A SMOKER AT A YOUNG AGE ANDRUS HAS MAINTAINED AN ADDICTION TO NICOTINE, SO HE WILL COUGH AND OFTEN DESIRE CIGARETTES.	
<p>PRESS THE LEFT OR RIGHT ARROW KEY TO NAVIGATE THIS MENU.</p> <p>TO CONFIRM YOUR CHOICE, PRESS ENTER.</p>			
CHARACTER SELECT			
	NAME:	MELANIE EMBERLEY	
	OPERATION:	COFFEE HUT	
	PRODUCT:	QUALITY	SPEED
	MONEY:	\$1560.00	
MELANIE AND LAURA	NOTES:	DIVORCING HER HUSBAND MEANT THAT MELANIE HAD TO QUIT HER JOB IN HIS OFFICE. CAN MELANIE EARN CUSTODY OF HER DAUGHTER BY PROVING THAT HER NEW BUSINESS IS STABLE?	
	CHALLENGE:	MAKE AT LEAST \$1000.00 IN SALES BY THE CUSTODY HEARING ON MONDAY, AND TAKE CARE OF LAURA.	
	SPECIAL:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - MELANIE IS FRIENDLY AND PERSUASIVE. CUSTOMERS WILL WARM UP TO HER VERY QUICKLY. - MELANIE'S SISTER PLANS ON COOKING FOR THE GIRLS. 	
	ADDICTION:	IT IS IMPERATIVE TO MELANIE THAT SHE MAINTAINS A MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIP WITH HER DAUGHTER, SO DON'T FORGET TO PICK HER UP AT SCHOOL EVERY DAY!	
<p>PRESS THE LEFT OR RIGHT ARROW KEY TO NAVIGATE THIS MENU.</p> <p>TO CONFIRM YOUR CHOICE, PRESS ENTER.</p>			

The character selection screens in *Cart Life*

Based on this evidence, it may be suggested that *Cart Life* offers more clarity regarding the game's goals than *GTA V*. In the *Grand Theft Auto* games, there is no overarching winning objective that is made clear at the start of the game. In fact, the overarching motivations of the characters the player assumes in these games often change sporadically according to character development and changing situations, much like they would in a film or novel with a complex narrative. The long-term goals in *Cart Life* are therefore relatively clear. However, the game differs from *GTA V* and from conventional games in its reluctance to tell players exactly how to meet the stated goal. The gameplay of each character begins with a dialogue between the player character and an NPC who provides the player with a short tutorial. The conversations take a largely expositional form, giving players advice of varying usefulness regarding how to get started. Play with Andrus, for instance, begins with a conversation between the player-character and Timothy, the current owner of the newspaper cart who has agreed to sell it to Andrus for \$2000. If the player agrees to a tutorial, Timothy will give the player a brief introduction to setting up the cart and using the in-game menu.

Figure 9



Andrus gets some basic instructions on setting up his cart

Cart Life is therefore generally forthcoming in setting out the game's overall goals and provides some basic instructions on setting up the character's retail business. Despite this, however, several participants who played the game expressed frustration at the lack of instructions that the game provided. When asked to compare *Cart Life* to games they were more familiar with, P17, a female language and linguistics student, stated that: "I think it's quite at the primary stage - just give more guidance like for example tell me what I should do the next - the mission - cause sometimes messages just pass my mind and I just don't remember". Another participant, when asked about the degree to which they felt that the game was fair, stated that:

it wasn't very clear - like I told you the graphics I had to get used to
 it - after a while you're just like 'okay so it's normal' - but when I
 was trying to sell things it was like 'okay what do they want?' - you

have a timer and you have to press what they want - and then the cash was a bit unclear - I don't know if everyone will find that - maybe not - but I just found it quite unclear - that's what I thought was a bit unfair - yeah I've lost like the customers because of that

(P19)

Due to a combination of a lack of in-game instructions and a user-interface that is often unclear, *Cart Life* lacks some of the clarity regarding goals and the methods players can use to achieve them that participants were familiar with from their experiences with other gaming situations.

For a number of participants, these problems were augmented as the game's primary goals are superseded by the even more ambiguous 'micro-goals' of day-to-day existence. Unlike most business simulation games, which tend to place the player in a detached, abstract business management position, *Cart Life* possesses role-playing elements that extend beyond the process of making money. The game adopts a character-needs system comparable to that utilised by *The Sims* game series which requires players to perform routine actions to keep their chosen character functional. The list of character needs in *Cart Life* varies depending on the player's choice of character. However, the three characters share the core hunger need which, if it drops too low, will trigger recurrent interruptions in the form of a short cut-scene where the character will comment on their hunger (Figure 10). Once the player's character reaches this state, a new, implicit goal can be seen to be triggered: the goal of keeping their character happy – or happy enough to continue working.

Figure 10



Gameplay in *Cart Life* is periodically interrupted when the player-character's nutrition bar becomes too low

The primary way in which the player-character's hunger can be satisfied is by purchasing food from shops and restaurants scattered throughout the town. Players who chose Vinny or Melanie have alternatives in that Melanie can eat leftovers from the fridge at her home, whilst Vinny can eat bagels that he has prepared. However, Melanie still needs to rely on food purchases when at work and Vinny's bagel-making process caused confusion for some participants (P18, P22, P30). For some participants, a large proportion of their efforts were targeted towards finding a cost-effective way to satisfy their character's hunger needs. As P21, a male 22-year-old biology student, stated:

most of the learning was where I could get certain things - I could get food from a grocery store or I could go to a restaurant - I had

soup at a restaurant once - that's what I was mainly focusing on in the first playthrough - when I noticed that I wasn't doing - in my mind - particularly well with money I saw it was getting a bit low I was like - I'm gonna explore - work out how I can optimise money and everything

Unfortunately, however, players are limited in their freedom to explore the game map by the immediate need to start generating an income. Each of the game's characters have financial pressures in addition to the costs of feeding themselves throughout the day: Andrus and Vinny have rent to pay, Andrus has to pay for his stock of newspapers and buy food for his cat, Vinny needs to keep stocked with ingredients, whilst Melanie, though faced with less immediate financial pressures, is responsible for taking care of her daughter in addition to establishing her business. The goal system in *Cart Life* is, therefore, largely characterised by various uncertainties and pressures: uncertainties about what to do at each stage of the game and pressures to find out how to progress without losing too much time and resources that should otherwise be spent working towards the completion of the game's main goals. Participants' responses regarding these aspects of the game were overall indicative of a game that continually disrupts the flow-state, and which thereby potentially subverts the expectations that players may have regarding conventional gameplay experiences.

Mechanically speaking, *Papers, Please* is a simpler game than *Cart Life*. The game begins with a short cut-scene that explains to players that they have been chosen to assume the role of an immigration inspector in the fictional Soviet-bloc style country

Arstotzka at a recently opened border checkpoint. The player's task is explained by a paper bulletin containing a very brief series of instructions: "Stamp passport ENTRY VISA and return documents to entrant. Entry is restricted to Arstotzkan citizens only. Deny all foreigners. Glory to Arstotzka." In *Papers, Please*, therefore, the immediate task is clear: the player must process migrants, allowing access to those who are Arstotzkan and denying foreigners.

Figure 11



Players of *Papers, Please* are introduced to their role as immigration inspector. Despite this, several participants expressed difficulty getting started with the game (P14, P3, and P15). The cause of confusion for these players was at times due to a lack of clarification regarding how they should interact with the game. Participant 14, for instance, described that "in the beginning I was clicking anything to see if it would do anything [...] so that was a bit of frustration 'cause I didn't know what exactly it wanted me to do". P3, a male 21-year-old computer science student, reported that "the design of the game was kind driving me crazy cause there is no

real explanation". Another suggested that "first of all I don't understand it - because I don't know how to control or how to find the passport" (P15). The reasons behind these types of responses may be ascertained by looking more closely at the game's design. *Papers, Please* places players in a first-person perspective. Everything the player sees on the lower half of the screen is limited to what the player might expect to find in a 1980s immigration office: a desk, clock, guide book and shutter that can be used to close off the office space to the migrants. The top half of the screen displays the outside of the booth, a vast queue of prospective migrants included. This panel may be interpreted as an exterior CCTV feed or, more likely, simply as a non-diegetic, cinematic split-screen designed both to give players a sense of the infinitude of the number of people that need to be processed and to provide the player with a way of interacting with the space outside the booth later in the game. The game provides some instructions regarding how to interact with the game in the form of a diagram in the bulletin and a few other indicators, such as a low-profile circle that draws players' attention to the megaphone that they must click on in order to call in the migrants and some fragments of text that are integrated into the game's environment (such as the text "DRAG DOCUMENTS HERE" at the bottom of the desk space which illustrates to players that they can move objects between the interior view of the booth and the bottom-right panel which shows a close-up of the inspector's work space).

What the game does not include are popups containing explicit instructions on how to progress at each stage of the game. The use of frequent popups and prompts are design features that are commonly utilised by developers to ease players into a new game. An example of how these features often manifest to help players to gain

control of a game's user interface can be found in the turn-based strategy games of Firaxis Games' *Civilization* series. *Civilization V* (Firaxis Games, 2010) features a comprehensive tutorial system which teaches players the basics of gameplay and, in addition, incorporates numerous 'tooltips' that can be used to remind players of the functions of various interface devices such as buttons or menus. The game also makes use of an 'advisor' system, where frequent pop-ups provide information and guidance to players throughout the game. *Papers, Please's* minimalist instructions defy the convention of didactic tutorials which have become the predominant means by which designers ease players into gameplay.

Figure 12



An advisor window (top right) gives players guidance on setting up their first city in *Civilization V* (Firaxis Games, 2010)

While the lack of detailed instructions at times serves to slow down players' comprehension of how the daily task of processing migrants should be completed,

this design decision can be seen to underhandedly introduce players to what several participants saw as the game's main goal – survival. As discussed above, in the early stages of the game players are not provided with any form of explicit end goals, such as the instructions in *Cart Life* to earn a certain amount of money before a specified amount of time has elapsed or, as in the more conventional game *Civilisation VI*, a list of different winning conditions. The player's ability to comprehend these long-term goals is an important factor in maintaining the flow state and, ultimately, has the potential to play a significant role in determining how involved players feel in the game (Chen, 2007). Instead, players of *Papers, Please* are required to attempt to develop their own motivations for playing the game. For some participants, this was a task that they found hard to accomplish. A number expressed frustration and boredom at what they interpreted as very monotonous gameplay. P1, a 21-year-old female mathematics student, described the game as “repetitive”, stating that “pretty much the only thing was checking all these documents over and over again and I suppose the more that I did the kind of less I cared about it”. P12, a female 19-year-old language and linguistics student, described the game as “kind of [...] frustrating because I have to do the same thing every day”.

Other participants, however, found that their motivation for playing the game was accelerated by the experience of failure. P6, a 22-year-old male economics student, stated that they were surprised that when the inspector's family died the game ended: “It was strange – I didn't expect that – I thought I am gonna play more – it [is] gonna continue - but when I started a new game I was motivated” (P6). Failure in the game also sets the player the implicit goal of reaching all of the game's possible endings. When the game ends, the players is shown a short epilogue in the form of a

cut-scene and given some statistics about their playthrough, including a number between one and twenty indicating which ending the player reached. P7, a female 19-year-old language and linguistics student, saw this as a key motivator for enduring with the game, stating that:

at the end I saw it says I did once an ending out of 20 possible endings - I was really curious what the other nineteen would be - that was the only thing that kept me going because I was getting really bored the second time

This feature is, in fact, an increasingly common trope in video games and can be indicative of design structures intended to facilitate an experience of mastery for players. Endings in these games can often serve a similar function to that of collectible items: players of these games are encouraged to replay the game in order to 'collect' the various endings. If playing on a commercial video game distribution platform such as Steam, 'achievements' may even be awarded to players who reach all of the endings. Reaching all endings, therefore, becomes a task that is instrumental to gaining mastery over the game world and can even make failing in the game instrumental to the process of achieving mastery. In the Steam version of *Papers, Please* there are separate achievements for reaching particular endings and for performing various other in-game tasks.

Figure 13



The ending summary screen for a player who fell into debt in *Papers, Please*

In addition to this, as player progress through *Papers, Please*, longer term goals do emerge which can serve to sustain the player's interest once the monotony of checking documents has worn thin. For example, on day 8 the player is approached by a mysterious revolutionary group called EZIC and asked to perform small tasks for them which often amount to violating regulations and earning citations, pay deductions, being offered bribes and even facing investigation by the authorities. Several participants expressed interest in this aspect of the game. P1, for instance, who otherwise described the game as "repetitive", expressed an interest in:

the parts where people kept trying to bribe me and where I got given money and I wasn't sure if I should keep it or not for the first time I said no and the second time I was like 'oh why not'

The interactions with EZIC, therefore, provide players with longer term goals that potentially influence their in-game behaviour and sustain their interest.

The way in which goals operate in *Papers, Please* is therefore significantly different to their functioning in *Cart Life*. In some ways the inverse of *Cart Life*, *Papers, Please* subverts the conventions of contemporary role-playing game design practice by providing players with a fairly clear, if monotonous, daily task but delaying the revelation of a long term goal. With its shorter, simpler gameplay, *Papers, Please* also appears to be more effective in its use of goals to sustain players' interest. Both games, however, differ significantly from mainstream AAA games in the way that they frequently deny players a clear sense of the games' goals and how they should be accomplished.

Player Rewards and Difficulty

Video game players are often motivated to complete in-game goals through the promise of some form of reward. Rewards can take the form of power-ups, high scores, cinematics, additional content or even real-world prizes. Rewards serve as feedback to tell players how a game should be played and when they are doing well and therefore have a crucial role in maintaining the experience of flow. The availability of feedback forms the second part of the first of Csikszentmihalyi's prerequisites for flow: not only does the flow-state depend on a situation where the goals of the activity are clear; it also depends on the accessibility of feedback. At a basic level, this feedback can take the form of the responsiveness of the events that take place on-screen: the player moves the joystick upwards and their character moves forwards; or their character collides with another in-game object and their

health-bar retracts indicating that damage has been taken. Although these forms of feedback are essential in teaching players the basics of gameplay, however, they do little to motivate players towards the completion of the game's goals. Rewards, on the other hand, serve to direct player action towards the completion of goals and to sustain the flow state by reassuring players that the actions they are performing in the game are both positive and may eventually lead towards the completion or mastery of the game.

Very often, the rewards players are given also directly contribute to players' empowerment within the game world. In many games, rewards take the form of level-ups or power-ups which serve to enhance the player's mastery over the game world by augmenting the player-character's abilities. This is especially apparent in role-playing games, where the development of the player-character's skills and abilities can be a key motivator for continued play. In Bethesda Softworks' popular RPG *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), for instance, players are motivated to clear out dungeons and exercise skills by means of an experience points system that upgrades the players' abilities with continued use. Upgrades to various skills also contribute to player-characters overall experience, which accumulates to the development of the players' core stats. Players are also encouraged to explore the map by rewarding them with various treasures and powers, or 'shouts', at particular locations. Quests also yield rewards that enhance the players' abilities.

Figure 14



The level-up menu in *Skyrim* allows players to choose which of their character's attributes to upgrade

The reward systems of role-playing games such as *Skyrim* are usually carefully balanced to ensure that the benefits players gain from completing certain quests or clearing certain dungeons are proportionate to the efforts required to obtain them. For instance, a short 'fetch' quest requiring the player to simply travel to one or two proximate locations is likely to warrant only a small amount of gold or a low-level item. An extensive, long-running quest requiring players to visit multiple locations and defeat high-level enemies, however, might yield a unique suit of armour or another high-value item. These rewards are likely to make future challenges easier.

These types of reward systems are not unique to role-playing games, however, and can also be found in business and job simulators that have more in common with *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*. These games do not incorporate conflicts on the epic scale that is imagined in *Skyrim* but often incorporate similar reward systems. The

tongue-in-cheek investment game *AdVenture Capitalist* (2015), for instance, rewards players who have been patient enough to accumulate money through small business ventures rewards players by allowing them to purchase larger businesses with higher potential for profits. The popular farming game *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016) likewise incorporates a system where the player's patience, and at times business savvy, is rewarded with the potential for more expensive investments that yield higher profits. Despite the apparent mundanity of these games, therefore, it is still possible to identify in their ludic structures a reward mechanism that seeks to facilitate an experience of empowerment.

Figure 15



Players of *AdVenture Capitalist* (Hyper Hippo Productions, 2015) can increase their profits drastically with simple upgrades

Cart Life presents rewards in the form of increased disposable income and the possibility to invest that income in upgrades for the player-character's business. Players earn money by selling products from their cart. In order to demonstrate how

the reward system works in the game, and judge how proportionate the game's rewards are when compared to the effort required to obtain them, it is first necessary to examine in detail how the retail process works. Players can set the price of their products from the in-game menu but must balance the cost to ensure that it is high enough to make a profit but not too high to discourage customers. When players have stocked their cart, they are able to begin the retail process. The process of selling goods is more complex in *Cart Life* than in more conventional business simulators such as *AdVenture Capitalist* and *Stardew Valley*, where sales are made by doing little more than clicking a button. The retail process in *Cart Life* consists of multiple stages which depend on the product being sold. Once the sales process has started a timer begins, representing the customer's patience. If at any point the timer reaches zero, the customer leaves and the player will have lost the sale. During the first stage of the retail interaction the customer will tell the player-character what product they want, which the player must confirm by typing the appropriate letter into a multiple-choice dialogue box. If the product being sold requires no additional preparation (such as a newspaper or pre-made bagel) the transaction progresses to the cash exchange, which usually requires players to return to the customer their change. If the item requires preparation (for example, coffee) the player must undergo an additional step which, depending on the product, may involve typing an exact phrase into a text box or completing a series of arrow key inputs.

Figure 16



The retail process in *Cart Life*

The retail process in *Cart Life* is, therefore, more extensive than in many other games and as a result was often a cause of frustration for participants, as demonstrated by comments made by P18, a female 26-year-old health and human sciences student:

when I finally made the bagels I couldn't even sell them because I was too slow at - you have to write out the sentence - and I wasn't putting a full stop on cause I wasn't paying attention to all the little details - I had to read it first which I found really difficult - cause I was like is that an 'X' is it a 'K' I don't know - so then when I finally did write it and then it got to the money and I was like 'I don't understand - what' - cause there's some on some side and some on the other side - I didn't really understand what was my money and what was their money - and how to change it and stuff - I didn't find it very intuitive how to use that bit so - it was really frustrating

The same participant, who claimed they had personal experience in a retail position, suggested that the vending process is harder in *Cart Life* than in real life (P18), citing the game's sometimes unclear user-interface and lack of instructions as determiners of this difficulty.

The game's difficulty level alone, however, does not necessarily mean that the retail experience in the game constitutes an overall experience of disempowerment. High difficulty games have had a recent resurgence in mainstream game design: the games of the popular *Dark Souls* series, for instance, have become notorious for

their high difficulty levels. In these games, however, high difficulty levels are usually met with high rewards. Defeating a difficult enemy in *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011), for instance, often rewards players with a unique item in addition to a high number of 'souls' which can be used to upgrade their character. The reward system in *Dark Souls*, therefore, transforms what might otherwise be an experience of disempowerment into an experience of heightened gratification once the victory is finally achieved. In *Cart Life*, however, the reward for a day's work is usually minimal when compared to the player's end goal. A successful sale of a basic cup of coffee can yield the player up to \$4. However, the higher players charge the fewer customers they are likely to attract. Players may also receive tips, which can actually exceed the amount of money made on the sale. Tips are somewhat dependent on the speed at which the player completes the transaction but are often inconsistent, meaning that a faster sale does not necessarily yield a higher tip. The most restricting factor in the sales process in *Cart Life* is time: a minute in the game is equivalent to roughly a second in real-time. Accommodating for the expenses of food, stock and rent, therefore, players are often stretched to make a profit each day.

Figure 17



The player is rewarded for defeating the Dragon Slayer Ornstein & Executioner Smough bosses in *Dark Souls*

The reward system in *Cart Life*, therefore, is far less driven towards an experience of player-empowerment than those in most other business simulator games. However, despite the relatively low profit yields that *Cart Life* offers, the game incorporates an upgrade system which players can utilise to enhance their business. The upgrades that can be utilised by the player depend on their chosen character with some examples including a power source, toaster, coffee machine and sound system. Players can also invest money in diversifying their range of products: Andrus, the newspaper vendor, can equip his cart to sell coffee, milk and soft drinks. If playing as Vinny or Melanie players may also spend their earnings on changing the appearance of their cart. This upgrade, however, is purely cosmetic, whilst the majority of other cart and stock upgrades are geared towards increasing players' profits or making the retail process easier.

