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# Video Games, Influence, and Identification: The Perpetuation of Culture Through Digital Worlds

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VIDEO GAMES, INFLUENCE, AND IDENTIFICATION:  
THE PERPETUATION OF CULTURE THROUGH DIGITAL WORLDS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Steven P. Zwier

May 2019

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2019

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Approved March 29, 2019

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## ABSTRACT

### VIDEO GAMES, INFLUENCE, AND IDENTIFICATION: THE PERPETUATION OF CULTURE THROUGH DIGITAL WORLDS

By

Steven P. Zwier

May 2019

Dissertation supervised by Richard Thames

Video games, through their widespread popularity and appeal, transmit meaningful ideas, beliefs, and attitudes via the use of digital worlds, narratives, characters, and play. Play has always held a key role in human life, but the video game medium accentuates and accelerates the reach and impact of play on human users. Ellul's philosophy of social propaganda and Burke's rhetorical theory each offer important implications to the persuasiveness of video games; however, when placed in conversation with one another, the union of Ellul and Burke leads to a more complete understanding of how video games have such an effect and what can be done when complications are found. That video games are influential is not troubling, but it is worth exploring the ways in which video games are changing players' actions, attitudes, and ideals through covert persuasion. Video games have the capacity and potency to transmit and instill

prejudicial attitudes in players through covert persuasion, and these attitudes can lead to destructive actions. Many groups suffer from stereotypical depictions in video games, but one particular group under threat from the video game industry in the current political climate of the United States are Hispanic and Latino populations and cultures. If video games have the power to spread prejudice, then they also have the power to correct those problematic attitudes.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last four decades, the multibillion dollar video game industry has permeated popular culture and become deeply important in the lives of many people. The ubiquity of video games in the current world demands interdisciplinary academic conversations. Today, video games play an important role in the creation, maintenance, and modification of society, culture, and personal identity. Video games convey messages densely packed with persuasive elements to their users, whether intentionally or not. It is important to study the medium of video games through a rhetorical lens in order to understand the implications that they have on individual players and cultural issues.

While many are joining the academic conversation about video games, few study video games from a predominantly rhetorical perspective, Bogost (2007), Anderson (2017), and McAllister (2004) being notable exceptions. The relatively new study into the rhetoric of video games leaves much more work to do. Rhetorical theory reveals many important implications in the discussion of the persuasive effects of video games. Jacques Ellul, a French philosopher and major thinker in the field of media ecology, establishes a unique manner of considering the force of technology and its many possible effects on human life in his philosophy of propaganda. Furthermore, Kenneth Burke, a primary rhetorician and scholar in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, provides an understanding of the ways in which persuasion functions and the overall power of language. The scholarly connections between Ellul and Burke provide a framework to understand, analyze, and critique the persuasive power of video games.

This project seeks to answer the question: How are video games changing the world? Specifically, *how* do video games have such persuasive power and *what* are the

personal and cultural effects of their use? Entire teams of scholars from many fields study the effects of video games in a variety of issues, such as violence, addiction, education, utility, and social change. Scholarship outside the rhetorical discipline often neglects the question of how video games actually affect the issues above. The rhetoric-focused questioning of the how and what of video game persuasion responds to a scholarly and cultural need to better understand the massive effect of the video game medium. The union of Burke and Ellul generates a unique perspective through which to ask these questions and seek valuable answers. This project lays a theoretical framework of the covert persuasive power of video games and then explores, through a case study, the popular video game depictions of the Hispanic and Latino minority group to (1) elucidate the persuasiveness of video games, (2) observe the ways in which video games have already been persuasively used, and (3) to raise awareness of the positive and negative effects that video games, understood as cultural agents-of-change, can have.

This introduction will offer initial discussion into the necessary subject matter as well as help to set the stage for the full project. First, the major scholarly trends in the study of video games will be discussed for both their relevance and also to reveal the current gap in the conversation on the persuasiveness of video games. Second, a brief theoretical overview of the major works of Jacques Ellul and Kenneth Burke will inform the overall approach and perspective of this project's investigation. Third, the overarching questions and concerns of this project will be discussed in light of the theoretical overview, pointing to a truncated argument for the entire project in the fourth section. The introduction will end with a chapter overview.

## **Guiding Question and Rationale**

Video games are a media giant. According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), over 65% of United States' households own a video game console, a computing device dedicated to playing games (Entertainment Software Association, 2017). This number is staggering, but it becomes more so when one begins to consider the ubiquity of mobile games (cell phones, tablets, etc.), computer and browser based games, video arcades (such as ChuckE Cheese or Dave & Busters), and one of the newest technological trends, virtual reality devices. Video games are everywhere in the modern, developed world. Many people spend large portions of their free time and money exploring the virtual worlds created by video games, engaging in social aspects, and engaging with the content of games in meaningful ways. Video games have an enormous power to communicate with the world.

Video games change culture. From early on, video games changed local culture and community. While the early years of the video game medium (1960s) were a fringe hobby, the 1970s and 1980s saw an important cultural transition of video games into the public sphere. T.L. Taylor (2012) points to the ways that video games changed youth culture, writing "from the start, computer game players seemed drawn to not only their interaction with the machine but to the competitive space against one another it could facilitate" (p. 3). Taylor points to the importance of competition in the growth of video game popularity, but also subtly recognizes the public ramifications of the increasing prevalence of video games in public places. Through the 1990s and 2000s, video games continued to grow in popularity, technological advancement, and industry strength. The introduction of multiplayer gaming via the internet in the 2000s facilitated the rapid

growth and expansion of the competitive video game scene created in the arcades, as the world's best video game players could compete on a global scale simultaneously.

Throughout the late 2000s and the 2010s, video games have become one of the most influential platforms for digital entertainment with the advent of e-sports (competitive video game tournaments). The cultural impact of video games, however, extends beyond “video game culture.”

In light of their popularity, power, and reach, what are the ways in which video games are changing the world? This question, at its base, emerges continually in video game research. Video games and video game effects have been studied for addiction, aggression, reclusion and other social habits, education, simulation and training, brain development, human creativity, and more. In addition to this, there has been some conversation surrounding the impact of video games on culture itself, particularly in terms of its personal/psychological, political, and social powers.

Video games can be, and have been, used for good - for the betterment of society. Outside of the essential benefit of playing on the human condition (Huizinga, 2016), video games in particular have often been used for good in education and simulation/training. Schools have begun to incorporate various video games into the curriculum to help students learn particular skills in a more engaging manner, such as with Math Blaster or Reader Rabbit (Bogost, 2011, p. 145). Various branches of the military have been using video games for decades, for instance in the Air Force as flight training or the Army in military tactics and squad mechanics (Stillwell, 2016). While simulation software and games have been used in aviation for decades to help pilots train without placing their own lives in danger and militaries around the world have used video

game simulations to ready the troops for war, other forms of simulation are becoming more and more popular. Bogost (2011) argues that the positive habits created by video games translate into real-life action in stressful situations, referencing specifically *HumanSim*, “a sophisticated medical simulation for health professionals to try out unusual scenarios” (p. 144). Video games are performing important educational and training functions for people of all ages, from learning simple math to performing complex surgery.

The educational and persuasive functions of video games mentioned above are all incorporated intentionally, with the purpose of helping people to develop skills, gain competence at performing certain tasks, and also enjoy the process. It is not a far leap, however, to question whether video games may have an effect on the players in ways that are not intended by the game developers. Rarely, outside of studies of violence and addiction, is it asked whether the content of video games has unintended consequences. If video games are effective at intentional persuasion, then they must also have a potential persuasive impact on development decisions that were less intentional, or even unintentional. Thus, the question as to the impact of video games on culture must already be expanded to include both intentional and unintentional effects. Ultimately, what makes the unintentional effects more important to question is that they are, by definition, sent to the public without careful consideration as to the personal consequences and societal ramifications of such issues. It is crucial to question, observe, understand, analyze, and critique the ways in which video games may be unintentionally effecting personal, communal, cultural, and societal change.

A primary question emerges: *How* do video games have such persuasive power and *what* are the personal and cultural effects of their use? To answer this question about video games, it is important to begin with a broader understanding of the ways in which any form of communication media, particularly mass media, can fulfil these purposes. According to McLuhan (1994), “games are popular art, collective, social *reactions* to the main drive or action of any culture” (p. 235). The evolution of media has presented alternate modes of understanding otherness. Perhaps the most memorable instances of media depictions of otherness stem from wartime propaganda films, made popular in WWII from both the Axis and Allied sides of the war. In these films, the enemy is depicted as evil, even less-than-human. Since then, particularly with visual media such as film, television, and the internet, particular attitudes have been promoting specific beliefs and further propagating the ‘us-vs-them’ mentality.

The 2016 presidential election revealed the need to consider how popular forms of media, including video games, are representing Hispanic and Latino populations. One of the key elements to the depiction of these populations is in the underrepresentation of them altogether – and the representations that do exist further display insensitive, insulting stereotypes, such as those dealing with poverty, violence, laziness, poor parenting, alcoholism, and, specifically in the United States, a conflation of all Hispanic and Latino culture into a simplistic understanding of Mexican culture. In video games, this problem is even more pronounced. There are merely a handful of games that even make the claim to have Hispanic or Latino characters, and even less when you consider the characters that actually exemplify a culture in any way (Lavandier, 2016). In sum, the majority of video game depictions of Hispanic or Latino people are often stereotypical.

What are the causes behind this lack of meaningful, non-stereotypical Hispanic and Latino characters in video games? The lack makes financial sense when one considers the video game market. The biggest markets for video games are Caucasian and Asian people, and video game development studios are often built around those groups. It is important to acknowledge the racial demographics of the video game market, however, it must not be ignored that the cultural depictions within video games have a significant impact on the players, and that those players go out into the real world with these specific attitudes and beliefs. Ultimately, this project asks: What are the consequences of video game depictions of minorities and stereotyping, particularly surrounding Hispanic and Latino populations?

This question matters for video game developers, players, scholars, and for the world. This project argues that the existence and prevalence of covert persuasion in video games is a serious issue. One of the underlying characteristics of the video game medium is that in the creation of digital worlds, certain shortcuts are taken, and these shortcuts can be problematic when they involve stereotypical characterization of people from other cultures. This project highlights just one instance of covert persuasion in the video game industry, but it also provides future researchers with a toolset for continuing to unpack the persuasiveness of the video game medium. Video games are indeed a persuasive tool, but they can be purveyors both for good and for evil.

### **An Overview of the Video Game Medium**

While video games have only been around for less than half a century, human beings have been engaged in meaningful acts of play and games for all of human history.

In recent years, scholarship on play and video games have risen to new levels of popularity and importance. Many scholars have taken new and interesting approaches to ludology, the study of play and games, and applied their respective specialties. The key trends in current video game studies include, but are not limited to, game and play theory, game and media effects, genre and categorization of games, educational games, the psychology of games, the cultural impact of games, and the persuasion of games; however, there are relatively few scholars dealing with the persuasion of video games from a strictly rhetorical standpoint. Rhetorical theory does not have a monopoly on the study of persuasion, but it does offer the best and most comprehensive pathway to understanding persuasion and human communication. This section will construct a brief narrative of many of the relevant areas of study in order to better understand the background for asking the question: How are video games changing the world?