Figure 18



Vinny's upgrade menu

However, whilst the upgrade system in *Cart Life* is comparable to conventional profit-driven simulation games such as *AdVenture Capitalism* and *Stardew Valley*, the way in which this system functions in the game differs significantly. Far from being empowered by *Cart Life's* upgrade system, participants who attempted to engage with it found it misleading and confusing. One participant described how they “accidentally got electricity” before forgetting about the upgrade system altogether while they attempted to earn a steady revenue (P18). Another participant, playing as Vinny, explained how:

I made a bad purchase by purchasing the cash register and I regretted that decision after I did it - because I thought that's what I needed but - I mean I think I shouldn't have taken any of the upgrades except - neither the battery - none of the upgrades -

because I thought - I needed the fridge but I didn't know that so I purchased some other things - and then I found out I needed [the] fridge for hotdogs (P27)

The usefulness of the upgrades, and their compatibility with the players' specific business venture, is often ambiguous in the game, and the use of one additional purchase is often dependent on others which may not at first seem obvious to the player. As a whole, the upgrade system in *Cart Life* potentially serves not to empower players, but to disempower them. As Chen (2007) states:

In video games, simply increasing the number of choices is costly. Too many choices overwhelm the user and maybe even the computer. When people can't decide what to choose, they are at a loss. Being required to make frequent choices could also be annoying, further interrupting gameplay. Both situations confound the fundamental components of Flow—a sense of control and concentration on the task at hand

As an example of surplus of difficult economic choices, the upgrade system in *Cart Life* can therefore serve to debilitate players rather than aid them.

The reward system in *Papers, Please* is in many ways comparable to that in *Cart Life*. In *Papers, Please* players are rewarded on the basis of their ability to complete their task of checking documents speedily and accurately. The gameplay consists of moving around and looking through documents using the mouse whilst looking for any inconsistencies or irregularities. If any exist the player selects the 'check discrepancies' tool which is integrated into the booth and highlights the inconsistent

information, after which the player can question the migrant about the irregularity. At the end of this procedure the player presses a button on the side of the screen to bring up a stamp which they then use to print the migrant's passport with an 'accepted' or 'denied' print.

Figure 19



The 'highlight discrepancies' (above) and 'stamping' (below) utilities in *Papers, Please*

Participants who played *Papers, Please* overall expressed a wider variety of sentiments towards the game's basic gameplay than those who played *Cart Life*. Similarly to the retail process in *Cart Life*, the basic gameplay in *Papers, Please* was often described by participants as difficult (P9), frustrating (P2), boring (P1), or as a combination of these sentiments (P15). P1 complained that "it was pretty much just the same thing over and over again". P3 left the study an hour earlier than scheduled, saying that they enjoyed the game but that "it felt like a task almost". Other participants were more forthcoming about the aspects of the game they enjoyed. P2, a 30-year-old member of University staff, reported that although they often found the game frustrating, they also enjoyed its puzzle-solving aspects, relishing in catching out the inconsistencies or, as they described, "Easter eggs", hidden in the migrants' documents. P6 expressed a similar enjoyment towards the puzzle-like gameplay as stated they felt "like Sherlock Holmes". Based on this evidence it is apparent that the level of enjoyment that players may experience from the game can fluctuate significantly. It also indicates that the basic gameplay in *Papers, Please* is more conducive to an experience of flow, and even empowerment, than the retail process that takes place in *Cart Life*.

Like *Cart Life*, however, the rewards that players gain for completing tasks in *Papers, Please* are usually relatively minimal. Players are given five credits for every migrant successfully processed and deducted five for every migrant incorrectly processed after two warnings are given. At the end of each in-game day, the player has to balance their income against various expenditures, including rent, payment of which is compulsory, food, heating and, if any members of the inspector's family require it, medicine. When asked, most participants were able to articulate the reward system

accurately. However, most of the participants also stated that the money they were able to earn was only just enough to continuing progressing in the game, which in some cases significantly detracted from their sense of being rewarded for their efforts. One participant, for instance, suggested that “there's not really like - reward - it's more [play to] survive rather than play to be rewarded” (P3). P5, a male economics student, said that they felt they were not rewarded in the game because:

my house rent in the day was high - so my money was just gone - I
couldn't save much - I couldn't save my son - my uncle - also my
wife was sick - I think if I was if I have no food next day she might
have died - because I didn't have enough money

Largely because of the expenses that must be met to keep the inspector's family healthy, therefore, the reward system in *Papers, Please* did little to motivate players to endure with the game.

Like *Cart Life*, *Papers, Please* offers an upgrade system that can be taken advantage of if players are able to accumulate enough money. The game offers four upgrades, each of which only become available once the player has progressed to a specific day. Though useful, the upgrades the game offers are somewhat unconventional in that they offer the type of functionality that many games offer players by default. The first two upgrades, for instance, are keyboard shortcuts that allow players to access the booth's core utilities without the need to select them with the mouse. Keyboard shortcuts are common features of strategy and role-playing computer games where players may need to navigate between several different menu screens, and where players may need to perform an action very quickly. In *Skyrim*, for

example, keyboard shortcuts can be used to quickly gain access to particular menus. In the classic real-time strategy game *Age of Empires 2*, shortcuts are used to quickly control military units and, once mastered, can greatly increase the player's performance. In both games, however, shortcuts are built-in features that players can take advantage of at any time to improve their gameplay experience. The design decision utilised in *Papers, Please* to restrict players' access to this key functionality is representative of a game that attempts to subvert the user-centred design ethos of mainstream video games. The third and fourth upgrades also offer an enhanced user-interface and so may be understood to fulfil the same design function as the first two upgrades.

The design structures of both *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*, therefore, are distinctive in their relatively high difficulty levels, disproportionately small player rewards and unconventional upgrade systems. In both games, these features could be seen to frustrate players and, at times, reduce their levels of motivation for engaging with the games. It is also clear that the core gameplay in *Papers, Please* is more conducive to an experience of enjoyment and empowerment than the retail process in *Cart Life*. However, the game's high difficulty level and minimal rewards served to curtail the limited sense of empowerment participants experienced during their playthroughs.

Player Agency and Control

The concept of agency is a rich source of discussion in the fields of philosophy, sociology, media studies and, increasingly, game studies. Philosophers and theologians going as far back as Descartes have discussed agency in order to

understand the individual's power to determine their destiny in the face of religious determinism and scientific causality. Canonical sociologists such as Simmel (1971) and Bourdieu (1984) have discussed agency in relation to individual's level of control over his or her circumstances, and over society at large, when placed in the context of complex social and political structures. In contemporary media studies, meanwhile, a significant branch of research is devoted to the amount of agency that audiences have in their consumption of mass media products. Questions have been raised regarding the level of control audiences have over the meaning they take away from media products (Hall, 2001), the freedom they have to manipulate and expand the intellectual property of media franchises (Jenkins, 2012), and the control they have as consumers in an increasingly regulated media marketplace (Allen-Robertson, 2013).

In game studies, the concept of agency is usually interpreted as player agency. Although player agency might be interpreted as a referent for any one of the topics associated with media studies outlined above, it is most commonly used to refer to the control that players have within, and over, a particular game environment. The concept of player agency has been a point of interest for a number of notable game studies theorists, some of whom, like Murray, present video games as exceptional in the level of control they give to audiences (1997), whilst others, such as Palmer (2003), take a more sceptical approach, arguing that the agency that video games appear to provide players is largely illusory.

This section will focus primarily on the ludic aspects of agency or, to use Malliet's terminology, the aspects of design that determine "the balance between user input

and pre-programmed rules” (2007). This category encompasses the degree of control that players can exercise over the game world. It considers the extent to which they can use their own ingenuity and imagination to influence their gameplay experience and takes note of the restrictions that design structures place on players’ in-game behavior. More concisely, it may be understood to refer to the ‘affordances’ that the game provides players (Hutchby, 2001; Mateas and Stern, 2006). The game enables and disables certain player interactions, seemingly relinquishing some degree of control to players by allowing them to make changes to the game world.

During the interviews, participants’ perceptions of the level of agency they possessed in the game were assessed according to whether or not they felt they had a significant degree of control in the game (Appendix B). The term control was used as opposed to agency because it was considered a more familiar and understandable turn of phrase and serves as an appropriate synonym for the type of agency players experience in virtual worlds. As discussed in the literature review, the types of control that players experience depend on the type of game they are playing. In a single-player, open-world RPG, control may be experienced as the self-determination that players have over the types of quests they choose to commit to and the locations they visit. In a racing game, meanwhile, control can simply refer to the responsiveness of the car’s engine and the player’s ability to successfully determine the vehicle’s movements. In video games in general, however, the player’s perceived level of control over the game environment will have a significant impact on how empowered they feel when interacting with the game world and, potentially, how much enjoyment they experience (Klimmt, Hartmann and Frey, 2007).

Participants who played *Cart Life* primarily assessed their level of control in the game world according to two key aspects of the gameplay. In the first case, a number of players suggested that their ability to freely determine the actions of the player-character constituted a high degree of control (P18, P20, and P30). The game follows an open-world, modern urban format that is comparable, though visually much simpler, to the environments in popular games like *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013). In *Cart Life*, the player navigates between the key areas of the city using an interactive map. The player can then choose which mode of transport they will use to reach their destination and, when they have arrived, they will be able to freely roam up and down the side-scrolling highstreets, interact with strangers and make use of the city's services. At all times, the player is free to go to whichever area of the city they want, barring a small number of character unique locations to characters whose story-arcs are not tied to these areas.

Figure 20



The navigation map in *Cart Life* allows players to freely explore key locations in Georgetown

The various interactions that take place as the player explores the game map are by-and-large determined by the game's programming. Dialogue with non-player characters is mostly scripted, occasionally offering players a choice between two or three options. However, as most interactions that the player can undertake in the game are optional, the freedom of exploration that the game offers may be seen to offer players a higher degree of agency. When asked about the degree of control that they felt they had in the game, a number of participants referred to the freedom they had to explore the city and meet its inhabitants, with some expressing particular enjoyment at this aspect of the game (P16, P18, and P28).

Although most participants were able to articulate ways in which they were able to exercise control in the game, several also noted that the demands that they were faced with had a significantly negative impact on the level of control they experienced (P17, 18, 21, 23, 25). When asked directly if they felt that they had a significant degree of control in the game, P18 explained:

in some aspects yes - like you could decide what to buy and where to eat and where to go and when to sleep and that kind of thing - but then in other aspects no because when he's hungry you have to feed him and there's nothing else you can do - you can't just let him be hungry - you have to go and buy food otherwise you can't do anything - so that was kind of where you feel like it's dictated to you what you have to do

P18's comment indicates that the experience of control, and by extension that of player agency in the game, is significantly determined by the tension between the player's ability to freely explore and interact with the game environment and the pressures that are placed on the player to meet various demands. Participants also noted that the time restraints placed upon the player significantly curtailed the degree of control they possessed (P25, P26). The freedom of exploration the game offers is therefore bounded by several factors. In particular, it is limited by the tight time window that the player has to complete their character's goals and the responsibilities that the player has towards the wellbeing of the player-character. Players are free to explore the map at their leisure, but every minute they spend exploring is a minute that may have otherwise been used to make some form of

profit. Moreover, if players neglect to fulfill their character's immediate needs (in particular the need to sleep and eat) they will be burdened with intrusive notices informing them of the character's status and will be unable to perform certain actions, such as selling products or asking NPCs questions. For some participants, these limitations were a significant source of frustration (P18).

These responses might be seen to indicate that *Cart Life* offers players less in-game agency when compared to more conventional video games. If approached analytically, however, the level of agency that *Cart Life* offers players is not much less, and indeed sometimes more, than many mainstream products on the contemporary video games market. Consider the latest game of the *Call of Duty* series as an example. *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2016) is a game that prioritises the experience of empowerment: the single-player campaign positions players as the commander of an interplanetary warship, the 'Retribution', that has been tasked with destroying a rogue faction of off-world colonists. The gameplay of the campaign mode involves ground and aerial combat where players must assert their control of the game space by violently subduing enemies. The game's narrative, meanwhile, places the player at the center of an interplanetary conflict, with the player-character's actions serving as a determining factor in the fate of the solar system. Despite this, however, the amount of agency that the player possesses in the game is actually extremely limited. The campaign mode of *Infinite Warfare* is, to use Juul's (2002) terminology, characteristic of a "game of progression" and, accordingly, players' actions are heavily restricted by a linear game design structure.

Compared to popular first-person shooters such as those in the *Call of Duty* series, players in *Cart Life* are actually offered much more agency. What is distinctive about the way agency functions in *Cart Life* is not that it gives players less agency than other games, but that the game suggests to the player that they may be able to engage with various opportunities and affordances but then ultimately restricts them. Whilst limitations and restrictions are essential components of all game design, contemporary video games often make efforts to hide their existence. As discussed in Chapter Three, video game marketing often utilises a libertarian discourse that emphasises the freedom that players are granted in virtual worlds. Narrative-focused games such as *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) and others produced by Telltale games place emphasis on the freedom of choice that players have over their unfolding storylines. More traditional role-playing games, like those in the *Elder Scrolls* series, often promise players freedom of exploration and self-determination, with the Steam store page for *Skyrim*, for instance, suggesting that the game “allows you to play any way you want and define yourself through your actions” (Bethesda Softworks, 2011). In order to sustain the sense of freedom that they promise, these games often attempt to hide the games’ restrictions and limitations. In *Skyrim*, the game map’s borders are represented by natural barriers such as seas and mountains, barren of notable locations and vast or tall enough to inconspicuously hide the emptiness that exists beyond the game space. Players are accordingly unlikely to directly interact with the map’s edge unless they are specifically trying to test the boundaries of the game. The sense of the openness of the game world remains intact, and the player’s perceived ability to explore the virtual space without restriction is likewise maintained. There are no

locations in *Skyrim* that you can see but cannot visit and, likewise, there are no visible parts of the game that lack some form of geographical content. *Cart Life* takes a different approach by demonstrating to the player the possibilities that the game has to offer but by frequently denying the player access to them, due to time constraints or a lack of economic resources. The game offers players a rich environment to explore, complete with side-quests and opportunities to form relationships and upgrade equipment, but places time constraints and other restrictions that prevent players from enjoying these opportunities. In this sense, it is largely the difficulty that is the primary means by which the player's agency is restricted.

As with *Cart Life*, participants who played *Papers, Please* were asked to describe the level of control they felt they had in the game and elaborate on the aspects of the game that they felt influenced their sense of control. Participants' responses to this enquiry were varied and at times contradictory. Like *Cart Life*, it has been possible to identify two key aspects of the game that influenced players' perceptions of the amount of control they possessed. According to many participants' responses, a significant determinant for players' sense of control was their ability to perform the work of the immigration officer efficiently and keep their family alive and healthy. According to one participant, for instance, they felt they were 'in control' only once they had played for three days without making any mistakes (P14), whilst some participants suggested that it was because they were struggling to support their family and make progress in the game that they felt that they lacked control (P4, P7). Similarly to players' responses to *Cart Life*, some players of *Papers, Please* referred to the game's time constraints as a feature of the game that limited the

amount of control they had. P2 suggested that it was due to the “limited time window” presented by the game that they felt they were only “scraping through the game as opposed to really thriving in it”. Another stated that “no matter how quickly I managed to get people through or like - either through the gates or refused - it was never enough money to keep my family okay - never - like no matter how hard I tried - I could never do everything or pay for everything I needed” (P7).

Players’ perceptions of the level of control they possessed in the game were therefore commonly tied to their ability to master the game’s rules and mechanics and capacity to meet the goals set by the game. However, participants’ responses also indicated that their ability to have a meaningful influence on the game world was a significant determinant for the level of control they had in the game. As some participants noted (P4, P5), *Papers, Please* is a game where player decisions have a salient role. The gameplay is constructed around the decisions that the player makes as an immigration officer and the dualistic nature of those decisions (usually the player’s choices are restricted to either letting the prospective migrant pass or sending them away) makes the decision-making process clearly visible to players, as opposed to in *Cart Life* where most decisions the player makes, such as what food to eat, which locations to visit and what items to sell, may be interpreted as insignificant or even not as choices that could be made by the player at all. A number of players expressed ambivalence towards their ability to have a meaningful influence over the game world, which might be seen to accurately reflect the player’s role in the game as an individual in a position of authority, but whose actions are still tightly controlled by strict regulations. A migrant may, for instance, come into the player’s booth with all the necessary documents but may be holding a

passport that contains a minor typographical error. The player might decide, in this case, to employ their own discretion and permit the migrant despite the mistake. However, doing so will cause the player to receive a citation, reducing their much-needed daily income and possibly even resulting in a fine. One participant, having rated the level control they felt they had in the game as medium-high, described this situation in the following way:

you do feel very in control when you just decide whether someone can get to go in or not - but at the same time you get penalties if you don't respect the guidelines - so basically you don't have really any control you're just following rules - so you feel you're in control because you're the one saying denied or approved - but in fact you're just following what you're instructed to do (P7)

These responses indicate that, like *Cart Life*, whilst *Papers, Please* offers players some degree of control, this is often curtailed by the additional demands that are placed upon the player. *Papers, Please* therefore, approaches player agency in a way that is comparable to *Cart Life*. Both games present players with options that they then restrict, often resulting in experiences of frustration that foreground the lack of power players have within the game world.

The Rhetoric of Disempowerment

The textual analysis and participants testimonies presented above have demonstrated that disempowerment is an apt description for the unconventional design features of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* and serves as an accurate means of describing the experiences that audiences commonly have with these types of

games. As suggested in Chapter Three, the extent to which a game 'empowers' or 'disempowers' players can in itself be regarded as politically meaningful, in the way in which the game positions the player in relation to broader social and political forces.

In addition to the social and political meaning encoded within the broad experience of ludic disempowerment, *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* may be seen to utilise experiences of ludic disempowerment to express their own distinctive, and more targeted, political rhetoric. As with the broader rhetoric of disempowerment, these examples of procedural rhetoric go against the grain of the ideologies that are dominant in most mainstream video games. As demonstrated above in the discussion of conventional business and strategy simulation games such as *AdVenture Capitalist*, simulation games typically follow a ludologically enforced narrative structure of economic success and progression. The player or player character may begin the game as a lemonade stand vendor or mayor of a small town and progress to become an oil tycoon or leader of a bustling metropolis. Although seemingly a natural component of video game design, when placed in a realistic economic context this structure of progression may be seen to sustain an ideologically informed perspective on social and economic mobility in contemporary western society. The ease in which players are able to journey to the top ranks of society and commerce in simulation and strategy games such as *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) with minimum effort sustains an ideology of perceived meritocracy that has the potential to undermine and discredit the legitimate difficulties and obstacles that people face in their day-to-day lives and entrepreneurial pursuits.

As McNamee and Miller (2014) describe, the “myth” of a just and benevolent meritocracy, where hard work and talent are consistently rewarded with success, sustains social and economic inequality through its representation of material wealth as a just reward for success, and its implicit refusal to consider the additional barriers that many people in western nations – and especially those from marginalised social and ethnic groups – have to overcome to achieve a reasonable standard of living. Games that follow ‘rags-to-riches’ narratives of progress through perseverance strengthen the myth of meritocracy and in doing so fail to identify the determining social and economic factors that can restrict an individual’s ability to improve their material conditions.

As shown in the analyses above, however, *Cart Life* possesses a number of features that appear to be designed specifically to frustrate the player’s ambitions. The income that players earn for their work is extremely limited, it is easy to make mistakes that cut into this revenue, upgrades are often traps that cost the player dearly whilst doing little to promote revenue, and the player-character’s own needs routinely interfere with the player’s effort to develop their character’s business. All of these design features are representative of real difficulties that a self-employed retailer may face in establishing their business. However, more conventional games in the simulation genre omit these aspects of simulation in order to facilitate an experience of ‘flow’ and the accompanying experience of empowerment. As a game that offers an experience of comparative disempowerment, *Cart Life* subverts the continual upward progression of traditional business simulation games. By extension of this subversive game design, *Cart Life* serves to critique the perceived meritocracy that sustains a dominant position in the ideological fabric of western society. *Cart*

Life exacts a social critique comparable to that utilised in contemporary and classic works of social realism. The ludic structure of the game, where the player's best efforts remain unlikely to result in success for the player's chosen character, rhetorically challenges narratives of social and economic mobility upheld by mainstream titles in the video game market.