Video games are a digital medium with the primary purpose of facilitating human play. There are many ways in which video games are a unique medium, but they can best be understood through a perspective that appreciates their importance as a modern extension of the vast human history of play. In that light, video games are a product of the technological advancements made over the last 100 years, but they also share much in common with some of the earliest human activities. Video games are a unique moment in human history, because the play itself is done within a fantasy/virtual world, rather than in reality. Where video games become unique in the history of play is in their ability to first permeate and then attend to the play of the masses. Today, video games are ubiquitous.



The foundational work in the field of ludology is Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1949). Despite writing decades before video games were created, Huizinga turns his attention to larger and theoretical aspects of human play, crafting a comprehensive understanding of play and its characteristics. Ultimately, he argues that play is one of the essential characteristics of human beings, and that play necessarily preexists culture and society (p. 1, 196). Huizinga's key assumptions include the ideas that play is voluntary, rule-based, meaningful, and based in human imagination and creativity. Huizinga's interpretation and understanding of play provides the foundation of ludology and points to the overall importance of human playing. In addition, Huizinga's thinking predicts some of the ways in which modern day video games have such an important cultural role to play.

One of the roles held by video games in the modern world is that they easily and powerfully fulfill the human need for play. Jane McGonigal (2011), in *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make us Better and how they can Change the World*, extends the work of Huizinga, further defining the traits of games in general, and pointing to how video games function in terms of their role as a medium of play. Mark Wolf (2001) explores these trends further, comparing the medium of video games to other popular technological media, such as film and television. He claims that, when compared to these other media, "the video game player is even more active, making sense of the game as well as causing and reacting to the events depicted" (p. 3). Wolf presents a fairly comprehensive case in defining, limiting, and accentuating important characteristics of the video game medium. Wolf establishes a working vocabulary for dealing with video games in terms of space, time, narrative, genre, and adding to Wolf, Rebecca Tews

(2001) constructs a case for a Jungian theory of video games in which the games transport the user to an alternative reality.

Video games tell stories within a digital space. Digital, in the most basic sense, is the term used to describe a media that functions through representations of numerical code, such as 1s and 0s. Vincent Miller's (2011) *Understanding Digital Culture* explores the key elements of digital media, from automation to cultural narratives and virtual reality. Ultimately, he points to the importance of video games in terms of narratives, play, and simulation. While arguing that narrative is often incidental to video games, narrative is an unnecessary component of play, as opposed to rules, some foreseeable end, and the players' ability to make meaningful choices (p. 40-42). Miller also explicates the complex nature between play and virtual reality, finding a reconnect to corporeity or perceived presence that is traditionally lost by the video game media.

Despite the consensus that video games can be classified as their own medium, they only function through an amalgamation of various other mediums and technological advancements. According to Ruggill and McAllister (2011), "the computer game is quintessentially transdisciplinary" (p. 3). The transdisciplinary nature of the video game medium contributes to the widespread nature of video game scholarship. While all video game scholarship is built on the ideas shared above in terms of ludology and media, the extent of topics discussed by video game scholars are vast and far between. The largest area of video game research stems from psychological approaches to analyze the effects that video games have on individual people.

One of the most well-known scholars to study the psychology of video games in both academic and lay-audiences is Jamie Madigan (2016), author of *Getting Gamers:*

*The psychology of Video Games and Their Impact on the People who Play Them* and founder/host of the *Psychology of Games* podcast, where video game scholars from multiple disciplines discuss the major issues in game studies and the future of video games in general. Madigan splits his analysis into four categories: gamers (people who play games), developers (people who make games), retailers (people who sell games), and finally the games themselves. This approach provides an extremely effective way to ask a multitude of questions and discover that at different points along the way of making/selling/playing that there are also different effects. His inclusion of deindividuation, or “reduced social accountability and reduced self-monitoring” provides one of the most glaring problems with the video game medium today, as it removes many of the important components of the corporality of play as it has been understood throughout history (p. 12).

Whereas the psychological perspective can offer much to a project informed by rhetoric, many of the questions that psychologists ask in terms of video games remain outside of the purview of the field of communication. The best example of this is the popular question: do video games make people violent? While this is a common view held and shared by popular media outlets, particularly in times immediately following a violent attack, the general consensus among psychologists is that there is little to no evidence that video games themselves cause violence. A causal link between playing video games and taking violent actions has yet to be proven.

The other main efforts of psychological investigations into video games deal with addiction. In a similar fashion as with video games and violence, there is no one clear consensus among psychologists as to the addictive qualities of video games. Clinically

confirmed addiction has yet to be established as caused by playing video games (Bean, Nielsen, van Rooij, & Ferguson, 2017). That said, however, certainly video games tend to promote suspect and questionable behaviors in people who play them heavily, such as social isolation, lack of exercise, poor dieting, and problems with personal hygiene. While the psychological perspectives are worth studying and indeed receive much political and academic attention, the psychological stance ultimately shies away from questions of cultural trends and the messages of the games themselves.

To better understand the games themselves, there must be a framework through which to understand the vast variety of games that exist on the current market. One of the leading issues in game studies is how to delineate between types, or genres, of games. On the most basic level, traditionally games have been understood in terms of genre by the look and feel of the final product. Games have been put into many categories such as platformer, simulation, action, adventure, role-playing game (RPG), first-person/third-person shooter (FPS), fighting, stealth, survival, horror, text, massive multiplayer online (MMO), real-time strategy (RTS), wargame, racing, sports, etc. A complete list of game genres would most likely include hundreds of items, but as the genres are continually in flux, interweaving, and new ones are generated often, it is impossible to create such a list. What can be done, however, is to generate a new list that organizes video games based on their purpose, rather than their visual or play style. This is what many top scholars in the field have turned to in order to solve the lack of consistent definitional terms across the board.

The main video game genres according to purpose are advergaming, art, casual, education, narrative, exergaming, and serious game. Some of these, such as advergaming,

education, and serious game, will play a key role in the main question of this project – additionally, they have received much scholarly attention over the last decade. While Vincent Miller (2011) argues that the narrative study of games often resembles scholarly grasping-at-straws because narrative is “often incidental” within the games themselves (p. 40), scholars such as Jesper Juul (2011) believe that the fictional component in many games make them worth playing to begin with. He still notes, however, that many fictional worlds are necessarily left incomplete due to the developers’ budget and timeline (p. 122). In *A Casual Revolution*, Juul (2010) comments on another of the key genres, the casual game. He records the rise in popularity of casual games, which was propelled further by the simultaneous release of the Nintendo Wii and the ever-growing popularity of mobile gaming with the smart phone and tablet markets. Serious games, according to Madigan (2016), are games designed for purposes other than entertainment (p. xiv). As with serious games, educational games are designed to have a multifaceted purpose, on one hand to educate through information and simulation, and on the other, to engage an audience via a fun and captivating medium. One of the most important genres to this project, Advergaming includes games designed as advertisements or advertisements placed in games, such as the 2008 election where Barack Obama ads were placed in popular EA (Electronic Arts) games. Ian Bogost (2007) writes about these games as procedural rhetoric, or as games intended to persuade an audience via the process of playing, rather than a direct, linguistic message (p. 28).

A category of game that typically does not fit into its own genre is multiplayer and online video games, because these games span genres, but also exist within a social space through the Internet. Pearce and Artemesia (2009), in *Communities of Play*, explore

the dynamic relationship between players and the game-world. Using an online game as their entrance point, *Uru*, they explore the ways that the game itself develops a culture, including its own currency, factions, interactions, and ceremonies. Upon the inevitable removal of game servers due to the expense and age of the game, Pearce and Artemesia notice that the culture established within the game itself was kept alive by the people who had played the game, turning instead to alternative games, internet forums, and even real-life meetup events (p. 280). Gamers create meaningful bonds within and through virtual cultures that can transcend the medium itself.

Perhaps more important than the culture created within games is the cultural change that certain games or genres can bring about within the larger, non-gaming culture. In *Raising the Stakes*, T.L. Taylor (2012) analyzes the growing popularity of e-sports events. E-sports, or electronic sports, are massive in-person events where the top individuals and teams in one's region, nation, or across the world gather together to find out who (or which team) is the best at a particular video game at that given moment. Taylor traces the roots of e-sports to the beginning days of video game playing, such as in the arcade with battles for high scores, but also notes the significant differences in the idea of being present with one another. One of the most enlightening connections between video games and culture rests in the South Korean e-sports scene, where Taylor claims that within Korea, "E-sports has clearly established itself there as a viable leisure and professional activity, weaving together a cultural inclusion of video games with elite competition and spectatorship" (p. 27). Taylor (2009) claims that this kind of play is deeply connected to one's personal abilities, but also one's social networks and local culture (p. 156). In *Play Between Worlds*, Taylor (2009) explores the social dimension of

multiplayer gaming, finding that gamer identities created within an online space can be vastly different than the real-life person, and that video games often include a type of code-switching as players move not just between reality and the virtual world, but between virtual worlds in different games as well. Video games are changing the people who play them and the cultures that they exist in due to their widespread appeal and captivating engagement.

The connections between video games and their ability to shape culture is more apparent in today's world than was first considered throughout the early years of gaming. While they were once on the fringe of popularity, video games now transcend many other forms of media, as well as penetrating aspects of culture that were left untouched for decades. For starters, there have been an increasing number of movies *based-on/in* video games in recent years (Wreck it Ralph (2012), Gamer (2009), Pixels (2015), Assassin's Creed (2016), Prince of Persia (2010), etc.). Video games are reaching new audiences, exemplified with both the rise in mobile gaming, whether handheld console or smart phone/tablet gaming, and the new paths of research in the elderly and play, with systems like the Nintendo Wii and *brain-games* (Juul, 2013). While these examples demonstrate the increasing cultural awareness and acceptance of video games, scholarship has not fully explored the impact of these changes. The best way to explore the impact of these questions is in terms of a rhetorical study of video games, in the messages they share and the worlds they create.

The rhetorical study of video games is crucial to the proper understanding of the persuasive power that video games have on the modern world; however, aside from a few key scholars in recent years, there have been few outstanding publications analyzing

video games and their rhetorical impact on culture. One of the early and foundational writers in video games and rhetoric, Ian Bogost (2007), has already been mentioned above in terms of advergaming. His analysis of procedural rhetoric extends well beyond the intentional attempts at creating games that advertise a particular product or idea. He defines procedural rhetoric as “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures” (p. ix), which unveils the unique power of video games specifically, and games and play in general. Bogost’s procedural rhetoric will be explained further in Chapter One, but his emphasis on the “coded” nature of the digital world opens avenues for rhetorical explorations that are unique to digital creations. Video games, as mainly composed of rules and interactions, have a different persuasive power than television, film, radio, and print.

New voices have emerged recently, highlighting the important connections between video games and rhetorical studies. Sky Anderson (2017), who has focused on many interconnections between video games and rhetoric, is interested in the connection between video games, rhetoric, and embodiment. Likewise, Bond Benton (2013) analyzes the ways in which video games function rhetorically as they socialize the people who play them. To build on the idea of socializing video games, Davisson and Gehm (2014) explore the power of video games in terms of their educational abilities in terms of civic life, claiming that video games can inform and educate their players through simulations in order to make them more able to make real-life decisions based on their gaming experiences.