Similarly to *Cart Life*, the critical rhetoric in *Papers, Please* is expressed through the subversion of traditional ludological and narratological conventions. As has been demonstrated above, *Papers, Please* undermines the conventions of mainstream video games by first placing players in what appears to be a position of authority, before exposing the player to the limitations and responsibilities that inspector's role involves. The rule structure of the game is such that players are repeatedly forced to make decisions where the player-character's interests, security and family is pitted against the wellbeing and rights of those attempting to cross the border into Arstotzka. The totalitarian border control policy the player is forced to uphold in *Papers, Please* appears to work in no one's interests: the inspector's family appears to suffer from a poor standard of living regardless of the player's performance, whilst desperate pleas to cross the border against regulations must continue to be denied if the player is to keep the inspector's family warm and fed. Meanwhile, increasingly strict and discriminatory policies appear to do little to curb terrorist activities within the Arstotzkan state. The game therefore expresses a discernible critique of strict, bureaucratic systems of border control and the dehumanisation it forces on both border-crossers and border-guards. Within the Arstotzkan border control system there is little room for empathy, lenience or human connection, and yet the security of the Arstotzkan people seems to be anything but assured.

Papers, Please is set in a fictional soviet-style nation during the later decades of the Cold War. As Crawford and Muriel point out, however, the border control system simulated in the game has a number of similarities with contemporary western border control practices. The most notable comparison can be made to the US President Donald Trump's aggressive stance on immigration. Despite the game being released in 2013, four years prior to Trump's inauguration in 2017, the game foreshadows Trump's controversial election campaign and subsequent immigration policies. The rhetoric employed by the Arstotzkan government in *Papers, Please* to justify the discriminatory border control regulations in the totalitarian state mirrors the Trump administration's focus on national security. Trump's pledge to build a wall spanning across the border between the US and Mexico has been repeatedly justified by the perceived threat that Mexican migrants pose to the security of American citizens (BBC News, 2016). An even clearer parallel, however, can be identified in the Trump administration's attempts to block citizens of particular nations from entering the US (Rothwell and Krol, 2017). Trump's so-called 'Muslim ban' blocked access to the United States from people from a selection of Muslim-majority countries: Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia, Yemen and Iraq. The Trump administration's rationale for this move has been as a national security measure. However, the executive order enforcing this policy has proven to be highly controversial, targeted as a discriminatory infringement of human rights and a perceived legitimization of the country's growing islamophobia.

Papers, Please presents a clear parallel to this situation through the Arstotzkan government's response to terrorist activities at the border. After a citizen from the neighbouring fictional state Kolechia detonates an explosive device having been

legitimately granted passage across the border the player is instructed to refuse entry to all Kolechian citizens. The demand that the game makes for the player's complicity in this practice, in combination with the emotional responses of the refused border-crossers, exposes the player to the human cost of these discriminatory policies, both in terms of the impact on those seeking to cross national borders and on those who are required to enforce these policies. In doing so, the game presents a world view where all citizens of a nation, even those in an alleged position of authority, can be the victims of political power. As Jayanth (2016) describes:

...in *Papers Please* [sic] you have all the agency in the world, to decide how to spend your time, what documents to pass, how to spend your money — but your power is hugely, pointedly limited. Part of that limitation is by making the NPCs demand and need more things than you can provide, forcing you to make choices, compromise, fail. Giving you the agency actually highlights how powerless you are — in playing you actually form a kind of kinship with the NPCs you nominally dictate to — you are ALL, in fact, powerless in the face of Aristotzka's [sic] tyrannical bureaucracy.

The rhetoric of *Papers, Please*, therefore, is discernibly critical of strict, discriminatory border control practices, both in history and contemporary society, and in simulating these practices exposes players to the trauma experienced on both sides of the document-checking process.

This chapter has demonstrated how the design features of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* differ from those of conventional video games and ultimately contribute to an experience of ludic disempowerment. In both games this experience of disempowerment is channelled towards a particular socio-political concern: in *Cart Life* the experience of disempowerment is framed according to Andrus, Vinny and Melanie's financial and personal difficulties and serves as a critique of the rags-to-riches myth that remains dominant in political rhetoric in Western industrial societies. In *Papers, Please* the player's experience of disempowerment corresponds to the disempowerment that individuals face when confronted with the bureaucratic principles that governed not only Soviet society in the 1970s but which endure in 21st century democracies. These games are distinctive in their willingness to use the video game medium to explore the struggles that people face on a daily basis and their implicit rejection of the doctrine of empowerment that remains dominant in the vast majority of game design practices. Participants' responses corroborated many of the conclusions generated during the game analysis process concerning the type of gameplay that is likely to emerge from *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please's* unconventional design features. As will become apparent in the following chapters, however, players who experienced the games as a form of ludic disempowerment were not necessarily receptive to the critical rhetoric identified in this chapter. The following chapters therefore examine how participants' interpretation of the meaning encoded within the games varied, exploring in particular how the design features of the two games and the video game medium itself could have enabled these divergent interpretations.

6. Decoding Disempowerment: Video Games and the Interpretive Process

From the previous chapter, it is evident that *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* contain an array of critical social and political arguments that bear great relevance to contemporary society. In the case of *Cart Life*, this critique is directed against the entrepreneurial, rags-to-riches ideology that is encompassed within business simulation games. In both games, this socio-political critique is enacted according to the aesthetic values of social realism, which in turn is highly informed by the cognitive process of identifying with fictional characters who are placed in a socio-politically contextualised position of disempowerment. In *Papers, Please*, this criticism is levelled against the dehumanising bureaucracy of border control practices. In *Cart Life*, it takes the form of an implicit critique of the ideology of social mobility, and the rags-to-riches narrative structure that informs not only the content of popular video game franchises such as *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000), but also a wide breadth of western media. The introduction, and surprising popularity, of games containing such critical themes into the increasingly mainstream indie gaming market is undoubtedly a positive sign, an indication of a growing perception of the video game medium as a complex and multifaceted form of expression, and evidence that the gaming community itself is more self-conscious and sympathetic to the disempowered than recent controversies, such as Gamergate, might lead us to believe.

In and of itself, however, this critical analysis is insufficient in building a comprehensive understanding of the impact of these gaming experiences on

individual players. As discussed in Chapter Four, the insights gained by examining the themes and rhetoric of a game from an analytical perspective can differ significantly from those gathered by communicating more broadly with players who engage have engaged with the game on a more casual basis. Moreover, there is little evidence to suggest that an academic reading of a video game, or any media product, should be regarded as more meaningful, rich or objective than the experiences of non-academic players. Indeed, if the objective of a study is to discover the possible influence that interaction with a particular video game may have on a player's perception of society, it is imperative that the researcher assesses not only the political rhetoric embedded within the fabric of a game (the 'encoded' meaning of the game), but also how that rhetoric is interpreted ('decoded') by audiences.

Drawing on results from the audience reception methodology outlined in Chapter Five, this chapter examines the various ways in which players may, or may not, interpret the socio-politically critical content of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*. The sample of thirty player responses is not presumed to have provided an exhaustive range of possible meanings and interpretations that players may ascribe to these games. What has been achieved, however, is the accumulation of data that represents a variety of ways in which these games can be experienced and interpreted, and which points us to insights concerning the audience reception process as it occurs with narrative texts that encourage audiences to identify with disempowered individuals and with works of social realism more broadly. Just as significantly, however, the proceeding analysis demonstrates how the distinctive features of the video game medium influence the process of interpretation.

This chapter therefore identifies the variety of meanings that emerged from players' experiences with the games, correlating participants' responses to literature on media reception and video game rhetoric in order to build an understanding of how the reception process functions in interactive media and how political rhetoric is transmitted through simulations of disempowering experiences. Except for the first section, these findings are presented according to the themes that appear to have informed the interpretation process, meaning that contrasting interpretations may be discussed alongside one-another if the mental processes and textual features that governed the interpretations are comparable.

Within Hall's widely accepted model of audience reception studies audience (2001) it is often assumed that although media texts are interpreted by audiences in a variety of ways, media texts are also encoded with some form of relatively static intentional meaning. This meaning is typically revealed by the researcher through the process of analysis and is often regarded as a strong component of the ideological force of the media product. Audience members who interpret the text along the same lines of the encoded message are often described as having accepted the text's 'dominant', or 'preferred', meaning. It has become common practice in audience reception studies to present this meaning of the text, in the form of textual analysis, before exploring audience's alternative interpretations of the text. This is a structure that has been followed in this thesis, which presents a purely textual analysis of its objects of study foremost, and then proceeds to consider how audience respond to the features identified in the analysis. Although this study follows this tradition in this regard, it should be made clear that the analyses of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* presented in Chapter Six are not considered

to be the 'preferred' or 'dominant' responses of the two games but are simply those that were generated during the researcher's process of analysis.

Chapter Five saw that these games possess features which subvert some of the conventions of the video game medium (in particular, the tendency to create compelling gameplay by placing players in a situation of empowerment) and do so in such a way that can be seen to criticise socio-political ideologies and conditions that are dominant in western society. As will be clear, however, there are textual and contextual factors that can highly influence the players' interpretations, often resulting in a process of reception that is significantly at odds with textual analysis presented in Chapter Six. This chapter begins by presenting evidence of how participants' existing political beliefs and social preconceptions may have influenced their interpretations of the games' content. The following sections examine in greater detail participant responses that contain evidence of ways in which the design features of the two games, and the inherent features of the medium, can result in interpretations that either lack a significant social or political dimension, or which express a significantly different understanding of the politics of the two games.

Preconceptions and Persuasion

Cart Life and *Papers, Please* carry with them a political rhetoric that is potentially critical of a number of contemporary political ideologies and institutions. Several participants were receptive to a socio-political commentary in their allocated game. The form in which this commentary was perceived, however, differed significantly between participants, ranging from a subliminal awareness of the game's political

rhetoric to a strong and active perception of the game's critical polemic. These critical readings varied considerably in terms of their nature and intensity, with some participants responding with passing references to the social and political context of their game, and others provided more extended accounts of the socio-political meaning they took from their experience.

For many of the participants who identified a form of social criticism in their allocated game, it was possible to identify a pre-existing socio-political attitude that informed their response. P13, a male 19-year-old humanities student, was highly critical of the policies of the Arstotzkan government in his playthrough of *Papers, Please*. He described the Arstotzkan government as "dicks" on the basis of their strict controls on immigration but admitted that prior to his experience with the game he was "not too keen on countries with [...] really strict borders". P10, a female 18-year-old psychology student who described feeling negatively towards the Arstotzkan government on the basis of their "weird" procedure of requiring entering travellers to provide entry tickets in addition to passports and work permits, likewise justified their position on the basis that they "don't agree with that kind of stuff". P12, meanwhile, regarded the excessive rules, the sense of totalitarian nationalism evoked by the game's title screen and soundtrack as themselves indications that "something is going really really badly" in Arstotzka.

P30, a male 22-year-old business student, provided an indication of how the game's difficulty influenced his thought process during the playthrough in his statement that:

I kept thinking 'is this what life's gonna be like - is life gonna be this hard?' like it's not been a breeze up to this point and university isn't a breeze but it just kinda felt like this game's telling you that life is hard and you have to work hard at it and you have to get up early and go to the store and do your thing

In and of itself, this response may be better described as cynical rather than critical, in that it identifies the game to be indicating that life is difficult for many people but fails to address the causes of this perceived difficulty. However, P30 also commented that:

to work on the streets you have to be quite hard-working and determined - and if I said to you that someone was hard-working and determined you wouldn't associate them with someone that doesn't have a house or a home or can barely afford to eat - personally I think it comes down to education and luck - I think we all could be potentially homeless but it's the people that are in the wrong places at the wrong time

In this case the participant made a clear connection between the game's difficulty level and a belief that economic success is largely a product of "education and luck". This understanding of the game bears significant remnants of the critical interpretation of the game presented in Chapter Six, in particular in its rejection of the ideology of meritocratic social mobility that is both a staple of the video game medium and is also, as McNamee and Miller (2014) describe, a key component of the ideological fabric of western society. P30's suggestion that "we all could be

potentially homeless”, and that those who are have simply found themselves “in the wrong places at the wrong time” provides an especially strong indication that their experience of playing as Vinny encouraged them to reflect on the fragility of economic security in western society, and is indicative of the belief that success in life is as much, if not more, the result of the chance of birth as it the product of commitment or individual merit.

Despite demonstrating an understanding of how *Cart Life* can be seen as rhetorical challenge to the supposedly meritocracy of Western capitalism, the interview contained little evidence that P30 was actually, to use Bogost’s (2007) terminology, “persuaded” by this aspect of the game’s procedural rhetoric. P30 did not indicate that they held a contrasting belief prior to their participation in the study and their choice of words when describing their beliefs – using the general term “I think” rather than temporally specific language such as “the game made me think” or “I was thinking that” – indicate that these views were held by the participant prior to playing *Cart Life*.

Though less prevalent, it is possible to identify responses from the other end of the political spectrum which likewise appeared to echo participants’ existing political views. P5 said that the message of the game was that it is important for a country to “feel safe” and indicated that the player’s responsibility as an immigration officer in the game was in “protecting its people”. P5 also said that the perspective on border control presented in the game was consistent with their existing attitude towards border control, while P1 indicated that they were not very political, and that may have been why they did not engage with the game in a political way. While the fact

that *Papers, Please* failed to effectively challenge both P5's more conservative attitude towards border control and P1's relative disinterest in border control politics indicates that the video game medium may be an ineffective tool for the transmission of a convincing political rhetoric, it is important to emphasise the difficulty with which any political message is adopted by an individual who has an existing viewpoint that is starkly in contrast to this message (Slater, 2011, p. 160).

The responses presented above indicates that although participants' experiences with *Papers, Please* and *Cart Life* had, in some cases, a discernible impact on the way some of these participants viewed social reality, the critical rhetoric of these games was often only perceptible to those who were at least partially already sympathetic to the ideas expressed in the games. Some participant responses, however, indicated that their playthrough had a meaningful impact on how they view the issues engaged with in their allocated game. P8, a female 21-year-old sociology student who played *Papers, Please*, drew attention to the dehumanising aspects of the border control process as it was simulated in the game. When asked if they felt the game was a believable representation of border control, they responded that: "they [border control enforcers] make you feel like you've done something wrong even if [...] you have no spot on your passport or anything." P8 proceeded to describe how this compared with their own experience of crossing the border from Calais to the UK, describing how the border control at Calais "looked at us like we were criminals - you feel like a little intruder". Rather than being 'persuaded' by this aspect of the game's rhetoric, P8's response to this feature of *Papers, Please* indicated that the game served as an effective vehicle for her existing perception of border control practice. P8 had visited Calais to work with a refugee charity.

However, P8 also identified a degree of ambivalence in the game's simulation of border control practices. For P8, the game gives players:

a chance to see how is it to be on the opposite - cause everyone is blaming the border control because they aren't letting refugees come in or out - but this is actually their job - and maybe this thing would help them understand that they have families at home and if they lose their jobs or if they are going to let someone in they could have end up in jails and lose their lives so - it's not that the border control people are the bad ones - it's kind of important to see this.

In addition to supporting P8's existing attitude towards border control, the identification process that took place between herself and the inspector appeared to encourage her to re-think her previous hostility towards border control staff. P8's experience with *Papers, Please* appeared to allow her humanise enforcers of border control policy. P8 was not, however, clear about where her frustrated towards border control should be directed. She indicated that "it's not that the border control people are the bad ones" but did not express who the "bad ones" are. However, P8's comments retain a sense that it would be wrong to demonise policy enforcers, instead preferring to see them equally as victims of a dehumanising system.

P11, a female 21-year-old government student, expressed a similar level of ambivalence to P8 but with greater sympathy for the inspector. They described how:

it's not an easy job - obviously - and you're dealing with so many people all the time - it is hard - I wouldn't work in real life this job because it's too hard [...] you're getting tired from people - and because they're all the time coming with the same problems - and sometimes they don't have the same documents that they need and they're mad at you - but it's not your fault - because they have to like read and see what they need to come across the border

P11's response indicates a strong level of identification with the inspector, to the point of feeling frustrated and almost hostile towards NPCs attempting to cross the border without proper documentation. When asked explicitly how they felt if they were in the position of one of the characters crossing the border, however, the participant indicated that they might have felt just as strongly, suggesting that the emotional strain of attempting to cross the border may be "quite the same thing" as the stress involved in working as the border control guard.

In many cases where persuasion was evident the meaning attributed to the game by participants was largely in line with the critical readings presented in Chapter Six. An exception to this, however, can be found in P9's reception of *Papers, Please*. P9, a female 23-year-old biology student, was one of the few participants who played *Papers, Please* and who also had a personal, though not quite direct, connection to border control practices. P9 described how their cousin "had a lot of issues with getting immigration status in the country", thereby comparing their cousin's situation to that of the fictional travellers in *Papers, Please* in that they were both repeatedly faced with new regulations that meant that "she'd have to start again

from the beginning". P9 indicated that they had a close relationship with this person, describing how "I call her my sister but technically she's my cousin", and stating that "because she's quite close to me I kind of lived with her in that experience".

Based on this close relationship to someone who has evidently been repeatedly frustrated by strict border controls, it might be expected that P9 would express a highly critical attitude towards the Arstotzkan government, exhibiting a comparable attitude to P10 and P13, whose existing political beliefs had a discernible impact on their interpretations. Discussing their feelings at the start of the playthrough, P9 expressed an attitude that was consistent with this perspective. They described how "In the beginning I thought they were a bit of a Nazi regime [...] just cause it seemed that they had loads of control" and likened the practices of "unfair" discrimination exercised by the Arstotzkan government to contemporary approaches to border control advocated by far-right political bodies such as the Trump administration in the US and UKIP in the UK. The participant's attitude appeared to change dramatically, however, over the course of their playthrough. As P9 progressed through the game and saw "the trouble that they [the Arstotzkan government] were having" in terms of attacks on the outpost the participant appeared to become increasingly convinced that the discriminating regulations were justified. P9 stated that: "I was just like 'okay this kind of make sense'". A significant factor that appeared to influence this change in perspective was the emotional stress that they experienced when the game was interrupted by a terrorist attack. When asked about whether the game was making a particular statement about border control, they suggested that:

I think the stress of like everytime a certain person comes in it affects your family and then the [other concern] is the fear of a terrorist attack - yeah because it kind of made me more apprehensive to let certain people through just based on where they came from

As for P8, therefore, P9's experience of *Papers, Please* had a persuasive impact. Unlike P8, however, whose interpretation of the game was largely in line with the critical response presented in Chapter Five, P9 was far more protectionist. Rather than teaching the participant the value of emphatic perspective-taking, the process of identifying with the border control inspector resulted in a lack of empathy towards those crossing the border. Ironically, however, this process of dehumanising the border crossers was developed as a result of the participant's feelings of empathy towards the inspector's family. The impact that experiences of empathy had on participants' reception of the games is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8. For now, however, it is important to note that the divergent interpretations made by P8 and P9 appeared to occur directly as a result of the identification process. As in traditional media such as film and literature, the way in which a player identifies with characters in a game can significantly influence their reception of the meaning encoded within the text.

Politics and Polyvalence

The responses presented above indicate that it is possible for games such as *Papers, Please* and *Cart Life* to have a discernible impact on the way players view social reality. However, as P9's response demonstrated, the form that this influence takes

is not always predictable. As discussed in detail in Chapter Four, it has become widely accepted in the study of art, literature, film and mass media that depending on contextual factors, such as the social, political and environmental context of the reception and the idiosyncrasies of the observer/reader/audience, the meaning created, and overall experience of the interaction between a text and an individual, will differ. This is often described in terms of the understanding of the polysemy of texts. Video games are no exception to this. However, video games are often regarded as distinct from traditional media forms due to the fact that their physical output can vary depending on the choices a player makes during gameplay. Galloway (2006, p. 105) describes this as the “polyvalence” of video games. This is often cited as the medium’s most innovative feature, one of its primary sources of enjoyment, and the key to its ability to explore reality and ideas in ways that are impossible for traditional media. Polyvalence, and the cognitive involvement it demands from players, may result in heightened audience engagement and a highly intuitive state of identification and empathy with a game’s controllable characters. It can also allow for the transmission of rich and complex messages. Polyvalence can allow players to explore situations from viscerally from multiple perspectives and assess the outcomes of multiple different actions. A simulation game such as *Frostpunk* (11 bit studios, 2018) can allow players to discover the pitfalls of both a society dictated by uncontrollable religious zealotry and of a society where a lack of common beliefs and values can result in social disintegration, whilst a role-playing game such as *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) can teach players that there are situations in life where the consequences of people’s actions cannot be easily predicted, and that sometimes any action taken will result in an undesired

outcome. In the video game medium, the modernist aesthetics of fragmentation and nonlinear story-telling have the potential to reach their ultimate expression (Murray, 1997; Bolter, 2001).