Ken McAllister (2004), writing from a perspective informed by the writings of Kenneth Burke, believes that video games function dialectically. He claims that “a good deal of the work of computer games is that they are always making and managing meanings” that cooperate, compete, and coopt the thoughts, beliefs, and ideals that gamers have (p. ix). Ultimately, through this lens, McAllister acknowledges the enormous power of video games to make “local, communal, and societal transformations” (p. 116). McAllister is one of the only scholars currently thinking about issues involving video games from a perspective enlightened by Burkean rhetorical theory.

Over the last decade, scholars have begun to notice the problems associated with video game content in terms of social stereotyping and racial prejudice. The overwhelming critical stance of video game scholarship deals strictly with the stereotyping of Middle-Eastern or Arab people groups, often seen in video games as being reduced to “nameless terrorists” and often seen as vile, soulless people (Lemmens 2011). Souri (2007) believes that video games are a prime way of disseminating ideologies, and that video games are “responsible for turning Islam into a death cult ... [with] hate speech” (p. 10). The work and scholarship being done in this area is vital to understanding the power of video games and correcting some of the consequences of particular content within the games themselves, an issue that will be addressed later in this introduction and throughout this project.

The field of game studies, particularly when hand-in-hand with the communication discipline, has provided an informative and necessary approach with which to analyze the persuasive power of video games theoretically, practically, and

critically. Given the trends presented above, there exists a further need to take a rhetorical approach in the analysis and criticism of the video game medium. While scholars have been observing cultural and societal trends for a few years, much is left to be uncovered. This project addresses two key gaps in the literature: (1) Further creating an understanding of the persuasive power of video games through a rhetorical approach, and (2) advancing a critical perspective of stereotyping in video games against the Hispanic and Latino communities, which has received minimal scholarly attention. The perspective created by the union of the rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke and the philosophy of Jacques Ellul is uniquely capable of responding to both of these key gaps simultaneously.

### **Framing and Theoretical Preview**

This project presents a perspective informed by both media ecology and rhetorical theory. While being compatible, media ecology and rhetoric are not identical. Media ecology studies media as environments, focusing on their nature of changing the humans who use them. Media ecologists are concerned with the ways that media and communication technologies change the thought, behavior, and values of human beings. Rhetoric is the study of persuasion. Rhetorical theorists are primarily concerned with impact of persuasion in human communication, message creation, and language use.

Media ecology and rhetorical theory both offer significant thoughts and implications to many aspects of the human condition. Individually, the theoretical frames offered by media ecology and rhetoric begin to answer the questions of this project; however, when put in conversation with one another, their union can shed new light on important issues. Media ecology, focusing on media as environments, has a tendency to

underplay the importance of the messages presented across the medium. Rhetoric, alternatively, fails to prioritize the impact of particular communication mediums on the messages themselves. The union of media ecology and rhetorical theory allows a more comprehensive understanding of the persuasiveness of video games in the modern world.

A rhetorical approach informed by the field of media ecology has the ability to investigate, analyze, and respond to questions of persuasion, culture, and technological advancement because of a theoretical foundation that discounts neither the content nor the medium. The interpretive angle of a perspective based in rhetorical theory is equipped with the capacity to respond to new issues with historically founded theory and wisdom. Media ecology, with its emphasis on how certain media technologies influence their users and cultures, offers significant implications for the impact of technology on the human condition. Rhetoric and media ecology, together, offer an important and unique perspective from which to investigate video games and their cultural effect.

Individual video games must be viewed as rhetorical artifacts. Video games have symbolic meaning larger than their digital (1/0) structure. They have been created by people for a particular audience at a particular time. While video games have become globalized, most video games are targeted at a specific group. Thus, video games offer meaningful messages to players; and, whether intentional or not, players likewise are impacted by the messages. Video games function as epideictic rhetoric, allowing them to have enormous cultural power.

Epideictic rhetoric is one of the three modes of rhetoric, along with forensic and deliberative. The traditional understanding of epideictic rhetoric holds that epideictic deals with issues of praise or blame, often tied to a ceremonial context. Jeffrey Walker

(2000), however, argues that there is a split between the pragmatic (forensic and deliberative, dealing with issues of law and policy) and that of epideictic. Walker argues that ceremonial rhetoric is under the head of the *epideiktikon*, an “amorphous and inclusive” indicator that does continue to deal with issues of praise and blame, though is much more inclusive and comprehensive than the more pragmatic rhetorical elements (Walker, 2000, p. 7). Walker writes: “*Epideiktikon*, in sum, came to include everything that modernity has tended to describe as “literature,” and more, comprised a range of genres much greater and more various than the handful of speech-types identified as *pragmatika*” (p. 7). Additionally, “epideictic discourse reveals itself ... as the central and indeed fundamental mode of rhetoric in human culture” (p. 10). Video games, in this light, function in the modern world as epideictic rhetoric, potently working to create, maintain, modify, and destroy cultural behavior and meaning.

The two major scholarly influencers for this project are Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) and Kenneth Burke (1897-1993), due to their influence in media ecology and rhetoric respectively. Ellul was a French philosopher most well-known for his technological trilogy, or the three books he wrote on the nature of technology and *la Technique*. Ellul was a significant member of the French resistance during World War II, which influenced his theory of technology, persuasion, and propaganda. Ellul is considered a prominent scholar in the field of media ecology, which focuses on the environments that media and technologies create, and how that effects the people who engage with them.