These features can be extremely effective in expressing ideas that are indebted to ambivalence and ambiguity. Polyvalence, therefore, can add a degree of ambiguity that may compromise a text's clarity of meaning. It was precisely for this reason that film critic Ebert (2005) controversially stated that video games are not art, his reasoning being that "video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control". The notion that some form of stability of meaning is a pre-requisite for a text to be given the sanctified status of 'art' is of course a problematic one, and has become a popular topic of discussion for video game researchers (Smuts, 2005; Clarke and Mitchell, 2013). For the purposes of this study, however, what Ebert's comments do justifiably indicate is that polyvalence can broaden the variety of likely meanings that audiences are likely to attribute to a text. For a study of how video games have been adapted for the politically-charged genre of social realism, this poses its own set of problems. The political rhetoric of social realism is typically much more focused and direct than that of the works of modernist writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. In watching *I, Daniel Blake* (Loach, 2016), the message that is clearly being intended is that the UK welfare system is bureaucratically dehumanising, inept and insufficient to meet society's needs. The film does not overtly encourage viewers to consider the situation from multiple perspectives simultaneously or encourage viewers to imagine and engage with different possible actions and outcomes. Even De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), which

turns its narrative full circle when the protagonist Antonio, pushed into despair when his own bicycle is stolen, commits the same act in an attempt to regain his livelihood, does not challenge the viewer to rethink their understanding of Antonio as a victim, but rather encourages viewers to consider crime as an act of economic desperation rather than an expression of moral depravity or greed.

In P9's case, it was not so much how the participant played the game as it was how they interpreted the gameplay that influenced their interpretation. Both P9, who indicated that the border control practices in the game were justified, and P10, who harboured a much more critical view of Arstotzka's border control policies, may have been presented with the same narrative content of the game presented non-interactive format and could have come to the same conclusions that they did from playing the game. This is an example of differing interpretations being attributed to the same text as a result of polysemy: the signifier (the game) stays the same, whereas the signified (the meaning produced) differs. Polyvalence, on the other hand, demands that the text be materially changed in some form as a result of the interpreter's interaction. This, of course, creates several new ways in which different interpretations of a single media text can be reached. In the first and most obvious of cases, polyvalence can result in significant transformation of the text, so that, in effect, the text being interpreted by one individual might even be regarded as separate to that of another which, due to decisions made either by the player or which were randomly generated by the software, presents significantly different content.

A basic example of how this may influence a player's interpretation of a game can be found in the character choice that players make at the start of *Cart Life*. Whilst all controllable characters in *Cart Life* are experiencing some form of economic and emotional strain, some of the characters are clearly more vulnerable than others. For instance, while Melanie has the dual pressures of needing both to create a regular income and taking care of her daughter, she also receives both financial and emotional support from her sister, who provides the player with food and accommodation for free. Andrus, on the other hand, is new in town, and appears to have no support network (excluding his cat and a passing relationship with his neighbour) and is forced to seek accommodation in a cramped room in a shabby motel. Depending on which character the player chooses, the gameplay that they experience is significantly different. As Melanie, most of the player's efforts are likely to be directed at first locating and purchasing a vending stand and then balancing the business with familial responsibilities. As Andrus, meanwhile, the player is given a cart at the start of the game, but, unlike Melanie, Andrus must economise to afford the high costs of his motel room and must also exercise thrift in keeping adequately fed on a tight budget. Melanie's family responsibilities can make the game cognitively and emotionally demanding but playing as Andrus provides players with a stronger sense of the precariousness of life in poverty.

The contrasting gameplay that can emerge from player's character choice can have a significant impact on how the game is interpreted. P19, a female 20-year-old biology student, played the game first as Andrus but then switched to Melanie. Describing why they chose to change characters, P19 revealed some indications of how the

game could be interpreted differently depending on the player's chosen character.

Comparing how they felt about the two characters, P19 described how:

it was a bit annoying that [Andrus] kept coughing so the whole screen was shaking I was sort of like 'okay' - and he was very pessimistic and just really depressed and I was like 'ookay...' and I was folding up the newspapers the things you had to type - oh my god I was like 'oh okay this is a bit depressing' - that's just the vibe I got from him - and with the girl she seemed a bit more friendly and like okay she just wants to get her business up and running - and he's just trying to get by

They then proceeded to describe Melanie as a “bit more lively and interesting”, proceeding to state that the time spent playing with Melanie:

started off more interesting to begin because she's a bit more optimistic - okay she wants to get this coffee place stand up and running and he's just selling newspapers and sleeping rough and in a motel you know

Whilst P19 did not make a direct statement about how they interpreted the meaning of these contrasting gameplay experiences, the sentiment of their response is clear: whilst they became quickly frustrated with Andrus' situation, coming very close to blaming Andrus for being pessimistic and “really depressed”, they had much more respect and enjoyment in Melanie's slightly more optimistic outlook. For P19, playing as Melanie was enjoyable because it served as a vehicle for the familiar rags-to-riches ideology of conventional business simulation games, whilst playing as

Andrus was unenjoyable because the game presented a bleaker image of social reality.

In this example, the decision that the participant took at the start of the game had a definitive impact on the game's content, and subsequently resulted on significantly different interpretations of the same game. The character choice that players make at the start of the game constitutes a significant and very deliberate process of decision making. However, it is also possible to identify instances where much more minor and subtle decisions and playing strategies applied by participants may have significantly influenced their experience of the game. In the first instance, how proficiently the game was played may have had a significant impact on how players interpreted it. P1, who played *Papers, Please*, described that although they found the game difficult at first, they were able to quickly improve, to the point where they felt they were "playing it quite well". The same participant was also less receptive than others to the game's critical polemic, certainly due in no small degree to the fact that they were, in their own words, "very ignorant" of politics, but perhaps also because in their experience of the game the inspector's situation was not as dire as for others who played the game. Both *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* can be won and, although the winning circumstances of both games may not be the happy endings that audiences can expect from most mainstream fictional media, the relative success of the player will ultimately have a strong influence on the narrative content experienced by the player.

The polyvalence of video games, therefore, has the potential to manifest in highly idiosyncratic playthroughs for individual players, which in turn may heavily influence

the meaning that players take away from gameplay experiences. However, evidence from the study indicated that there are other ways in which the quality of polyvalence can influence players' interpretations of a video game. Several participant responses suggested that the very awareness of polyvalence may significantly influence players' interpretations of gameplay, regardless of the influence that this polyvalence may have on gameplay. P28, a male 20-year-old economics student who played *Cart Life* as Vinny, was one of a number of participants who reached a staggeringly different interpretation of *Cart Life* from that presented in Chapter Six in that they viewed the game's narrative as one of success and social mobility rather than as a subversion of the rags-to-riches narrative structures of conventional business simulators. Discussing how Vinny's independent, albeit precarious, self-employed status may be preferable to working for a corporation, P28 described how:

I don't mind being in the company rather than selling something on my own like in a small business - but obviously [Vinny] may start from bagels and then he can own a bakery in ten years or something like this - and he would be a manager while I could still work in the company and be no one [...] so yeah my work and his work is different but I consider his work has an advantage because he has a better start - he actually he got things - he got the stand everything and he starting on his own - I would like to do this at some point as well

P29, a male 19-year-old law student who also played as Vinny, similarly stated that while a core aspect of the game was “the struggle to survive”, they enjoyed playing as Vinny because:

you feel like this is you and you're imagining yourself if you were in this position that you would somehow overcome it and life will not sweep you away - which I really hope - I wanta play this game again because I wanta win the game so I can feel better about myself in the future if I fall in the same position - that's my motivation right now

Despite this apparent optimism, however, both participants indicated that they had performed poorly during their playthrough. P28 predicted that they would not have been able to afford Vinny’s rent, principally because they had spent their money on purchasing and upgrading Vinny’s stand. P29, meanwhile, expressed being unable to make sales due to the game’s time-cycle and the difficulty in meeting Vinny’s personal needs, such as staying well-fed. In both cases, participants experienced the game along similar lines to that predicted in Chapter Six, having struggled to meet their characters’ needs whilst maintaining a financial profit, but interpreted the meaning of the gameplay in a radically different way. The reason for this was not because the game was played in a particularly idiosyncratic way by these participants, nor simply because they interpreted the core content of the game from a different ideological perspective. What appeared to influence these participants’ interpretations was, rather, the knowledge that the game could be played in different ways coupled with an optimistic interpretation of this polyvalence. In other

words, whilst the participants' experiences of the game were for the most part characterised by disempowerment, the knowledge that the game could be played otherwise had the effect of undermining the possibility of reaching a reading of the game as a work of critical rhetoric. P17 meaningfully described it as "kind of interesting to see the underdog go back to the normal life" probably". P17's use of this qualifying term 'probably' indicates even if players performed poorly, their interpretation of the game defaulted to a projected outcome where the player-character succeeds.

As discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five, whilst it is possible to win *Cart Life*, the process is difficult and laborious, often requiring several disheartening attempts and a significant degree of commitment. Moreover, even if the player is able to meet their character's end-game objective, it is clear that the character will need to overcome a number of additional obstacles in order to gain both financial independence and a good standard of living. P17, 28 and 29's optimism, therefore, may well have been misplaced. There are, however, several valid reasons why players of the game may be more likely to assume an optimistic rather than pessimistic perspective. In the first case, the fact that the game sets the player positive goals implicitly suggests that these tasks can and will ultimately be accomplished. As P22, a female business student, aptly pointed out: "you can always start from the beginning [...] that's a good thing with video games". The replayability of video games creates a situation of perceived possibility where anything that appears to be remotely possible becomes part of the semantic fabric of the game. The very knowledge of the possibility that a game may possibly be played in a multiple of ways results in interpretations of the game that deviate significantly from

their direct experiences of the game. As most games offers the prospect of unlimited retries, the fact that something can occur in a game can be semantically the same as saying it will occur.

In addition, the fact that the gameplay design of *Cart Life* has a lot in common with that of conventional rags-to-riches tycoon games could potentially have encouraged a more optimistic prediction of the game's outcome. Fuelled, to use Kristeva's (1980) terminology, with the "intertextual" knowledge of these conventions, it is highly possible that participants projected their experiences of other games onto the as-of-yet largely uncertain gameplay of *Cart Life*. In light of the knowledge that other gameplay experiences are possible, and in absence of precise knowledge about what those other experiences might be, players are likely to default to their expectations of what the game genre usually offers. In other words, a game's intertextual relationship with games of a similar genre can strongly influence how a player interprets the game, even if the game possesses features which, as was argued in Chapter Six, meaningfully subvert the conventions of that genre. Given the relatively high level of freedom that *Cart Life* offers, and the ease with which it fits into the popular simulation genre, it is unsurprising that a number of participants developed interpretations of the game based on expectations they had developed from prior gaming experiences. The game's polyvalence, in combination with its intertextual relationship with more conventional 'tycoon' and simulation games, can lead to player interpretations that are vastly different from the critical reading of the game presented in Chapter Five. In addition, part of the rhetoric of the game as presented in Chapter Five relies on presenting the player with options that are extremely difficult, or even impossible, to take advantage of.

This being said, it should be recognised that the participants in this study only had a limited time with the games and that extended playthroughs could result in an enhanced understanding of what it and what is not likely to be achieved in the game environment, thereby mitigating the indeterminacy that occurs as a result of this perceived polyvalence. However, the problem has clearly been recognised by developers, in particular those who explicitly associate their software with the 'games for change' genre. Frasca's *September 12th: A Toy World* (2010), examined in Chapter One, presents players with a situation where the apparent goal is impossible to achieve. The gameplay itself, however, does not immediately convey this to the player, creating a situation where the player may think that either they are playing the game poorly or simply that the game is hard and requires additional practice. The game addresses this room for uncertainty by presenting players with the direct opening disclaimer: "This is not a game. You can't win and you can't lose". The impact of the statement is such that the application's rhetoric is made more defined, but this comes at the expense of the loss of exposure that is accompanies the alienation of the product from the entertainment media market.

Agency and Individualism

The quality of polyvalence that distinguishes the video game medium can be seen a manifestation of the enhanced agency that players are granted in the video game medium as opposed to the relationship between audiences and more traditional media such as literature and film. It was also suggested that this enhanced agency may present a degree of tension in efforts to remediate the genre of social realism for the video game medium. As Williams (1977) identifies, the political rhetoric of social realism overwhelmingly relies on presenting individuals as victims of context

and circumstance. If Daniel Blake was in control of his own destiny, then no one could be blamed for his declining standard of living but himself. As it is, Blake is presented with insurmountable obstacles at almost every turn. Even his most proactive and audacious act, the spray-painting of the job centre with a piece of highly personal and deprecating written polemic, is met with little more than a cheer from a small crowd and a public arrest. Video games, on the other hand, continually place emphasis on the actions of the individual. All but the simplest of games contain a degree of determining action on the part of players, and the basic marketing rhetoric of the medium often emphasising to players that they control over the game world. *Fallout 4* (2015), for instance, promises the player that “every choice is yours” (Bethesda Softworks, 2015). Meanwhile, the “choices matter” tag is among the most commonly used on the Steam distribution platform and has been allocated to some of the biggest successes in recent years, such as the open-world RPG *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and the indie game *Undertale* (2015).

A consequence of this characteristic is that video games often place a greater emphasis on the actions of the individual than they do on context. Provenzo Jr. (1991), referring in particular to the sports-fighting title *Blades of Steel* (Konami, 1988), describes how in order to succeed in the game:

One must strike out as an individual; one must act for oneself; one must function as an autonomous and decontextualized being. This mode of behaviour would obviously be counterproductive in an actual game of hockey, but through the computer (that is, video game) it is possible to create a decontextualized microworld that

conforms in its simulation the philosophy of individualism and to a decontextualized sense of self. (1991)

Although it would be wrong to generalise this evaluation to the entirety of the video game medium, the element of interactivity (in single-player games in particular) frequently places an inherent emphasis on the actions of the player, or player-character, over the determining forces that restrict the players' possible actions. As argued in Chapter Five, *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* are distinctive in that the agency the games provide players with is often undermined by the player-character's obligations and limited means. The argument presented in Chapter Five was precisely that the games' difficult and disempowering gameplay shift the player's focus from remaining attentive only on their own actions, and towards the contextual factors in the game worlds that prevented the games' protagonists from succeeding.

Whilst, as has been shown above, several participants did respond in accordance with this analysis, others were much more inclined to interpret their game's meaning in terms of the actions that they themselves took in-game and, in particular, how these actions could be translated as strategic life lessons. In *Cart Life*, the responses manifested as advice on time and money management. When asked about the message conveyed by the game, P26, a male 22-year-old business student, stated that:

the game ask[s] the player how to dealing with real life problems -
for example Melanie got lot of problems so we need think faster to
move one place to other place - to get cart and to start a new

business as soon as possible - we need to manage time properly -
and how we need to manage our money properly - because the
game just give her 1500 - we need to manage that money to start
a new business - that's the message from the game I think

Other participants expressed similar sentiments. P18 commented: "I guess there's a bit of a message that you need to manage your money - spend your money wisely! Cause if you don't then you can't really get by". P20, a male philosophy student, likewise indicated that the meaning of the game is to: "maybe be careful with the decisions you take in your life - because you might then not have any money". P27, a male 25-year-old computer science student, similarly stated that the message of the game was that there are "certain responsibilities in life that you have to take care of multiple things - like family and business".

These types of 'cautionary' responses were significantly more prevalent in interviews with participants who played *Cart Life* than with those who played *Papers, Please*. This may have been due largely to *Cart Life's* more familiar and contemporary setting, and perhaps also because the playable characters in *Cart Life* are required to engage in more mundane and familiar tasks, such as buying and selling goods, eating and sleeping, than the inspector in *Papers, Please*. This latter point is evidenced in the one response from a participant who played *Papers, Please* who also expressed this cautionary reception of the game. When asked whether the game conveyed a discernible message, P15, a female 21-year-old business student, responded: "yeah - I need to bring all documents - you can't make the photos of your passport unclear because you make them confused - that's all" (P15). This

example, however, stands against the grain of similar participant responses to *Cart Life* in that the cautionary wisdom being conveyed was not directed towards the actions of the player-character (the inspector) but rather the actions of the game's non-playable characters, in particular, those who were engaged in the more familiar task of crossing a border rather than guarding it. The implication of this is that although it is possible for these types of 'cautionary' interpretations of socially realistic texts to emerge through the process of identifying with characters who are not controlled by the player (indeed, it is possible to imagine responses to film and literature that express a similar attitude. Perhaps the main message of *Bicycle Thieves* (Sica, 1948) is, for some viewers, to ensure they lock up their bikes when unattended), these types of cautionary responses may be more prevalent in interactive texts where the audience member's actions can influence the outcome of the narrative.

In all these cases, the meaning is directed at the actions of individuals rather than the socio-political system being represented in the game. The games are therefore not interpreted as a form of political critique, or even as pessimistic accounts of life's difficulties, but rather as simulations of negative life experiences that aim to teach players life-lessons in a playful and interactive way. The onus of these experiences of disempowerment is placed firmly on the individual, resulting in interpretations of the games that are in stark contrast to the contextualised political values of social realism.

A Medium of Indeterminacy?

The results from the study indicate that the political rhetoric of individual games can indeed have a persuasive influence on players. In particular, the above analyses have shown that the video game medium can excel in encouraging players to look at situations from multiple perspectives, and challenge players' perceptions about where responsibility for widespread social, economic and political disempowerment should be identified. However, the results have also shown there are many ways in which these games can be interpreted by players. As discussed above, a large degree of this semantic indeterminacy is a result of the polysemy that is inherent for all narrative texts. For one participant, the experience of playing as the inspector in *Papers, Please* could be interpreted as a sincere critique of contemporary border control policies and practices. For another, the same experience could be interpreted as a celebration of those working to keep a country safe. As has also been shown, these divergent interpretations can often be identified as products of players' pre-existing worldviews. In several cases, therefore, the participatory nature of the video game medium had a negligible impact on the meaning interpreted by participants. Had they experienced *Cart Life* or *Papers, Please* in a purely linear, non-interactive form, it is highly possible that they would have reached the same interpretation of the text as they did in the study.

In other cases, however, the polyvalence of the video game medium had a discernible influence on participants' interpretations. This has been seen both in cases where participants made in-game choices that significantly influenced the content of their playthrough and in instances where the very knowledge that the narrative events of the game might have occurred differently undermines the

rhetoric of disempowerment encoded within the games. The polyvalence of the medium, therefore, clearly has the potential to increase the indeterminacy of the message being conveyed, which in turn may restrict the possible applications that the medium has as a vehicle for concrete political rhetoric. This casts some doubt on the notion that a socially realistic video game can be an effective tool in the practice of rhetorical persuasion. This aspect of the medium may have been exaggerated by some authors, such as Bogost (2007) and Flannigan (2009), whose works have tended to prioritise the responses of an ideal, and at times highly idiosyncratic, audience over those of a broader range of potential players. If the intention of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* is to persuade players of some of the overlooked inequalities and injustices that take place in contemporary society, then both games engage in risky strategies, evidenced by the fact that even within this relatively small study a number of players exhibited interpretations of the games that were in stark contrast to the critical interpretations presented in Chapter Five. As has also been shown, even players who are receptive to a games' simulated disempowerment can respond in ways that lack direction and an incentive for action.

To conclude at this point that the remediation of social realism for the video game medium is a lost cause as an influential social and political instrument, however, may be misguided. Comparing the relative commercial and critical success of both *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* to the fact that the gameplay offered by these games is both unconventional, visually simple and frequently frustrating, it seems there are aspects of appeal in these games that have not been fully revealed by an analysis of players' interpretations of the mechanistic rhetoric that have been the focus of this chapter. Whilst some of this interest undoubtedly stems from the appeal of artistry

and expanding 'high culture' of indie games, a component that has not yet been discussed fully in relation to these games is the impact and influence of players' emotional experiences may have had on both the appeal of the two games and the meaning that players take away from them. The following chapter examines this aspect of participants' responses in detail, focusing in particular on players' experiences of frustration and character-identification may have resulted in a different type of socio-political influence.

7. Life in Pixels: Simulated Disempowerment and Perceptions of Realism

The previous two chapters discussed how *Cart Life* (Hofmeier, 2010) and *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013) can be seen to place players in a position of simulated disempowerment by remediating the aesthetics of social realism for the video game medium. Moreover, they demonstrated that the simulations constructed by these games are not politically neutral, but present players with contingent perspectives towards the subject matter of modern poverty and the ethics and consequences of strict border control policies. As explored throughout the literature review, scholarly work on film, literature and mass media has placed significant attention on the role that mass media have in contributing to the construction of the worldview of their audiences. Chapters Two and Three demonstrated how these discussions may apply to the concept of realism and a medium's ability to present ideologically informed narrative events as mimetic reflections of reality.

Chapter Two in particular demonstrated that, due primarily to the inevitable process of mediation and alteration that is inherent in media representations, realism is often considered a problematic concept. Following the position of theorists such as Hill (1986), it argued therefore that realism should be regarded less as an assessment of the authenticity of a particular representation and more as an assessment of the aesthetic qualities of the text, the differences between the styles of representation produced in the text and that of other, more mainstream, styles of representations, and the extent to which the aesthetic qualities of the text are consistent with existing traditions of realism. The term realism is not, therefore, an

absolute statement about the authenticity or reliability of the media representation in question, but rather an expression of the particular aesthetic qualities of a media product, whether or not they bear an intrinsic relationship to social reality.

Despite this, however, the extent to which a media representation is perceived by audience members as realistic may have a significant influence on both the meaning that they take away from the text and the emotional intensity that accompanies the received message. As Chapters Two and Three demonstrated, realism can be conveyed in a variety of ways. Whilst graphical realism is a commonly discussed element of game design and delivery in gaming culture, criticism and some areas of academic research, the extent to which video games have utilised and adapted the aesthetics of social realist media has been only rarely considered. This chapter addresses this lack of literature by examining the extent to which the participants involved in this study regarded *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* as realistic representations of social and political reality. In addition to this, the chapter examines how participants' perceptions of the realism conveyed to them in the games may have influenced their overall reception of the games' subject matter.

As with the previous chapter, this analysis is organised according to research themes that were most salient in participants' responses. The first two sections explore key aspects of the games that participants indicated had a positive impact on their perception of their game's realism, exploring in particular how simulations of mundanity, disempowerment and the decentring of the player contribute to a sense of realism. The following two sections develop these ideas by exploring the strategies that participants used to ascertain the extent to which they should view

the games as not only texts with realistic aspects, but credible sources of information about their social and political environments. The final section examines evidence relating to the relationship between participants' perceptions of the games' realism and their reception of the games' social and political rhetoric.

Familiarity, Detail and Struggle

Unlike some forms of reality media, *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* make no direct claim to be accurate representations of reality, nor do they directly place themselves within any of the historical traditions of realist media. *Cart Life* takes place in the fictional, undistinguished American city of Georgetown and features fictional characters who are referred to only by their first names. The game refers to itself as “a retail game for Windows” and does not actively frame itself a realistic representation of reality (Valve Corporation, 2014). *Papers, Please* similarly places itself in a fictional geographical context – the Soviet-style nation of Arstotzka – and actively positions itself within a long tradition of fictional storytelling through its tagline: ‘A Dystopian Document Thriller’ (Pope, 2019). The low-resolution graphics of both games are far removed from the visual realism that has come to dominate the contemporary video game market and the audio is similarly clunky and out-dated.

As discussed in Chapter Two, popular discourse on gaming often emphasises the role that photorealistic graphics have in enhancing players' perception of how realistic a game is. However, given that it is not only visual media that is known for its ability to convey events as more or less realistic but also other forms of representation, such as printed text in the cases of newspaper journalism and literary realism, it is clear that it would be reductive to assume that the technological quality of a game's

graphics is the only determinant of a game's perceived realism. Notably, several reviewers of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* noted the games' realistic qualities despite the fact that both employ low-resolution graphics (Smith, 2012; Hawkins, 2013; Lee, 2013a; O'Mara, 2013; Turi, 2013; Vineaux, 2013). Some participants found that these qualities prevented them from making a connection between the games and reality (P1, P6, P10, P15 and P19). Others, however, expressly described the games as realistic and, in order to justify their claims, identified features that are consistent with the aesthetic qualities of social realism. Among the most salient factors that contributed to participants' perceptions of realism was the way in which the games represented mundane and repetitive activities. *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* are both notable examples of games that attempt to ground players in reality by forcing them to engage in mundane activities, such as brushing one's teeth, eating food and performing repetitive work tasks, in a virtual space. In *Cart Life*, these types of activities are structured according to its *The Sims*-style needs system and gamified work mechanics. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five, players of *Cart Life* must ensure that their character's basic needs are met for them to work productively. Meeting these needs involves purchasing and eating food, getting adequate sleep and, for Vinny and Andrus, taking care of their caffeine and nicotine dependencies. Participants who played this game suggested that these features contributed to the sense of realism it conveyed. P27 indicated that the "the need to be fed [and] the need to be caffeinated" contributed to the game's sense of realism. P28 suggested that other mundane and familiar features of the game – in particular those that involved meeting the costs of living and paying for essential services – contributed to a sense of realism, stating that the game "was like a simulator of a real life I would

say - you had to pay your rent for a flat - you had to eat - you had to pay for the transport”.

Other features that participants found to be realistic included the inclusion of small details and characters who had a degree of ‘depth’. For P6, the inclusion of dates in the user interface of *Papers, Please* contributed to a sense of realism, whilst for P9 the presence of daily newspapers, which indicated that “everyday something new is happening”, contributed to the game’s believability. P7 talked about the detail on passports. Several participants also commented on the role that in-game characters had in making the game appear more realistic. Governing some of these sentiments was the notion of character-depth. It is commonly perceived that character-depth increases the believability of a fictional text and can also serve to heighten the audience’s ability to engage with a narrative. This process of engaging with a text can be identified in the comments of P17, who, when discussing the inclusion of Andrus’ ‘back-story’ in *Cart Life*, indicated that it made them “want to know about this person - this is why it's different from other strategy game[s] I played - this person has a past that [is] kind of more real - yeah it's more real somehow”. The indication that the playable character Andrus had a life outside of the brief space of time that occurs when the player is playing the game therefore appeared to add to the sense of realism afforded by *Cart Life*.

Representations of mundane activities, the inclusion of small details and enhanced character depth can all be factors that can contribute to a sense of realism. It is important to note, however, that such features are not exclusive to indie games and can commonly be found in high-budget AAA titles such as the more recent titles of

the open-world *Grand Theft Auto* series and the hugely popular *Sims* franchise. In these games, players can interact with wide, dynamic worlds and have a high number of options for interactions with different characters, game objects and in-game services and activities. As discussed in Chapter Three, however, AAA games such as these are far removed from the aesthetic demands of social realism, principally because the gameplay offered by these games is directed towards an experience of player empowerment rather than disempowerment. Detail and mundanity in these games is commonly used to enhance the players' sense of freedom, immersion and opportunity. *GTA V* (Rockstar North, 2013), for instance, allows players to engage in the relatively mundane tasks of playing tennis, meditating and shopping for clothes, but offers these activities as supplementary distractions from the product's primary gameplay, which consists largely of car chases, bank heists and shoot-outs. In *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000), players are required to engage in mundane tasks such as eating, sleeping and even paying rent in order to keep their characters active and able to meet the player's chosen objectives. These tasks, however, are relatively easy to complete. Food stocks are automatically replenished and processes such as bathing and sleeping can be made more efficient by purchasing upgraded utilities. In the franchise's more recent iterations player-characters can even be 'upgraded' to make them capable of going without a shower or using the toilet for longer. The rent that players are required to pay is dependent on the net value of their household's wealth but is generally extremely low, whilst promotions at work can be reached very quickly and are accompanied with significant pay rises and bonus payments.

Games from the *Grand Theft Auto* and *The Sims* franchises, therefore, possess elements that are both familiar and mundane, but do not convey the same sense of realism that is evident in games such as *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*. This distinction was astutely expressed by P28 who, when discussing the extent to which *Cart Life* is a realistic game, stated that:

there are some games which are not realistic - naturally realistic -
but they try to be realistic - like Grand Theft Auto [...] you sleep
there as well when you control a person - but it's kind of different -
you don't care about paying the rent - you don't care about food
(P28)

P28's comment indicates a perceived difference between games that possess aspects of realism exclusively in the form of player affordances and levels of detail in some of the more mundane features in the player-character's day-to-day lives and those that provide realism through the simulation of familiar daily struggles. This perceived difference is consistent with what Galloway (2006, p. 73) describes as a distinction between 'realistic-ness and realism' in video game content. According to Galloway: "*realistic-ness and realism are most certainly not the same thing*. If they were the same, realism in gaming would just be a process of counting the polygons and tracing the correspondences" (italics in original).

According to a common thread of thought in scholarship on media realism, a significant contribution to a text's realistic quality is its representation of personal struggles as fundamental aspects of daily living. Galloway makes such a claim in his plea that video game researchers should "turn not to a theory of realism in gaming

as mere realistic representation, but define realist games as those games that reflect critically on the minutia of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama and injustice” (p. 75). That this understanding of struggle as an indicator of a text’s realistic properties also exists among media audiences is strongly evident in some participants’ responses to *Cart Life*. P25, a female 22-year-old language and linguistics student, commented that:

I would say that *Cart Life* is a little bit more realistic than [*The Sims* because of the intensity of the struggles in it - because I sometimes find in Sims that it's really easy - it's a really like easy-breezy care-free [inaudible word] game - I don't know I get that feeling - but here - and as I felt that the characters and mostly the game in its entirety worked a lot more against myself - against me [more] you know than Sims would do - I felt that was more realistic

P25’s comment, therefore, indicates that difficulty, when placed within a familiar social context, can be instrumental to a heightened sense of sense of video game realism. Galloway’s distinction between realistic-ness and realism, in conjunction with P25’s comment, also indicates how players of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* may find the games realistic despite, and perhaps even as a result of, their lack of graphical realism. As discussed in Chapter Five, the visual styles of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* may be seen to contribute to games’ respective political arguments by emphasising the poverty and destitution of their social and economic environments. If this aesthetic of impoverishment can be considered as more realistic than the glossy photorealism of AAA games, it may be that pixelated, low-

resolution graphics can afford a higher sense of realism than the latest blockbusters. As one reviewer of *Cart Life* describes, the game is “compounded by a distinct monochrome pixel art visual style that perfectly complements the mundane nature of life” (Lee, 2013b).

Decentering the Player

As discussed in Chapter One, video game scholars and commentators have made much of the role of interactivity in the video game medium. Chapter Three developed this argument by demonstrating how the interactive nature of the video game medium has repeatedly been utilised by developers to create experiences of empowerment where the player and their character are at the centre of a virtual world. Like the quality of a game’s graphics, however, the level of agency that a game affords its players appears to be able to evoke both a heightened and reduced sense of agency. Within the existing literature on players’ perceptions of realism in video games, there is some evidence that an enhanced level of player agency can increase players’ perceptions of a game’s realism. Ribbens and Malliet (2010) argue that a player’s freedom of choice has a positive impact on players’ perception of realism. Some participants’ comments appear to corroborate this hypothesis. P8 suggested that *Papers, Please* could have been improved, and made to feel more realistic if the player was able to make more choices:

I play the game on my console - it was a Japanese game - and you had a lot of choices and I've played that game 8 or 9 times to see the different choices because if you have choices say something the story would go in a particular way if you had some saying

something was going a different way - so I think you have more control - it's more real

This sentiment, however, appears also to contradict the responses presented above which suggest that it is the simulation of struggle and disempowerment, and therefore by implication a *lack* of control, that contributes to a sense of realism. A number of participants made comments that indicated that their lack of control over the game's social environment contributed to a heightened sense of realism. In particular, participants highlighted conversations in-game conversations where NPCs where overtly hostile towards the player. P7, who played *Papers, Please*, stated that:

I liked the dialogue like the lines they had they were really every-day talk - it wasn't like this one man this one time he wanted me to let him in and I couldn't because his documentation had like discrepancies and he was like 'oh go to hell'

P17, when discussing their playthrough of *Cart Life* similarly stated that:

some technicians in the machinery [are] quite mean - but it's so - it's so real - they would say like 'do you have anything else or do you want to be here still wasting my time?' - the bus ticket seller - quite interesting to see that - his bus ticket seller - I just found it's interesting it's quite real his response 'well you're just wasting my time' or something - that's quite interesting

NPCs behaving in a hostile manner towards the player-controlled character are certainly not exceptional in the video game medium. Virtually all commercially

significant single-player video games are structured around conflict that is represented in terms of violent or otherwise competitive confrontation with non-player characters. In the situations described by P7 and P17, the player is faced with hostility not as a result of acting in ways that are openly anti-social, but simply by performing tasks as mundane as exploring the game space and following the in-game instructions. These types of casual, unprecedented antisocial interactions with NPCs are relatively uncommon in mainstream video games, where players often assume the role of the hero and interact with NPCs in a way that polarises between admiration of the player-character and open hostility and violence. Popular RPGs such as those of the *Elder Scrolls* series, for instance, encourage players to gain the admiration of friendly or neutral non-player characters by completing quests and rising in the ranks of the game-world's various factions. Even in the grittier RPG *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015), the prejudices that NPCs have towards the outcasted player-character can often be nullified by completing quests and performing tasks for the game's inhabitants. This polarised state of social relationships facilitates the players' sense of empowerment in the first case by situating the player in a social context where their character has a high social standing and secondly by placing them in an automatically violent relationship with characters who do not share the passive population's admiration, allowing the player to violently eliminate them if needed or desired. The ultimate effect of these types of character relationships is that the player-character is positioned in the centre of the game's fictional universe: virtually all non-hostile relationships between NPCs and the player-character are positive, whilst interactions with NPCs who are hostile towards the player are purely violent. In both cases, the player

appears to stand at a moral precipice, doing good where people are in need, whilst purging the towns and countryside of any seeming ill-wishers.

The incorporation of much more casual negative interactions with NPCs in *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* effectively compromises this arrangement by frequently positioning the player as neither a hero nor enemy, but simply a nuisance. The interactions described in both P7 and P17's comments occurred in situations where the player was neither the subject of an NPC's adoration, nor the NPC's mortal enemy, but simply an obstacle preventing the NPC from living their lives and meeting their own goals. In the situation described by P7, the player was told to "go to hell" for performing the relatively mundane and algorithmic task of conducting the inspector's daily duties. P17's comment described the even more mundane situations of the player simply interrupting NPCs whilst at work. These situations serve to decentre the player by creating an enhanced sense that the game-world does not revolve around the player-character but is populated by characters living lives that are independent of and unaffected by the player-character's existence.

These comments indicate, therefore, that the decentring of the player can have a positive impact on a player's perception of how realistic a game is. This corroborates an argument made by Jayanth (2016), who suggests that by giving non-player characters more agency (and, as a result, reducing the amount of control possessed by the player), it is possible to create an experience with a heightened degree of realism. According to Jayanth:

We've spent too much time fridging³ girlfriends and little brothers because we're afraid of hurting protagonists. We only dare hurt them by proxy. We think players will be turned off by experiencing a protagonist's loss, or confusion, or stupidity or failure — who wants to play a "loser", a failure? That's something that *seems* true but I don't think it is. In fact, it's winning all the time that seems fake. True immersiveness necessitates loss, failure, pain, frustration.

As Jayanth suggests, this decentering of the player can heighten the degree of immersion that players experience in relation to the game world and, as indicated by P7 and P17's comments, can lead to an enhanced sense of realism.

(Dis)Believing Realism

The participant responses presented above demonstrate that *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* both possess design features that may encourage players to associate the games within the broader tradition of realism in media, film, literature and art. As discussed in Chapter Two, however, the quality of realism is not a guarantee of the authenticity of the relationship between a media text and social reality. Realism is an aesthetic — a way of presenting a situation or narrative in a way that espouses the conventions of escapist mainstream entertainment media. The result of this style of

³ Jayanth is referring to the 'women in refrigerators' narrative trope, where a supporting character is killed, kidnapped or in some other way "depowered" in order to motivate the protagonist to complete their story arc (Simone, 1999).

representation may, as suggested at the beginning of this chapter, serve to convince audience members of the representativeness of the reality presented by the media product. However, as was explored in Chapter One, audiences are not the passive receptacles of mass media, but have an active role in the construction of the meaning they take away from media texts. Accordingly, just because an audience member is able and willing to identify the visual and ludological style of the game as consistent with the aesthetic principles of realism does not mean that they believe that the structures and circumstance represented in the text are accurate portrayals of the real world.

P6 expressed this situation concisely when asked if they felt that their experience with *Papers, Please* caused them to reflect on issues taking place in reality. P6 responded that: "I found it realistic but I didn't quite make an assumption that it can be related to something real". P6 indicated that it may have been the game's lack of graphical realism that prevented them from making a firm connection between the content of the game and the real world. However, participants described a range of additional strategies that they used to determine whether their allocated game's content was an accurate portrayal of reality. The most salient and recurring strategy used by participants was to compare the content of the game with their lived experience. Due perhaps to the possibility that the student-based demographic involved in the study were more familiar with border control than economic difficulty, this was particularly the case for participants who played *Papers, Please*. P8, for instance, had recently visited and volunteered in the now disbanded refugee camp in Calais and drew on their experience of crossing the border back to the United Kingdom to justify their perception that the representation of border control

in *Papers, Please* is consistent with contemporary border control practices in Europe:

It's really really real - because everyone at the border control is like 'yes - no' - and it's the same thing - but it's really - they have a really plain conversation - but they make you feel like you've done something wrong even if you've done - you have no spot on your passport or anything - because when we had to enter the UK from France - cause we were 12 persons - we needed to step of our car and get searched and everything - and we felt like we were some imposters and everything - and they actually started asking us 'what are studying, what are you doing in the UK, why did you come here, this is really you?' - and we were feeling like 'no we're students - we came there to help and now we are going back - and this is all - we don't have any refugees in our car or anything' - but they looked at us like we were criminals (P8)

P9 and P14, a female 19-year-old psychology student, appeared to utilise the same strategy:

their rules and regulations were very similar to what we have now - I mean it just seemed like I was going through passport control at the airport - it seemed quite realistic - and I mean border rules and regulations change all the time so it just seemed normal (P9)

I know it's just a game but it has more of a realistic feel to it because you've - I've experienced it because I've been to airports a

lot of times and I've never been on that side of the situation [the border control staff's side] where you have to go through people's documents and check that they have all the requirements to be able to enter (P14)

Still other participants relied on second-hand knowledge to gauge the game's relationship to reality. P7, for instance, indicated that their school education might have served as a reference point, as they described how the game was: "so eye-opening for me - just made me think about all the history I learned about in high school and stuff". P11 relied on information they had heard from their friends to determine the accuracy of the game's simulation of border control, stating that:

I have a lot of friends who are from like Egypt and they have to pass - like through the border system - so it was kind of related to my friends and what they experienced - what I've heard from them (P11)

Despite this, however, P11 was also conscientious of the limitations of their knowledge about border control practices in contemporary society. When asked if they felt the border control system represented in the game was fair, they responded that:

I think so yeah - well was like they require a lot of things like work papers, ID and a passport as well - I don't think that everywhere they require the same things like in the real world but it was quite fair system - I think so - well I never experience border control - so I can't say if it's true or not you know (P11)

P11's response is an example of some of the ways in which audiences can take a diplomatic approach towards assessing the relationship between a media text and reality. A similar approach can be identified in P10's response to *Papers, Please*. P10 said that they generally didn't find the experience to be realistic, stating that "I was sitting behind a screen – I didn't really feel like I was actually there". However, when asked about how realistic they felt the Arstotzkan government was they stated that "it wasn't like 'oh this is out of order' or 'this is nonsense' – like it could be possible". This idea of 'possibility' might be a clue RE the distinction between perceiving some as realistic and believing that it is real. P10 identified that the situation simulated in *Papers, Please* appeared realistic enough to 'possibly' be an accurate representation of real border control practices, but their reluctance to make any more decisive claims suggests that they lacked the knowledge to make any concrete assertions.