Ellul’s major works center on his idea of *la Technique*, or the essence or spirit of technology. Throughout the technological trilogy, *The Technological Society* (1964), *The Technological System* (1980), and *The Technological Bluff* (1990), he explains

technology via the benefits and consequences, as opposed to the structure and nature of the individual medium. Ellul argues that technology (*la Technique*) is autonomous, effective, and inevitable. The entire trilogy builds to Ellul's argument in the *Bluff*, where he argues that the most problematic characteristic of technology is in its ability to create a sense of safety and security, that all technological advancement makes life inherently better without question, and that if we continue down this path, human beings will begin to lose important aspects of their humanness. Losing oneself within the technological environment is certainly problematic, and when viewed alongside Ellul's philosophy of propaganda, creates a sense of dread when considering the implications of video games and racial stereotypes.

For this project, Ellul's main contribution comes from his philosophy of propaganda, offered in his book, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (originally published in 1962, translated from French in 1965). Within *Propaganda*, Ellul (1973) employs a novel way of considering propaganda and its implications, finding that despite common inclinations to label all propaganda as evil, he instead describes propaganda as a sociological phenomenon after putting aside ethical judgment (p. v, x). Furthermore, Ellul ties propaganda to the scientific world, or a world rooted within the modern scientific system. One of the most interesting aspects of his theorizing, however, is in his discussion of unintentional sociological propaganda. Ellul points to film, specifically to directors, who incorporate specific, meaningful aspects of society and social structure within their films. While Ellul notes the relationship as involving cultural reflection, that films reflect the culture they are a part of, he also finds a component of cultural education or even cultural manipulation. In sum, the unintentional choices made

by content creators has a meaningful impact on the audience, teaching them propriety, decorum, language, and how to live within a particular context.

Like directors and film, video games and their creative teams deploy certain aspects of culture within their games, but some of the unintentional choices further propagate depictions of problematic cultural behaviors and thoughts. Ellul's work allows for a study of the unintentional, sociological propaganda active in the video game industry and its impact on players, culture, and societal ideals.

Kenneth Burke is a primary rhetorician of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His significance rises out of his series of books on rhetorical theory and culture. Burke, in many ways, brought a new and compelling understanding of Aristotelian rhetoric to the modern world. Burke's understanding of rhetoric provides the groundwork through which to explore all matters of human language and life. Burke expanded the reach of rhetoric to new areas with his emphasis on symbolic meaning and human action, arguing that, like Aristotle, in our very essence, humans are language-using animals.

The bulk of Burke's corpus centers on his trilogy/tetralogy of motives (*Rhetoric*, 1950; *Grammar*, 1945; *Symbolic*, unpublished). By reapplying the importance of language use to human beings, Burke (1969b) created in *Rhetoric of Motives* a sense that rhetoric is a tool of socializing and moralizing (p. 39), that it is "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (p. 41). In doing so, he builds a vocabulary for how to address rhetorical, thus human, issues. Identification, which Burke defines as the self attempting to conform with society and communicative norms through images and ideas that are formative (p. 39), exemplifies the persuasive power of certain messages, because perspective is gained by association

with, and through, others. Likewise, however, Burke points to the importance of the negative, arguing that one can as much define something positively, as much as definition can be done by what something is not. Ultimately, Burke's influence elevates the importance of language and persuasion.

Burke's rhetorical theory will play a fundamental role throughout this project, but his main contributions come from *Permanence and Change* and the introduction to *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Burke, in these texts, provides a textured understanding of the nature of rhetoric and how it is deeply connected to, and interconnects, both people and culture. Specifically, in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke writes that there exists a type of human expression that falls in between deliberate and unconscious speech (1969b, p. xiii). This explanation extends Ellul's (1973) sociological, unintentional propaganda and places it firmly under the umbrella of rhetorical theory. As such, Burke is the best resource for rhetorically investigating the issues surrounding unconscious persuasion or unintentional propaganda that is found in video games in the modern world.

Given each of their individual scholarly corpuses, both Burke and Ellul offer significant insight to this project and to the developing field of games studies in general. When viewed in conversation, however, the union of the two has the ability to create a new theoretical framework for understanding the societal implications of the video game industry. Burke and Ellul cooperate to open a new perspective on the importance of unintentional decisions made by people who have a great deal of power over large swaths of the global population.

Ellul's (1973) philosophy of unintentional sociological propaganda describes the way in which video games instill certain beliefs and values into the player. Ellul, thus,

sets the stage for exploring the ways in which video games have engaged in propagandistic aims, and how they have functioned unintentionally as well. Burke's rhetorical standpoint furthers Ellul's argument by explaining how video games can function persuasively through identification. Additionally, Burke's rhetorical theory offers a critical edge to the discussion, because while Ellul points to the unintentional propaganda taking place in popular culture, Burke places the onus on content creators, who have societal power to make people identify with particular viewpoints and attitudes.

Burke and Ellul are both essential to answering the general question: "how are video games changing the world?" and the specific question: "how are video games, in their treatment of minority populations, propagating prejudicial attitudes and ideas?" The implications of these questions, particularly the latter, are troubling. If the video game industry continues to promote the status quo in terms of issues of social justice and racial stereotyping, whether intentionally or not, the world will continue to neglect the rights and benefits of many people. The following section establishes this project's significance and situates the project within the current conversations on video games and race.

## **Significance**

Video games are one of the largest form of media in the modern world. Each year, video games, and the developers behind the games, continue to expand their player base. The ubiquity and popularity of video games solidifies their ability to transmit messages, narratives, and feelings to a widespread, global audience. Video games are, indeed, persuasive. They are used overtly, such as in advergames, but also in less obvious ways, such as in military/tactical shooters. Video games have become a powerful, influential



medium, and there is a growing demand for scholarly attention from a wide variety of disciplines.