A final way in which participants of the study demonstrated a strategic approach to gauging the extent to which their allocated game was a realistic representation of reality was by comparing the content in the game to that of other media texts. P2 appeared to judge how convincing the representation of *Papers, Please* was on the basis of its coherency with the Cold War thriller films *The Man from U.N.C.L.E* (Ritchie, 2015) and *Bridge of Spies* (Spielberg, 2015), stating that:

You could see checkpoint charlie having that kind of thing going on to be honest with you - specially as I've just watched *Men from U.N.C.L.E* [...] that's sort of you know east meets west - what's the other one - *Bridge of Spies* - very good - that really deals with the

whole - I mean a lot of the things you could argue that game mirrors (P2)

These types of intertextual strategies of identifying realism in a text indicate that whilst audiences may be critical of realism on a case-by-case basis, the tools that they use to ascertain whether a text is realistic or not can be largely constructed on the basis of other forms of media representations. This might indicate that whilst audiences may be critical of realism on a case-by-case basis, if all media they consume coheres with a particular world view or ideology they may be quite easily convinced.

Protecting the Game Space

Video games have developed a reputation for being especially divorced from reality. If we play a game with a group of friends and one of them becomes particularly emotionally involved, we might remind them that it is 'only a game' and has little or no meaning in reality. In academia, there is a popular notion that games are played in a 'magic circle' that is somehow divorced from normal social life (Huizinga, 2014). In 2014, a wave of abuse hit gaming culture. Commonly referred to as the 'GamerGate' controversy, the movement targeted women within the games development and media industries. Much of the abuse that took place over this period was a response to the widening appeal of the video game medium and the broadening of gaming culture. However, an additional factor that routinely fuelled the aggression of GamerGate sympathisers concerned the role that video games have in society, and type of content that is appropriate for the medium. Within the GamerGate movement and in within more mainstream gaming culture there can be

seen a desire to protect video gaming as a space for pure recreation and entertainment.

Whilst a number of participants involved in the study were receptive to the notion that the game they played could serve as a reflection of reality, others were quite strongly resistant to the idea. In some of these cases, for example P6 as described above, this resistance against the possible realism of the game appeared to be rooted in the particular content of the game itself, rather than in the video game medium as a whole. For other participants, however, there appeared to be an innate resistance against the notion that a video game could (or should) strive to achieve a realistic simulation of real-life situations. The reasons behind this attitude varied between participants, but many appeared to be threatened by the concept of 'realistic' video games and preferred to protect the video game space within a realm divorced from reality.

For P9, this anxiety surrounding realism in video games centred on a concern over the psychological and ideological impact of playing video games. They stated that:

I kind of really get submerged into games when I play them - so I think games like Call of Duty and stuff they're just too realistic for me - and it kind of takes out the fun because it's kind of like a serious - I feel like people who play it take it very seriously and because I can get swept into a game I think it would be - it would affect me personally if that makes sense - I don't want to be thinking about shooting an individual person - I'd rather play a game where it's just a fantasy rabbit - rabbit? - like plant or zombie

or something that's not realistic so - they don't have mirrors with society kind of thing (P9)

P9's statement indicates a concern that the perceived effects of playing video games would be heightened if the content of the games was realistic. The participant later clarified what they felt could be the negative effects of player games that encourage players to make connections between the game space and reality, stating that:

I don't really like entertainment where you have to think about it too much after you - or whilst you're playing it - cause you don't want to take away any preconceived notions about something - but I feel like the game could give you them - like subliminally - not on purpose (P9)

Despite this, P9 said both that *Papers, Please* mirrors society and that they enjoyed it, causing them to state that "maybe I do enjoy games that are a bit more realistic than I thought". It's also possible that the game's low-fidelity graphics helped P9 to engage with the more realistic subject matter. P13, for instance, described *Papers, Please* as "pretty believable" but also suggested that had it been more realistic it may have also been harder to enjoy, stating that:

you might not be able to have fun with it if it actually had real countries it would just feel a bit topical compared with just being a bit of fun - if you were at the Russian border or something it wouldn't have the same silly vibe to it that [Arstotzka] - that lends a bit more fun to it even though it still keeps the - it's kind of relatable yeah to real life (P13)

Fictional and humorous content may therefore be a means of making the gameplay of realist video games more palatable for mainstream audiences.

As comments from the study's participants have shown, realism clearly plays an important role in the gameplay experience, and therefore reception, of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*. This chapter has demonstrated that perceptions of realism in these games, and in the video game medium more generally, can be influenced by a wider variety of factors, stemming from the particular aesthetic representation of in-game events and situations, to the way in which the player-character is contextualised within the virtual environment and the lived-experience, beliefs and values that the player brings to the gameplay experience. The culture surrounding video games, as well as popular perceptions of what the medium can and should aspire to achieve, evidently may also influence the degree to which video game players are prepared to accept the realism of a game. What has also become clear, however, is that a player's perception of realism can at times be distinguished from the belief that the game is an accurate representation of reality. In other words, while video game players may be passively receptive of the aesthetic of realism utilised by a game, they may nonetheless be active in comparing the details of the simulation to other sources of information, including information gleaned from their own lived-experience and other texts, before deciding that the game is an accurate representation of reality. Whilst it is likely that this process of reception is common to audiences of a wide variety of media, the association that video games have as an exceptionally escapist medium may have a role in reducing the extent to which players believe in the realism of the simulation, thereby also potentially undermining the critical rhetoric expressed within the game.

8. Frustration and Empathy: Disempowerment and Emotion

The previous chapter demonstrated that there are a number of different ways in which the political rhetoric of games that simulate experiences of disempowerment can be experienced and interpreted by players. In particular, it demonstrated that the polyvalent nature of the medium, in combination with its leading conventions of player-empowerment, can result in highly indifferent and even oppositional readings of the critical political rhetoric identified in Chapter Five. However, as discussed in Chapter One, the reception of a mass media product can extend beyond an audience member's recognition and assimilation of a discrete political message. In recent years, a significant degree of attention has been directed towards the emotional impact of video games on their players. Publications such as Isbister's *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (2016) have attempted to illustrate the emotional appeal of video game content, whilst studies conducted by pedagogical researchers and social psychologists have sought to demonstrate the pro-social impact of empathic video game experiences (Bachen, Hernández-Ramos and Raphael, 2012). As was also discussed in Chapter One, the emotional experiences that audiences have with media texts can be just as sociologically and politically significant as the impact of an audience member's conscious recognition of a text's political rhetoric. In a political climate that some commentators have identified as increasingly "post-truth" (Kalpokas, 2018), it may even be the influence of the emotional rhetoric of a video game (for example a general feeling of empathy and accompanying sense that it is good to be empathic) surpasses that of precise political and social arguments of the types that were explored in Chapters Five and Six.

This chapter will therefore sidestep the overtly political responses that participants expressed as discussed in the previous chapter and instead focuses on participants' emotional reactions towards the games. Following on from the discussion of the social and political significance of emotional responses to media texts presented in Chapter One, however, this chapter will present these emotional responses within a political framework, considering the ideological connotations of how the two games may be seen to teach players how to feel (both about the situations simulated within the games and within a wider array of social contexts) and evaluating the extent to which participants engaged positively towards the ordeals of in-game characters or otherwise. The chapter argues that participants' emotional experiences of the games ranged between three key sentiments: frustration, empathy and apathy.

Frustration and Engagement

Discussion around frustration and boredom may likewise be applied to the study of audience reception of social realism in literature and film. The genre's reaction against the so-called illusionism of mainstream entertainment media often manifests in work that is less accessible than conventional media, regardless of the medium. As discussed in Chapter One, video games are commonly believed to require a greater degree of participation than literature and film. Players must be fully consenting in order to progress through a game. There is some debate over the extent to which traditional mediums, such as literature, are not also participatory. Video games are exceptional, however, in the higher level of cognitive and physical interaction required, on the part of the player, to maintain the interaction between the audience and text. In watching and film or reading a novel, audiences may

choose to engage with a particular sentence or scene in an active and focused manner, but they may equally choose to skip over a segment, proceeding to the next narrative sequence with little active interaction. In a video game, users are often required to make an active cognitive engagement with a game in order to proceed through its content. Unlike a work of social realism in literature or film, therefore, which may be able to convey its rhetoric to audiences with minimal active participation, a video game with a distinct political rhetoric must maintain the continual, active consent of participants in order to convey its procedural rhetoric.

Within the mainstream video game industry, this consent is often gained by making the process of interaction an enjoyable and addicting experience. Very often this is achieved by ensuring that players are able to succeed in progressing through the game and rewarding players when they do so. When considering how the aesthetic values of social realism can be remediated for the video game format, however, the reward systems that maintain players' motivations in conventional games becomes problematic. Almost invariably, the narrative structures of traditional social realist texts incorporate strong elements of tragedy. *I, Daniel Blake* (Loach, 2016) ends with the death of the protagonist, as does *Germany, Year Zero* (Rossellini, 1948). Tragedy is a fundamental aspect of the aesthetic and rhetorical values of social realism. The oppression of the individual under insurmountable social and political forces serves as a case study for broad social injustices. Ang (1985) points out that it is difficult for a text to be critical without entertaining some degree of tragedy (p. 122).

Within film and literature, tragedy is a viable entertainment form (Smuts, 2007). The narrative structure of tragedy, however, does not appear to come naturally to the

video game form. The past forty years of game development has largely followed a model of player empowerment: protagonists in video games, controlled by the player, overcome obstacles and eventually triumph. At times tragedy will strike, in the form of the death of a companion, a drawback in the players' strategy, or simply losing the game. However, these drawbacks are usually temporary, and serve only to increase the sense of victory that is achieved at the completion of the game (Tamer, 2016). Juul (2013, p. 114) goes so far to suggest that tragedy works against the fundamental principles of gameplay.

As discussed in greater depth in Chapter Three, for a video game simulation to authentically recreate the aesthetic and rhetorical principles of social realism, it must expose the player to no small degree of failure and consternation: success should be difficult, if not impossible, and should be met with an equal or greater degree of failure. This model of game design, however, can place significant strain on players, which came across strongly in participant responses to *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*. P18 indicated that their overall experience of *Cart Life* was that of frustration:

When I finally made the bagels I couldn't even sell them because I was too slow at - you have to write out the sentence - and I wasn't putting a full stop on cause I wasn't paying attention to all the little details - I had to read it first which I found really difficult - cause I was like is that an 'X' is it a 'K' I don't know - so then when I finally did write it and then it got to the money and I was like 'I don't understand - what' - cause there's some on some side and some

on the other side - I didn't really understand what was my money
and what was their money - and how to change it and stuff - I
didn't find it very intuitive how to use that bit so - it was really
frustrating

Similar sentiments were expressed by several other participants. P16, a male 20-year-old government student, described being frustrated by Andrus' repeated coughing fits and P17 complained that the game lacked the guidance that they had learned to expect from conventional games. Participants who played *Papers, Please* expressed similar attitudes. When asked to describe their experience of playing the game in a single word, P2 chose the term 'frustrating' due to the fact that there is: "an awful lot to check with that very limited time window so – you feel like you can only keep scraping through the game as opposed to really thriving in it". P7 described finding the process of allocating their hard won earnings the pay for the various needs of the inspector's family members equally stressful, describing that "it annoyed the hell out of me [laughs] because no matter how I tried dividing the money - the family died and I couldn't pay the rent so it was terrible".

It is easy to see, therefore, that the frustrating aspects of these games can serve as deterrents for extended periods of engagement with these games, which in turn is likely to have a significant influence on the impact that any form of encoded political rhetoric has on players. Some participants, such as P18, appeared to be too overwhelmed with the frustration of their experience to consider the rhetoric of the simulation that was the cause of their frustration. Another participant, P3, ended their playthrough of *Papers, Please* significantly earlier than scheduled, despite

being warned that they would receive less financial compensation for their participation, because they felt that an hour was “enough” for them. However, as suggested in Chapter Five, this frustration is an essential aspect of the game’s critical rhetoric. As a result, it seems to be the case that games that attempt to remediate the political and aesthetic values of social realism require their players to be relatively tolerant of frustration in order not only to be receptive to the game’s political rhetoric, but to voluntarily engage with the game for an extended period of time.

Projecting Failure

Whilst a tolerance to the experience of frustration is evidently a key factor in determining whether players of social realist games engage with the game’s encoded political rhetoric, as the study developed it also became clear that where players directed their feelings of frustration had a clear influence over how they interpreted the meaning of the game. For P17, the political meaning of *Cart Life* was comparable to the rags-to-riches rhetoric of conventional business simulation games, which she described she enjoyed because players can “build up your realm - start from scratch and then see the theme park or hospital or restaurants getting bigger and bigger”. P17 likewise indicated that some aspects of the game were difficult and frustrating. Rather than an aspect of the game’s critical rhetoric, however, these features were interpreted as design errors. P17 described the game as “rough [...] like not very well programmed”, referring especially to the lack of information and guidance provided by the user interface. The participant expressed some ambivalence regarding the intentionality and functionality of these features, indicating that some aspects of this design may have been an intentional feature,

designed to “let the player use their brain more”. However, P17’s line of thought appeared to be overall more directed towards the notion that the “old-fashioned” nature of the game’s design were design flaws rather than a reflection of the personal and professional difficulties involved in a single person’s efforts to establish and make a living from a small business. In P17’s case, frustration at the game was directed at the game (and indirectly at the game developer) rather than the economic structure simulated within the game. Their reaction was therefore comparable to Juul’s description of failing the rhythm game *Patapon* (Pyramid and SCE Japan Studio, 2008):

I search for a solution, and I used the fact that many players had experienced the same problem as an argument for attributing my failure to a flaw in the game design, rather than a flaw with my skills. As it happens, we are a self-serving species, more likely to deny responsibility when we fail than when we succeed. A technical term for this is motivational bias, but it is also captured in the observation that 'success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan'. (Juul, 2013, p. 19)

P17’s frustration was directed at the impersonal game system, which may have had a significant influence on their interpretation of the game. For some players to be receptive to the critical rhetoric encoded within these games, it may therefore be important that the cause in-game frustrations are clearly directed towards the social, political and economic structures that are represented within the game to avoid frustration being directed at the game system itself.

The same influence can be identified in participants' attitudes towards in-game characters as it is towards the game system more broadly. P18 indicated that their frustration with the game was at times directed at their chosen playable-character, Vinny, describing that "he just kept getting hungry - and I was just like 'come on Vinny!' - so annoying". P18's attitude towards Vinny, and his economic situation, was largely characterised by a sense of detachment. The participant speculated why they did not feel more empathetic engagement with Vinny, suggesting that part of this may have been due to the black and white visuals and lack of audio dialogue: "he doesn't feel really real - it's just quite - quite removed from it". However, P18 also indicated that part of her lack of empathetic engagement with Vinny may have been part of dissociative strategy to avoid dealing with the game's emotional consequences:

I think just being able to be detached from it makes it less worrying - cause even if you're really into the game you're like 'no I can't lose money - then even if you have nothing at the end you can still step away of it and be like 'okay - that wasn't real'

P18's response indicates that frustration, and the negative themes of the game in general, could serve not only as a deterrent for players' continued engagement with the game, but also for interpretations of the game as an expression of real social conditions. For some participants (P18) *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*'s bare-boned visuals, frustrating gameplay and dreary aesthetics served as obstacles for engaging emotionally in the lives of the in-game characters. These sentiments give an indication of how negative, or un compelling, gameplay experience may have led

participants to adopt a more detached attitude towards the games' protagonist. It is easy to see, based in particular on Juul's reflections in *The Art of Failure* (2013, p. 19), how players of a game may develop frustration, and even hostility, towards aspects of a game system (including the player-character) that prevent them from meeting their prescribed and self-determined goals. Given that the majority of participants in this study (and, perhaps, the majority of video game audiences in general) did not identify as 'gamers' as such and may therefore be less likely to possess the skills and tolerance to failure of more 'hardcore' gamers, it is all the more likely that frustrating or otherwise less-compelling gameplay could have a negative influence on participants' ability to empathically engage with in-game characters. However, this process of what we might term 'projected frustration' may be only one aspect of P18's lack of empathetic engagement with Vinny. By placing these responses within a more in-depth socio-psychological context, it may be possible to gain a greater understanding of how the narratological representation of game characters may also result in a representation of disempowered individuals that is counterproductive to the fostering of player-empathy.

As recounted in Chapter One, and discussed at length by Dunn (2004), the way in which troubled individuals are narratologically represented within a media text can significantly influence how audiences emotionally engage with them and the social issues they represent. Exploring the representations given to female victims of domestic abuse, Dunn pays attention to how levels of discursive agency given to these victims may influence the degree to which their circumstances are met with sympathy. As discussed in Chapter Five, *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* are both notable in the way they flout the conventions of mainstream game design by

restricting the amount of agency players possess in achieving their goals and improving the circumstances of the game characters. Dunn points out that it is often necessary to believe that the individual is in a problematic situation through no fault of their own in order to provoke an empathetic response. In other words, the individual must be narratologically stripped of a large degree of agency in order for a general audience or observer to feel empathy. Such a characterisation is referred to by Dunn as that of the “ideal victim” and is commonly used by charities and human rights advocates to garner aid for support in events such as natural disasters and other humanitarian crises. This representation can, however, also be problematic. In the first case, the construction of the ideal victim can be viewed as morally problematic in that implicit within this process of ‘idealising’ there can be discerned a form of belittlement: by reducing an individual to an ideal victim, the observer potentially undermines the strength and will required to endure, and possibly even surpass their difficulties. At the level of reception, this form of representation possesses an additional problem. Dunn points out that:

In a culture that privileges agency and autonomy, the "victim" identity can become a pejorative, stigmatized identity. This identity may evoke more negative emotions than sympathy, such as pity or contempt (p. 239)

For P18, Vinny’s relative lack of agency, exemplified in particular by his need to eat routinely in order to stay productive, may have pushed his representation into the “stigmatised” ideal victim category. P18’s efforts to help Vinny were thwarted by his

limitations, fostering a degree of frustration towards him rather than increased empathy.

How a victim is narratologically represented can therefore have a significant influence on whether audiences respond empathically towards a character's situation. However, the perception of their game's player-character as entirely lacking in agency was not universally expressed by participants. Like P18, P26 attributed the burden of their difficulties in playing *Cart Life* upon the player-character, in this case Melanie. However, P26's perception of the character was significantly more optimistic and placed a much greater emphasis on the player-character's (and, indirectly, the player's) ability to improve Melanie's economic situation. P26 described the game as "dealing with a real-life problem" but again placed the burden of the situation on their character (Melanie), and ultimately themselves through their control of Melanie, suggesting that the meaning of the game was that:

We need think faster to move one place to other place - to get cart
and to start a new business as soon as possible - we need to
manage time properly - and how we need to manage our money
properly [...] we need to manage that money to start a new
business - that's the message from the game I think

P26 took a far more optimistic approach to Melanie's situation than P18 did to Vinny's situation. Moreover, their repeated use of the plural pronoun "we" to describe their partnership with the player-character suggests that they were able to develop a more empathetic relationship with their avatar. However, P26's

comments also place the responsibility for their success in the game solely on the actions of the player and player-character. The heightened level of agency that P26 attributed to the player-character may, therefore, have been effective in allowing them to develop a more emphatic relationship with Melanie, but this heightened sense of personal responsibility on the part of both Melanie and the player means that the struggles experienced by Melanie cease to have a political dimension and are instead the product of individual decision-making. A comparable sentiment was expressed by P27, who also played *Cart Life* as Melanie. When asked what they felt was the message of the game, P27 said that it was that "there are certain responsibilities in life that you have to take care of multiple things - like family and business". P27's response, though less direct, likewise indicates that they felt that the meaning of the game, and the responsibility for Melanie's difficult circumstances, was directed more towards the Melanie and the player than the unforgiving social and economic context represented in the game.

These responses may suggest that the game medium's emphasis on the agency of the player makes the medium ill-suited to the representation of individuals experiencing disempowerment. Juul (2013, p. 112) suggests this in his description of the "awkwardness" of tragedy in video games as representative of the fact that players are to some degree responsible for the events that occur in video games.

Juul describes that:

The awkwardness of the tragic game ending (the player being responsible for the suffering of the protagonist or for other

negative events) shows that we accept regular, noninteractive tragedy in part because we lack any responsibility for the suffering.

Juul's argument is consistent with the responses provided by P26 and P27 as well as those expressed by P17 and P18 listed above. Each of these participants' responses indicate that the agency that the video game medium provides players may make them ill-disposed to identify the ways in which the player-character's social environment may be the ultimate cause of their problems. Instead of blaming the realistically unsupportive socio-economic system that the player encounters when struggling to manage their player-characters' lives, the interactivity has encouraged these participants to project this emotional discomfort onto either the impersonal, technological game system or the characters themselves.