From a rhetorical standpoint, video games must be studied for their persuasive power on modern audiences. In cooperation with a media ecological approach, the persuasive element of video games cannot be viewed merely as the messages transmitted by games to players, but rather seen as an environment within which players engage with games. The persuasiveness of video games is pronounced by the defining characteristic of the video game media, interactivity between player and game at the most basic level, and more complex relationships between player-player-game, etc.. Video games create an environment in which players are constantly being persuaded without the explicit realization of the changes or consequences therein.

Overwhelmingly, video games tell the stories of white male protagonists. As each of the cases discussed in Chapter Five involve issues of race, it is important to consider some major scholastic viewpoints surrounding video games, race, and prejudice. Racial questions in video games are certainly not new, but they have mainly focused on two key people groups: Black (including, but not limited to, African American) and Middle-Eastern (most often portrayed as either aggressive antagonists or helpless people in need of a global savior). While questions surrounding Hispanic and Latino people and culture exist in both popular media and the academy, comparatively the research is quite rare. The issue of Hispanic and Latino people and culture in video games will return in Chapter Five, but it is important to consider the current scholarly conversations and the significance of other scholars dealing with the issues of race and video games.

In Ubisoft's 2017 game, *South Park: The Fractured but Whole*, the player is invited to live in the fictional small town of South Park, Colorado as they engage with competing super hero clubs run by the town's children. Upon starting the game, the player is asked to create the character that they will use throughout the game, choosing from clothes, facial features, hair, and skin tone. Of note is the difficulty system built into the game, where the darker skin of the player's avatar, the harder the difficulty of the game. While player's experience of the game might not change much from the "increased difficulty" of having darker skin, the game raises the issues of systemic racism and the experience of minorities in a predominantly white culture. Games studies scholars have been discussing issues of race and games for many years, but it is rare to find such a popular game developed by such a well-known and successful company that exhibits such clear concern for racial issues. Despite its intent toward humor and public satire, *South Park: The Fractured but Whole* still represents an important shift in the perspective of leaders in the video game industry.

Whereas video game scholarship has been discussing race and video games for years, the video game industry often shies away from such conversations. According to Goldberg and Larsson (2015), "games have no strong tradition of engaging with social issues, politics, or the culture that surrounds them" (p. 7). They continue: "Game designers have historically eschewed reality and the present day for the fantastical and imaginary, with light-hearted science fiction, fantasy, and fairy-tale settings as staples of the form" (p. 7). This line of argument certainly explains the culture of the video game industry, but it does not explain or excuse its behavior. Rather than dealing with social issues, video games overwhelmingly promote the status quo, and they often reinforce the

cultural values that often fly under the radar of concern because it is “just the way it is.” In many ways, much of the issues that video games have with race can be seen as a direct result of the gaming culture of meritocracy.

Scholars have been discussing issues of race and video games for decades, but it was not until recent years that the conversation has taken a more definite shape. One of the most prominent contributions along the lines of racial attitudes against Black people is Yang, Lueke, Gibson, and Bushman (2014), who argue that “Black violent video game avatars not only make players more aggressive than do White avatars, they also reinforce stereotypes that Blacks are violent” (p. 1). While their goal is to determine the effect of the race of a player’s avatar in aggression, they find that video games not only are one of the most prevalent stereotyping media, but that by playing games as avatars of different races that it can lead to increased racial negativity particularly in violent games. Thus, while the numbers of minority avatars in video games might be going up, the consequences of how the characters are being portrayed is just as important as their inclusion at all.

Evan Narcisse (2015) also recognizes that when Black people are represented in video games, it is most often in an aggressive or violent way, but furthermore considers the role that video game developers can play in shifting tides of institutional racism in video game culture. Narcisse argues that even though the majority of video games are made by white and Asian developers, and that “there needs to be more black people making video games,” one of the consequences is that the characters that are depicted in popular video games are consistently shallow and poorly designed (p. 57, 60-61). Narcisse points out that it takes more effort to program into a game all of the different

types of skin and hair textures, but that does not mean that developers should not try harder to progress technology and culture toward more equal representation. Ian Shanahan (2015) discusses his experiences playing online video games as he encounters racial attitudes. While not an isolated incident, Shanahan finds that each interaction affects him differently, writing that “it’s strange how much weight the actions of your peers can bring to bear on you, even when your social medium is only a bunch of really fast math on a German server” (p. 24). Shanahan, further noting the “degree of respect that is absent from most ... multiplayer games” does not reference any particular event that causes such consternation, but rather an environment that has condoned such behavior since its infancy (p. 28). Video game culture, as much of the popular culture it is a part of, has powerful hegemonic tendencies.

In a similar vein, Kishonna Gray (2014) considers the experience of minority players in online spaces. Gray claims that in the hegemonic spaces of the video game industry, players of minority status (racial or gender based) are drastically affected by interactions with other players online, but overwhelmingly these interactions are demeaning, insulting, and overall troubling. She writes:

Video games, in disseminating stereotypes, in offering bodies and spaces of color as sites of play, and in affirming dominant ideas about poverty, unemployment, crime, and war, contribute to the consolidation of white supremacist power. Ultimately, the images and ideologies offered through games elicit individual consent for structural policies, thereby legitimizing structures of whiteness and masculinity. (p. 7)

If the industry and surrounding culture of video games do not go through significant changes, Gray argues, then video games will continue to exacerbate the problem. The consensus among scholars and minority players alike is that video games and the culture surrounding video games is a toxic space for those who deviate from the norms.