Fatalism

Although several the responses presented above express a degree of critical reflection of the issues simulated in *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*, this was not always accompanied by a strong consciousness of how particular social and political structures could contribute to this lack of opportunity. P30's response took the form of an undirected, pessimistic fatalism, where the disempowerment and impoverishment of individuals is the result of an abject but inevitable economic order rather than a tangible and contingent social system. Comparable attitudes were identifiable in other responses of participants who played *Cart Life*. P25, who spent time playing as both Vinny and Melanie, described the world in the game as "a universe of struggles", whilst P18, describing the "glum" and "derelict" representation of the game's fictional city summarised their feeling of dismay with

the pessimistic statement “oh – life”. In each of these cases, participants identified what they saw as a negative state of existence in the game’s fictional universe and were able to build a connection between that representation and the world they live in. However, this was not consistently directed towards particular problematic aspects of society or accompanied with an expressed understanding of the causes of the poverty in western economies.

From this point of view, it may be argued that even while a game such as *Cart Life* can be effective in lavishing players with a grim, and by extension critical, view of contemporary western living, the outcome of these experiences is more likely to take the form of a morose fatalism than a drive to instigate or promote change. As indicated in Chapter Two, this fatalistic aesthetic is a staple of the social realist genre – the Italian neo-realists De Sica and Rossellini are famed for creating worlds where misery commonly more misery, and impoverishment has no respite – and whilst this bleak view of the world is a fundamental aspect of the social and political criticism of social realist text, P30, 18 and 25’s reception of *Cart Life* echoes an attitude voiced by film critic and historian Overby (1978), who indicates that many progressive critics of the neo-realist period held the view that “although social problems form the basis of content in many neo-realist films, few are dealt with in any depth; many of them end with either desperate resignation or a sentimental mysticism at odds with the means of expression itself” (p. 10). For some participants, therefore, the lack of concrete analysis of social, political and economic problems in the social realist medium, alongside an abundance of fatalism and hopelessness, may prove just as problematic for video game remediations of the genre as for film texts.

Empathy

As the preceding analyses have demonstrated, despite the strong identification process that video game scholars have lauded for the medium there are a number of reasons why players may find it difficult to emotionally connect with in-game characters experiencing a state of social, political or economic disempowerment. Despite this, however, several participants of the study did profess to engage in a positive emotional engagement with their game's characters. P25 and P29 both described Vinny's situation in *Cart Life* as "sad" and indicated that part of their motivation during their playthroughs were in helping him, P25 stating that "everything about Vinny was sad - and I wanted to make him successful" and P29 recalling that: "by looking at the style I knew it was gonna be a doozy and like very gritty and realistic and very sad for Vinny - I really wanted to help him - to make it up". P27 explicitly stated that they "sympathise[d]" with Melanie and P20 stated that they could empathise with Vinny's economic problems, indicating that he himself, as a student, often struggled to manage money. P5, who played *Papers, Please*, also stated that:

I empathise - his child died - he couldn't save his child - his uncle died - things got a bit expensive for him - because my rent was going up - I don't think I paid the last rent

These sentiments are consistent with an emotional engagement with the characters represented in the game but require some unpacking to understand the broader impact that these emotional responses may have had on the participants' receptions of their allocated game. Whilst empathy often serves as a key component of the

political rhetoric of social realism, however, participants' experiences of empathising with a disempowered fictional character was not always accompanied by an overt consciousness of how the social and political issues represented in the games relate to their own socio-political environments. P20 indicated that they empathised with Vinny, but rather than seeing Vinny as a victim of economic circumstance, placed emphasis on the role that the player had in determining Vinny's financial situation, suggesting that the message of the game was:

[to] be careful with the decisions you take in your life - because you might then not have any money - yeah and they also want to send a message - but - yeah maybe like life could be hard for some certain people so don't be rude with them because they might have problems like depression [...] we might have problems but not as bad as their problems

For P20, therefore, empathy was a discernible element of their emotional experience of playing *Cart Life* but did not contribute to the reception of a coherent political rhetoric in the game's content. Rather, P20's emotional experience may be described as a form of depoliticised empathy: an empathic sentiment was clearly discernible in their response, but did not manifest in a critique of the social and economic system which Vinny found himself in. Whilst the experience of empathy may be a positive outcome of having played the game, it may be the case that this depoliticised empathetic attitude does little to leave an enduring impact on the player's perception of the socio-political issues that are at stake. A comparable argument is made by Bogost (2007) in relation to the browser-based social impact

game *Darfur is Dying* (Take Action Games, 2006), the winning entry of a competition hosted by the television network mtvU to raise awareness of the 2003 war in the Sudanese region of Darfur. Bogost argues that:

Understanding the Darfuri experience by playing *Darfur is Dying* may increase player empathy, but the game does not make a procedural argument for conflict resolution. mtvU might argue that the game fulfills one of its contest goals, to 'raise awareness' about the conflict, but awareness is a tired, ineffectual excuse for the absence of fungible solutions. If the player hopes for perspectives on possible solutions, he must consult materials far beyond the videogame. If it succeeds at all as a political statement, *Darfur is Dying* acts as a kind of videogame billboard for more complex verbal or written rhetorics on the crisis. (p. 96)

In a similar fashion, a player's depoliticised experience of empathy in *Papers, Please* and *Cart Life* may do little to influence their perceptions of border control and poverty.

As demonstrated in Chapter Six, however, the study did also produce clear examples of cases where a political dimension to the games was identified by participants. In several cases, empathy played a strong role in directing the participant towards a politicised reading of their allocated game. For P11, for instance, empathy had a strong role in providing a multi-dimensional, ambivalent perspective on border control. As discussed in Chapter Six, P11 had recently volunteered at a refugee camp in Calais and had developed a degree of hostility towards border control staff as a

result of the experience. However, their experience of playing *Papers, Please* clearly encouraged them to look at the situation of border control from a broader perspective. When asked how they felt about the border inspector's situation, the participant stated that:

I'm like inspector yeah so you're put in his position and how he's feeling - it's not an easy job - obviously - and you're dealing with so many people all the time - it is hard - I wouldn't work in real life this job because it's too hard - well for me and mentally [...] because you're getting tired from people - and because they're all the time coming with the same problems - and sometimes they don't have the same documents that they need and they're mad at you - but it's not your fault - because they have to like read and see what they need to come across the border and - after fighting with you - you know 'you have to let me go and you have to do that' but your job is just to check the documents and let them through or not - so it was quite like putting me in the inspector's position - it was quite hard sometimes when - as I said that situation with the husband and the wife - it was quite hard to don't put the wife with him together - so for me it was like more emotional with like work of inspector than other people - because always feeling in the role probably that's why

At the same time, however, they did not lose sight of their original empathetic attitude towards individuals attempting to cross national borders. When asked

whether they would have felt similarly sympathetic if they had played the game from the perspective of someone trying to cross the border, they stated that:

yeah I think so - it is you know kind of related because you're an inspector and people as well they really want to pass the border or they're terrorists - you don't know that - but if you put in the position of the person who wants to cross the border as well - it is quite the same thing but still you know - I don't know - maybe because I was playing in the inspector role I was feeling more attached to him

P11's response was, therefore, distinctly ambivalent. Based on the interview, it seems that they found themselves unable allocate blame to either the inspector for blocking access to the border or to those attempting to cross the border with invalid or incomplete documentation. Whilst the participant's evident predisposition towards empathy as a way of emotionally connecting with others may have had a significant role in developing this position of ambivalence, their response also indicates that the position they were placed in during the gameplay had a significant impact on where their empathy was primarily directed. The identification process developed during the participant's playthrough, therefore, appeared to have a meaningful influence on how they emotionally and cognitively engaged with the broader issue of border control.

The data presented in this chapter demonstrate that the emotional experience of empathy can be powerful and that video games may be effective tools for encouraging people to empathise with the lives of other, distant people. While it is

possible that experiences of empathy in video game environments may be effective in fostering pro-social attitudes, they do not necessarily carry with them a rhetoric that encourages a reflection of the structural social and political problems that form the basis of inequality and discrimination. Very often in video games empathy is a highly depoliticised experience and simply forms part of the emotional spectacle of the medium. In the cases of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*, there are clear ways in which the experiences of the in-game characters can be seen as political. However, players' perceptions of this may still depend heavily on external factors such as their pre-existing political views. Based on the data collected in this study alone, it is difficult to divine exactly why these participants' interpretations did extend beyond the personal and into the political, as Williams (1977) suggests the social realist genre is apt to do. A possible reason may be simply that these participants' consciousness of social and economic problems did not extend to consider problems such as unemployment, homelessness and poverty as more than just personal problems. Another reason may have been that participants simply accepted these problems as a widespread, inevitable aspect of social living.

Conclusion

The key purpose of this thesis as stated in the introduction has been twofold: firstly, to develop an enhanced understanding of how the reception process functions in players' interactions with video games; and secondly, to explore in detail how players respond to games that adopt the aesthetic and political principles of social realism. Given the enormous complexity of the reception process, the limited scale in which this study has been conducted, and the fact that video game reception remains in its infancy as an academic practice, it would be highly presumptuous to suggest that either of these objectives has been resolved conclusively. However, the study has generated a number of insights that demonstrate the value of audience-reception studies as a theoretical and methodological approach to the study of video games. In addition to this, it has also demonstrated a number of ways in which the design of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* have influenced the reception process, leading to insights that can be extended to the study of other video games and forms of interactive media as well as more traditional media such as film, television and literature. This conclusion will summarise the study's key findings with a focus on how the results may be applied beyond game studies, before discussing ways in which the ideas and themes explored here could be taken forward in subsequent research.

Towards Player-Reception Studies

As recounted in both the introduction and Chapter Four, this thesis has taken as its foundation the notion that the reception process is a key stage in the overall

influence that media products have on a society. What has been demonstrated conclusively in this study is that a player's reception of a video game can be highly variable and is dependent on a number of extra-textual factors, including the lived experience of the audience member, their existing political and social beliefs and their perception of the video game medium. What has also been demonstrated, however, is that the ludological and narratological features of *Cart Life* and *Papers, Papers*, as well as the distinctive features of the video game medium, can have a significant influence over the breadth of responses that are likely to manifest from the interaction. Drawing attention to players' responses in the study of video game influence therefore by no means undermines the significance that the medium has as an instrument of media power, nor does it belittle the value and utility of the textual analysis of video games. Rather, it demonstrates that the study of the meaning conveyed by video games can only be augmented by the inclusion of a range of interpretations in the process of analysis.

A notable contribution that has been made in this study has been its empirical demonstration of the relevance that what have to-date been largely theoretical concepts have in the reception process. Chapter Eight, for instance, demonstrated the powerful role that polyvalence has in not only increasing the breadth of interpretations that are made possible from video game interactions, but also how the player's presumed awareness of the polyvalent nature of the game they are playing can significantly alter the reception process. Being aware that a game's outcome is variable depending on a number of factors, including the choices the player makes in the game, their skill level at completing certain tasks, and potentially random calculations made by the game system, can potentially lead players to

disregard the meaning that is communicated by the outcome that is reached in the game, especially if they considered that outcome to be negative.

It has also been shown that players' existing perceptions of the video game medium can influence their interpretations of polyvalent media. Like all media texts, video games exist in an intertextual environment, with the result being that the way players engage with and gather meaning from them is influenced not only by the content of the game itself, but also by the content of the games that surround it. As a feature that results in the selection of what content is available to the player at a given time, polyvalence has the potential to augment the role that the players' experiences with other texts has in dictating the player's overall perception and reception of the game. Polyvalence creates various unknown outcomes that, though not visible to the player, evidently retain a significant role in how the player interprets the text. The player's intertextual experience can, it appears, fill in these unknown outcomes and thereby undermine the rhetorical force of their experiences of failure.

Whilst these outcomes may serve to be problematic where the design objective of a game is to convey a discrete social or political message, these findings may also serve to present points of resistance in situations where digital media is used as a vehicle for political control. As suggested in the introduction, mass media is becoming increasingly polyvalent. One of the ways in which this has become most evident is in the development of political campaign strategies that utilise social media advertising to target users with algorithmically selected messages that cater to their own demographic profile. This was controversially used in the Vote Leave's

political campaign during the 2016 UK European Union Membership Referendum (BBC News, 2018). According to the BBC, the campaign made use of targeted social media advertising to direct tailored messages to Facebook users based on data collected by the platform. This campaign created a situation where different users of the system could be confronted with different content depending on not their demographic information and but also the way in which they previously have interacted with the system: a user who often interacts with content that related to the environment may, for instance, be targeted with an advert claiming that EU regulations fail to protect the rights and wellbeing of endangered animals.

As the result of the referendum indicated, these campaigns can be effective tools of persuasion. Moreover, they have the potential to take the practice of dog whistle politics, and the contemporary state of widespread political polarisation, to new levels. As this thesis has demonstrated, however, there are ways that the use of polyvalent media as the vehicle of political rhetoric can be resisted. In particular, the study has suggested that the very knowledge of the polyvalence of the medium may act as a point of resistance against the message. Applied to the practice of targeted advertising on social media, it may be that the knowledge of the tactics utilised by political campaigners on social media platforms, coupled with community projects that attempt to share the variety of different ways that campaigners attempt to influence audiences, could be effective in undermining the persuasiveness of these strategies.

The study has also yielded insights into how emotional experiences of interactive media may influence audience interpretations. It has shown in particular how

interactive media can contribute to a heightened character-identification process and how by presenting players with difficult moral choices the video game medium can be utilised to encourage players to recognise the complexity of sensitive political situations and build an empathetic response to multiple, at time opposing, perspectives. This observation has significant connotations for the cultural status of the video game medium and its status as an artistic form of expression. Ambivalence, the state of holding two conflicting opinions in one's mind simultaneously, is commonly a highly prized quality in literary and artistic texts, in particular those associated with the modernist period in literary and art history, and its effective manifestation in video games supports a growing consensus that the video game medium should be afforded its own place in the domain of art and high culture.

More significant than this, however, is the potential that the experience of video game mediated ambivalence may have in resisting political polarisation in society more broadly. The fact that a participant (P11) who felt strongly enough about the global immigration crisis to volunteer to support refugees living in the camps in Calais, France responded to their short playthrough of *Papers, Please* by overcoming their prejudices and building a sympathetic relationship with border control enforcers is an encouraging indication that the medium may have in inciting players to consider alternative perspectives on divisive issues such as immigration and in doing so encourage the development of consensus across political divisions.

Simulating Disempowerment

In addition to demonstrating the benefits and transferability of reception-focused approaches to game studies, the study has also provided insights into the reception-process of social realist media more specifically. It has demonstrated that the genre of social realism can be successfully remediated for the video game medium and in doing so has the potential to express socio-political critique in novel ways which also engage video game players through the mainstream games market. However, the study has also there are a number of obstacles that may prevent audiences from being receptive to a critical political rhetoric in these games, some of which are dependent on the political positions of players, others on general perceptions of the video game medium, and still others on the particular design features of the games. As described above, some of these barriers are general to the function of rhetoric in interactive, polyvalent media. Others, however, are specific to the social realist genre and the experience of simulated disempowerment.

The study revealed insights into how video game players assess the realism of the games they play, and how this might influence the reception process. It identified that whilst for some players graphical realism is an important part of the believability in the reality presented by a game, it is only one of several factors that influences players' perceptions of video game realism. Other factors that influence players' perceptions of realism involve features that are consistent with the tradition of social realism in other media, such as the inclusion of mundane day-to-day life details, familiar settings and an overall decentering of the player-character as the game world's primary source of action and agency. The interviews with participants also indicated that realism may be an important factor in their emotional

engagement with the game characters and overall reception of a game's social and political rhetoric.

Whilst these findings may be equally applicable to social realism in traditional media as they are to video games, the study also suggested that the tragic narrative arcs that are characteristic of social realism can elicit a different range of emotional responses in video games than in traditional media. In particular, the heightened level of agency that video games afford players can result in the experience of pathos being overwhelmed by the personal feelings of frustration that they have upon struggling to meet the game's goals. In these circumstances, it appears that the video game medium's emphasis on the agency of the player undermines the state of distributed agency that is necessary in order to demonstrate to audiences how external circumstances can lead individuals into a state of social, political or economic disempowerment. Whether the medium's current emphasis on player agency is an essential feature of the video game medium or is a culturally contingent trend within the contemporary games industry is difficult to determine. As it stands, however, players' expectations of video game experiences can evidently have a significant impact on how they engage with individual games, which may in turn influence their reception of the meaning encoded within the game.

Despite these potential barriers, however, it is clear from a number of participants' comments that games such as *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* may still be effective ways of stimulating discussions around topics such as social mobility and immigration control. It may be that these games have value independently of their ability to convey a distinct political rhetoric. It may in fact be that the ambivalence

and indeterminacy that comes naturally to the medium may make it an exceptionally effective tool for providing players of video games shared experiences that they can then utilise to articulate and discuss their individual points of view. The fact that these types of games and the social realist genre more broadly do not always convey to audiences a discrete social or political message does not, therefore, necessarily mean that they are ineffective platforms for the exploration of serious and complex social problems. Rather, it may be that these games should be regarded as tools which players can use to reflect on their existing attitudes towards the issues explored in the game, consider how the situations represented in the game may be experienced from a different perspective, and communicate these ideas to both other players and their broader social network.

In addition to this, the study has demonstrated how traditional forms of aesthetic design, such as social realism, can be used to better understand the rhetoric and reception of contemporary experiments in video game design. The dominance of empowerment within the video game medium may lead to a perception of video games as essentially escapist entertainment products. However, as both *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please* demonstrate, examining the connections between alternative uses of the medium and traditions of representation in visual and narrative culture can expand the creative applications of video games. Such explorations also provide a means of understanding the characteristic differences between mediums and their influence on the reception process. Video game interactivity provides an effective platform for the exploration of the dynamics of individual empowerment and the restricting influence of broader social and political structures. At the same time, this very interactivity may serve to undermine the social and political meaning conveyed

by these experiments in player agency. Social realism as a discrete video game genre remains in its infancy, but by exploring these early stages of its development much can be learnt about both its limitations and potential and the tradition's role in the market of contemporary media culture.

Future Directions

The themes explored in this thesis could be expanded in a variety of directions using a range of methodologies. The possible avenues that further research could take are virtually limitless and as a result only a select few are discussed here. As an exploratory study into the reception process of video game rhetoric, this project has attempted to generate a better understanding of how video game players interpret the meaning of video games and how particular design features may influence this process. It may be possible to extend this line of enquiry as a larger-scale research project that attempts to measure the likelihood that players of these games have in reaching particular interpretations of the game content. Such a study could be designed as part of the broader goal of determining the potential impact that games that simulate experiences of disempowerment on the political and social beliefs.

Other studies could continue in the qualitative direction established within this project to consider how the reception process functions in interactions between video game players and other types of video games, such as the more conventional games that dominate the popular market or those that have attracted criticism due to their controversial content. Studies into these areas could provide additional insight into the reception process and respond to public anxieties surrounding the perceived role that these games have in cultivating negative behaviours and

particular social attitudes. Comparisons in these studies could be drawn between levels of graphical realism and immersion and the impact that gaming experiences have on players. As has been suggested throughout this conclusion, the findings of this study also have implications for the study of other subject matter and across disciplines. A fruitful way to expand this research may therefore be to extend the methodology conducted here to explore the reception process in audience interactions with other types of interactive media, such as social media, video streaming platforms, interactive film (such as the Netflix production *Bandersnatch* (Slade, 2018)) and experiences delivered via highly immersive virtual and augmented reality technology.

The overarching goals of this thesis have been to demonstrate the merits of an audience-reception approach to game studies and to begin to build an understanding of how the reception process functions during player interactions with games that simulate experiences of disempowerment. Textual analysis remains an essential tool in understanding the role that a media product can have in the proliferation, reinforcement and resistance of common social and political beliefs and can unearth aspects of influence that audience members themselves may be unable to communicate. Procedural approaches to the study of video games such as Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric therefore remain highly effective ways of understanding how meaning is expressed in interactive media and of building a foundational understanding of the ideas and arguments that are encoded in video game content. However, this study has shown that there are clear advantages to incorporating audience responses into the study of video game rhetoric and

influence and that doing so can reveal insights into the audience interactivity that is at the heart of what distinguishes these texts from traditional media.

Whether or not social realism will grow to become a staple of the video game industry remains to be seen. Over the duration of this study several games have been released which have notable similarities to *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*, including *Beholder* (Warm Lamp Games, 2016), *Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You* (Osmotic Studios, 2016), *Beholder 2* (Warm Lamp Games, 2018), *Not Tonight* (PanicBarn, 2018) and *Headliner: NoviNews* (Unbound Creations, 2018). Not all of these games adhere to the principles of social realism to the same extent and *Cart Life* and *Papers, Please*. However, they are consistent in their efforts to disempower players whilst engaging them with contemporary social and political issues. As this study has demonstrated, audience responses to these types of media experiences are by no means consistent. Despite this, however, there remains substantial evidence that these games can be effective ways of enabling and assisting video game players to reflect on and discuss some of the key issues that define the contemporary social and political landscape.

Appendix A: Questionnaires

Questionnaire for participants who played *Cart Life*

1) **Approximately how much time do you spend playing video games per week?**

Hours

2) **Do you consider yourself a gamer?**

a. Yes

b. No

3) **Have you played *Cart Life* before?**

a. Yes

b. No

4) **Had you heard of *Cart Life* before taking part in this study?**

a. Yes

b. No

What types of video games do you most enjoy playing? (circle all that apply)

- a. First-Person Shooters
- b. Platformers
- c. Puzzle Games
- d. 'Indie' Games
- e. Strategy Games
- f. Simulation Games
- g. Retro Games
- h. Role-Playing Games
- i. Sports Games
- j. Other (please state): _____

Questionnaire for participants who played *Papers, Please*

- 1) **Approximately how much time do you spend playing video games per week?**
Hours

- 2) **Do you consider yourself a gamer?**
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

- 3) **Have you played *Papers, Please* before?**
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

- 4) **Had you heard of *Papers, Please* before taking part in this study?**
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

- 5) **Have you had any personal difficult experiences, involving either yourself or someone close to you, with border control?**
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

- 6) **What types of video games do you most enjoy playing? (circle all that apply)**
 - a. First-Person Shooters
 - b. Platformers

- c. Puzzle Games
- d. 'Indie' Games
- e. Strategy Games
- f. Simulation Games
- g. Retro Games
- h. Role-Playing Games
- i. Sports Games
- j. Other (please state): _____

Appendix B: Interview Questions

The interviews conducted in during the study were of a semi-structured nature. The following question sheets were used as guides for the interviewer. However, the precise wording of the questions was not always consistent and the interviews often diverted from the content of the question sheets.

Questions for participants who played Cart Life

Introduction – Briefly explain to the participant the purpose of the study.

Description – Ask the participant to describe the game.

Q1. Can you think of a single word that describes your experience of playing the game?

Q1.1 Why did you choose that word?

Immersion and Enjoyment

Q2. Did you enjoy playing the game?

Q2.1 What aspects of the game in particular did you enjoy?

Q3. Were there any points where you became particularly frustrated or bored?

Q4. Were there any points where you felt particularly nervous or on edge?

Q5. Did the time you spent in your playthrough go quickly or slowly?

Q6. Did you get a sense that you were playing the game well?

Q7. Did you find the game easy or difficult?

Q8. Where there any points in the game where you felt sufficiently rewarded for your work?

Q9. Did you feel that you understood how the reward system worked?

Q10. Did you develop any particular strategies for playing the game?

Q11. Where there any parts of the game that you felt were unfair?

Agency

Q7. Did you make any choices that you believe may have changed the events of the game?

Q7.1 [If yes]: What were those choices?

Q7.2 [If no]: Do you think this lack of agency had an impact on how much you enjoyed the game?

Q8. Overall, how in-control of the situation depicted in the game did you feel?

Personal Experiences

Q9. Did the situation portrayed in the game relate to any experiences you've personally had with managing finances?

Q10. Have you ever had to do a job where you were performing a similar activity to the one you performed in the game?

Q10.1 How would you compare the two experiences (in terms of reward, boredom, frustration or enjoyment)?

Identification

Q11. What were your feelings towards Andrus?

Q11.1 Did you form an emotional attachment?

Q12. Did you feel emotionally connected to or sympathetic towards any of the non-player characters?

Q12.1 Were there any points where you deliberately granted or denied entry to someone you shouldn't have?

Q12.2 Did you ever feel guilty for refusing someone entry?

Q12.3 Which non-player characters are most memorable for you?

Q13. Did you feel emotionally supported by any of the non-player characters?

Q14. Were there any events in the game that made you particularly happy or sad?

Social Realism

Q15. How believable did you find the game?

Q15.1 Do you feel that it realistically conveyed what it may be like to be a newspaper vendor?

Q15.2 Do you think it realistically conveyed the experience of financial difficulty?

Q16. Did the experience make you reflect on society outside of the game?

Q17. Where there any parts of the game that you felt failed to accurately reflect the situation of being a newspaper vendor?

Aesthetics

Q18. How important do you feel that the visuals and audio were to the game experience?

Q19. Do you feel that the visuals and audio encouraged you to perceive the events of the game in a particular way?

Politics

Q15. How did you feel about the city the game is set in?

Q16. How would you describe Andrus' economic situation?

Q17. Did the game cause you to reflect on or change any of your pre-existing beliefs?

Gaming Context

Q18. What kinds of games do you usually play?

Q18.1 Do you have any specific examples?

Q19. Is *Cart Life* very different from the games you usually play?

Q19.1 [If yes]: In what way?

Q19.2 [If no]: What about *Cart Life* is similar to the games you usually play?

Q20. Are there any games you've played that are similar to *Cart Life*?

Motivation

Q21. If someone had told you about this game outside of the context of this study do you think you would have been interested in playing it?

Q21.1 If yes, why? If not, why not?

Questions for participants who played Papers, Please

Description – Ask the participant to describe the game.

Q12. Can you think of a single word that describes your experience of playing the game?

Q12.1 Why did you choose that word?

Immersion and Enjoyment

Q13. Did you enjoy playing the game?

Q13.1 What aspects of the game in particular did you enjoy?

Q14. Were there any points where you became particularly frustrated or bored?

Q15. Were there any points where you felt particularly nervous or on edge?

Q16. Did the time you spent in your playthrough go quickly or slowly?

Q17. Did you get a sense that you were playing the game well?

Q18. Where there any points in the game where you felt sufficiently rewarded for your work?

Q19. Did you feel that you understood how the reward system worked?

Q20. Did you develop any particular strategies for playing the game?

Q21. Where there any parts of the game that you felt were unfair?

Agency

Q20. Did you make any choices that you believe may have changed the events of the game?

Q20.1 [If yes]: What were those choices?

Q20.2 [If no]: Do you think this lack of agency had an impact on how much you enjoyed the game?

Q21. Overall, how in-control of the situation depicted in the game did you feel?

Personal Experiences

Q22. Did the situation portrayed in the game relate to any experiences you've personally had with crossing borders?

Q23. Have you ever had to do a job where you were performing a similar activity to the one you performed in the game?

Q23.1 How would you compare the two experiences (in terms of reward, boredom, frustration or enjoyment)?

Identification

Q24. What were your feelings towards the inspector?

Q24.1 Did you feel an emotional attachment?

Q25. Did you feel emotionally connected to or sympathetic towards any of the non-player characters?

Q25.1 Were there any points where you deliberately granted or denied entry to someone you shouldn't have?

Q25.2 Did you ever feel guilty for refusing someone entry?

Q25.3 Which non-player characters are most memorable for you?

Q26. Did you feel emotionally supported by any of the non-player characters?

Social Realism

Q27. How believable did you find the game? I.e. do you feel that it realistically conveyed what it may be like to lose a young child due to a long-term illness?

Q28. Where there any parts of the game that you felt failed to accurately reflect the situation of being a border-control guard?

Aesthetics

Q29. How important do you feel that the visuals and audio were to the game experience?

Q30. Do you feel that the visuals and audio encouraged you to perceive the events of the game in a particular way?

Politics

Q22. How do you feel about the Arstotzkan government?

Q23. Did the game cause you to reflect on or change any of your pre-existing beliefs?

Q23.1 Did the experience cause you to reconsider your attitudes towards immigration?

Gaming Context

Q24. What kinds of games do you usually play?

Q24.1 Do you have any specific examples?

Q25. Is *Papers, Please* very different from the games you usually play?

Q25.1 [If yes]: In what way?

Q25.2 [If no]: What about *Papers, Please* is similar to the games you usually play?

Q26. Are there any games you've played that are similar to *Papers, Please*?

Motivation

Q27. If someone had told you about this game outside of the context of this study do you think you would have been interested in playing it?

Q27.1 If yes, why? If not, why not?

Appendix C: Ethical Approval



University of Essex

Application for Ethical Approval of Research Involving Human Participants

This application form must be completed for any research involving human participants conducted in or by the University. 'Human participants' are defined as including living human beings, human beings who have recently died (cadavers, human remains and body parts), embryos and fetuses, human tissue and bodily fluids, and human data and records (such as, but not restricted to medical, genetic, financial, personnel, criminal or administrative records and test results including scholastic achievements). Research must not commence until written approval has been received (from departmental Director of Research/Ethics Officer, Faculty Ethics Sub-Committee (ESC) or the University's Ethics Committee). This should be borne in mind when setting a start date for the project. Ethical approval cannot be granted retrospectively and failure to obtain ethical approval prior to data collection will mean that these data cannot be used.

Applications must be made on this form, and submitted electronically, to your departmental Director of Research/Ethics Officer. A signed copy of the form should also be submitted. Applications will be assessed by the Director of Research/Ethics Officer in the first instance, and may then be passed to the ESC, and then to the University's Ethics Committee. A copy of your research proposal and any necessary supporting documentation (e.g. consent form, recruiting materials, etc) should also be attached to this form.

A full copy of the signed application will be retained by the department/school for 6 years following completion of the project. The signed application form cover sheet (two pages) will be sent to the Research Governance and Planning Manager in the REO as Secretary of the University's Ethics Committee.

1. Title of project: Simulating Disempowerment: Perspective-Taking in Independent Video Games

2. The title of your project will be published in the minutes of the University Ethics Committee. If you object, then a reference number will be used in place of the title.
Do you object to the title of your project being published? Yes / No

3. This Project is: Staff Research Project Student Project

4. Principal Investigator(s) (students should also include the name of their supervisor):

Name:	Department:
Ben Turpin (PhD Student)	Sociology
Dr. James Allen-Robertson (Supervisor)	Sociology

5. Proposed start date: 10/10/2016

6. Probable duration: 4-6 months field work

7. Will this project be externally funded?
If Yes, Yes / No

8. What is the source of the funding?

9. If external approval for this research has been given, then only this cover sheet needs to be submitted
External ethics approval obtained (attach evidence of approval) Yes No

Declaration of Principal Investigator:

The information contained in this application, including any accompanying information, is, to the best of my knowledge, complete and correct. I/we have read the University's *Guidelines for Ethical Approval of Research Involving Human Participants* and accept responsibility for the conduct of the procedures set out in this application in accordance with the guidelines, the University's *Statement on Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice* and any other conditions laid down by the University's Ethics Committee. I/we have attempted to identify all risks related to the research that may arise in conducting this research and acknowledge my/our obligations and the rights of the participants.

Signature(s): B. Turpin

Name(s) in block capitals: BEN TURPIN

Date: 14 June 2016

Supervisor's recommendation (Student Projects only):

I have read and approved the quality of both the research proposal and this application.

Supervisor's signature

Outcome:

The departmental Director of Research (DoR) / Ethics Officer (EO) has reviewed this project and considers the methodological/technical aspects of the proposal to be appropriate to the tasks proposed. The DoR / EO considers that the investigator(s) has/have the necessary qualifications, experience and facilities to conduct the research set out in this application, and to deal with any emergencies and contingencies that may arise.

This application falls under Annex B and is approved on behalf of the ESC (2,7,10)

This application is referred to the ESC because it does not fall under Annex B

This application is referred to the ESC because it requires independent scrutiny

Signature(s): Mark L

Name(s) in block capitals: M. C. L. BIRTH

Department: Sociology

Date: 2nd November 2016

The application has been approved by the ESC

The application has not been approved by the ESC

The application is referred to the University Ethics Committee

Signature(s):

Name(s) in block capitals:

Faculty:

Date:

Details of the Project

1. **Brief outline of project** (This should include the purpose or objectives of the research, brief justification, and a summary of methods but should not include theoretical details. It needs to be understandable to a lay person, i.e. in everyday language that is free from jargon, and the reviewer must be able to understand what participants will be asked to do.).

My PhD project explores video games that offer an experience of disempowerment. It will attempt to assess whether games that offer this type of experience have the potential to foster empathy towards victims of real-life social, political, economic and psychological disempowerment. In order to do so I will be inviting participants to each play one of three games that offers an experience of disempowerment and subsequently interview them. The interviews will focus on how participants have emotionally and cognitively responded to the materials presented to them. Game playthroughs and subsequent interviews will be conducted at ESSEXLab, pending approval. The participants' playthrough will be recorded in video form using screen capture software. Participants' in-game behavior may then be assessed in relation to their responses during the interview.

Additional interviews will take place with individuals who have an existing interest in games that provide an experience of disempowerment. The purpose of these interviews will be to gain an understanding of players' motivations for engaging with these types of materials. These interviews will take place online using video communications software.

Participant Details

2. Will the research involve human participants? (indicate as appropriate)

Yes No

3. **Who are they and how will they be recruited?** (If any recruiting materials are to be used, e.g. advertisement or letter of invitation, please provide copies).

The study will use ESSEXLab to host the playthrough interviews. ESSEXLab has their own database of participants and are able to target particular samples. I will request ESSEXLab to target people familiar with video games to take part. I will also request a diverse age-range, although due to issues of consent and in order to ensure that the materials are age-appropriate participants must be at least 18 years.

Participants for online interviews will be recruited informally using mainstream, gaming culture online forums.

Will participants be paid or reimbursed?

ESSEXLab pays participants a £2.50 show up fee. In addition, participants will receive £8 for every hour spent in the lab.

Participants of interviews that take place online will be giving significantly less of their time to the study and will therefore not be financially reimbursed.

4. Could participants be considered:

(a) to be vulnerable (e.g. children, mentally-ill)? Yes / No

(b) to feel obliged to take part in the research? Yes / No

If the answer to either of these is yes, please explain how the participants could be considered vulnerable and why vulnerable participants are necessary for the research.

Informed Consent

5. Will the participant's consent be obtained for involvement in the research orally or in writing?¹
(If in writing, please attach an example of written consent for approval):

Yes No

If in writing, please tick to confirm that you have attached an example of written consent

Consent should be obtained before data is collected. How will consent be obtained and recorded? Who will be giving consent? Please indicate at what stage in the data collection process consent will be obtained. If consent is not possible, explain why.

In the case of the ESSEXLab experiments, consent will be obtained in writing before the experiment begins and after the participant has read their information sheet and been given the opportunity to ask questions. Participants will be aged 18 and over and so will be able to give consent themselves. Completed consent forms will be kept securely by the lead researcher in paper form. An example consent form is attached.

For interviews that take place online, consent will be obtained electronically as a Word document before the interview takes place. Completed consent forms will be kept electronically in a password-protected folder. Participants must be aged 18 or over to take part. An example consent form is attached.

Please attach a participant information sheet where appropriate.

¹ If the participant is not capable of giving informed consent on their own behalf or is below the age of consent, then consent must be obtained from a carer, parent or guardian. However, in the case of incompetent adults, the law in the United Kingdom does not recognize proxy consent by a relative. In addition, the University Ethics Committee is not able to provide ethical approval for such research. It needs to be approved by a Health Research Authority National Research Ethics Service Research Ethics Committee.

Confidentiality / Anonymity

6. If the research generates personal data, describe the arrangements for maintaining anonymity and confidentiality or the reasons for not doing so.

The research project will generate a limited amount of personal data in the form of consent forms, questionnaires and interview recordings and transcripts. Questionnaire data and interview recordings and transcripts will be stored digitally in an NVivo project. When the data is digitised participants will be allocated an anonymous ID number to match their questionnaire to their interview recording and transcript. In case follow-up interviews would prove beneficial, the anonymous ID number will be recorded on participant consent forms. Data that is used in research publications (including the thesis) will be completely anonymous. In publications where it becomes necessary to refer to a participant by name, a pseudonym will be used.

Data Access, Storage and Security

7. Describe the arrangements for storing and maintaining the security of any personal data collected as part of the project. Please provide details of those who will have access to the data.

Personal data generated in the research will only be accessible by the lead researcher. Consent forms will be scanned and stored in a password protected file. Paper copies will be kept securely at the researcher's place of residence. Interview recordings and transcripts will be stored in a password protected NVivo project. Video recordings of participant gameplay will be stored on an external hard-drive and named with the relevant participant's anonymous ID.

Paper copies of participant surveys will be destroyed. Interviews conducted online will be recorded in audio format and will also be stored in a password protected NVivo project.

It is a requirement of the Data Protection Act 1998 to ensure individuals are aware of how information about them will be managed. Please tick the box to confirm that participants will be informed of the data access, storage and security arrangements described above. If relevant, it is appropriate for this to be done via the participant information sheet

Further guidance about the collection of personal data for research purposes and compliance with the Data Protection Act can be accessed at the following weblink. Please tick the box to confirm that you have read this guidance (http://www.essex.ac.uk/records_management/policies/data_protection_and_research.aspx)

Risk and Risk Management²

8. Are there any potential risks (e.g. physical, psychological, social, legal or economic) to participants or subjects associated with the proposed research?

Yes No

If Yes,

Please provide full details of the potential risks and explain what risk management procedures will be put in place to minimise the risks:

² Advice on risk assessment is available from the University's Health and Safety Advisers (email safety@essex.ac.uk; tel 2944) and on the University's website at www.essex.ac.uk/health-safety/risk/default.aspx.

The games under study portray events that some, in particular those with experiences that relate to life-threatening illness, immigration and poverty, may find distressing. Participants will be given an indication of the subject matter of the game they have been allocated before the playthrough takes place, giving them the opportunity to withdraw if necessary. At the beginning of the experiment participants will be able to ask questions about the research materials and will be reminded that they can withdraw from the experiment at any time without penalty. At the midway point of the playthrough participants will be briefly interrupted to ascertain whether or not they are comfortable to continue with the experiment. At the end of the playthrough participants will be asked if they are happy to continue with the interview and reminded, as before, that they will not suffer any penalties if they choose to withdraw.

9. Are there any potential risks to researchers as a consequence of undertaking this proposal that are greater than those encountered in normal day-to-day life?

Yes No

If Yes,

Please provide full details and explain what risk management procedures will be put in place to minimise the risks:

10. Will the research involve individuals below the age of 18 or individuals of 18 years and over with a limited capacity to give informed consent?

Yes No

If Yes, a Disclosure and Barring Service disclosure (DBS check) may be required.³

11. Are there any other ethical issues that have not been addressed which you would wish to bring to the attention of the Faculty Ethics Sub-Committee and/or University Ethics Committee.

³ Advice on the Disclosure and Barring Service and requirement for checks is available: (1) for staff from Employment Compliance Manager in Human Resources (email lauren@essex.ac.uk; tel 3506) and on the University's website at <http://www.essex.ac.uk/hr/policies/docs/CRBdocumentpolicy.pdf>; (2) for students from the University's Academic Section.

None



ESSEXLab

Consent form

The purpose of this study is to get an indication on how people respond to particular types of video games. In the study, you will be asked to play an allocated video game for between 90 and 120 minutes. After this you will be asked to attend an interview during which you will be asked questions about your experience. The interview should last no longer than 30 minutes. Your participation in this study may take up to 3 hours overall. If you have any questions about the study, they will be answered for you.

For your participation in the study, you will receive a £4 show up fee, plus additional earnings as described in the instructions. Show up fee and participation earnings are paid at the end of the experiment.

Your participation in this study is purely voluntary, and you may withdraw your participation or your data at any time without any penalty to you.

The interview will be recorded in audio format and will subsequently be transcribed using a word-processor. In addition, a video of your playthrough will be recorded using screen-capture software. Your data will be kept secure and completely confidential by the researcher. Your personal information will not be stored with the data and will be accessible only by the researcher.

If you have any questions, you can contact the researcher: Ben Turpin, bturpi@essex.ac.uk.

By signing I indicate that I have read the description of this study, my questions have been answered, and I give my consent to participate.

Signature: _____

Name (printed): _____

Date: _____

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