Moreover, video games play a powerful role in promoting racist ideals. While much of the video game debate takes place in the United States, the controversies surrounding racism and video games have a significant, international impact.

Even though most of the research considering the racial implications of video games are centered in the United States, there is a serious group of scholars dealing with depictions of the people and culture of the Middle-East. Machin and Suleiman (2006) were some of the first to highlight the disparity between representation and perspectives in video games. They accentuate the “authenticity” found in most games distances players who are not represented by the ludic elements of a given game. They write, “players in Lebanon, Jordan, and other Middle-East countries get to ‘kill’ Islamic terrorists operating in their own country through playing imported games, and perhaps it is no surprise that many Arab game designers see this as simply propaganda, and as evidence of overwhelming pro-Israel bias in the mainstream media” (p. 2). This has caused many Arab game developers to attempt to offer perspectives that represent the Islamic perspective in conflict, as well as to “celebrate the Islamic resistance” (p. 3). These games, however, do not receive international attention because they are often squelched by companies that market and release video games.

One of the biggest problems is due in large part to the perspective of the player in most of the games in question. Ottosen (2009), writing about popular video games in the shooting genre, argues that most games are created from the perspective of United States’ soldiers, and that the enemy is often based out of the Middle-East (or representative of that geographical area). Specifically referring to a video game that attempts to recreate battle scenes in their game, *Kuma*, Ottosen points out that “the information from the

eyewitnesses being used is all from the US or the Coalition side” and that the “information from one party alone is applied as truthful background knowledge” (p. 46). Lemmens (2011) confirms this suspicion, finding that people who play violent games that depict the relationships between the United States and Arab nations will ultimately “display more racist attitudes toward Arabs” than those who play other games. While this can certainly be explained by assuming that people who already hold these views will play these games, that argument falls short based on the popularity and prevalence of violent games in the current cultural climate. Rather, perhaps part of the problem is that video games are a contributing force to racial attitudes.

From the perspective of an American playing on the American side of the war, video games certainly do a better job of relating to an audience from the United States than from other countries and cultures. Ibrahim (2015) notes:

The problem is the “authenticity” is only on one side. As an American, you get to relate to the hero defending his country from terrorist threatening your freedom. As an Arab, you get to relate to the guy who wants to blow up your city, and that’s all. Often, it seems more time is spent making sure the guns in the game are authentic than on accurately representing the culture I belong to. (p. 79)

Thus, not only are the developers of many popular games not spending much time at all on creating compelling enemies, but that the depictions of other in video games can truly create negative environments for those who find themselves other.

Souri (2007) furthers that argument, claiming that video games, due to their power to spread ideologies, are “responsible for turning Islam into a death cult” with an environment filled with “hate speech” (p. 10). All things considered, video games do a poor job at representing diverse people groups, specifically seen in the United States through depictions of Black people and African Americans, and internationally through

depictions of Arabs and Middle-Easterners. While these groups represent the most researched elements of racism in video games, they do not have a monopoly on the prevalence of racist attitudes that permeates video games. Chapter Five will return to the topic of race and video games, focusing on a case study of Hispanic and Latino depictions across three popular video games.

There are many issues within the video game medium that can be grappled with a standpoint informed by Ellul's philosophy of propaganda and Burke's rhetorical theory. Despite many scholars writing about many consequences of video games, one of the less represented subjects is the stereotypical and racist depictions of minority groups in video games. The bulk of the scholarship that exists in this vein deals with people groups from the Middle East and African Americans, which are certainly both important areas to address. However, given the current social climate of the United States and overall lack of research looking into depictions of Hispanic and Latino populations, this project finds a destructive environment of stereotyping and racial prejudice against these populations in some of the most popular video games. Video games portray characters in certain lights, which either reinforces or changes perceived beliefs about particular groups of people. When hurtful, disrespectful, and damaging images and ideas are shared, it is a human problem.

This project will develop a theory to view, study, and critique video games as tools of cultural, covert persuasion. Equipped with this new theoretical framework, the growing societal tension surrounding depictions of Hispanic and Latino people and culture will be explored. Video games have not caused the prejudice and racism that exists in the modern United States, but individual games can be examined for their

contribution to the problem. The theoretical framework built upon Ellul and Burke can identify, explain, and begin to deal with the problems found.

In the end, there are two major ways in which this project hopes to see meaningful change. In the public sphere, video game developers must begin to understand the consequences of their actions, and take seriously the enormous levels of racial prejudice and stereotyping that exist in the modern world. Likewise, players must be more aware of the influence of video games on their lives, more than the psychological issues in popular academic study, but sociologically in the construction, maintenance, and destruction of culture and society. On the other hand, scholars have much to gain from these questions. Specifically in terms of rhetoric and communication, the exploration of video games as persuasion impacts our understanding of both how video games function persuasively, but also the ways in which rhetoric functions in the ever-changing digital age. Finally, this project propels the serious study of video games and their consequences into new areas of questioning. It is necessary to better understand the reach, impact, and implications of the video game medium.

## **Chapter Outline**

Chapter One: Gaming, Culture, and Gaming Culture: Video Games as Communication Medium

In Chapter One, the intersections between video games, communication, and rhetoric are defined and examined. This chapter investigates the methods and manner in which video games transmit meaningful messages to their audiences. By focusing on four scholarly fields, ludology, pedagogy, media ecology, and rhetorical study, it is clear that



video games can have great persuasive power. Ludology creates a foundation for understanding and unpacking the role of games in human life, as well as their importance for individuals and society alike. A focus on pedagogy reveals some of the key methods that video games are being utilized in the modern world as a tool of education and learning. Thinking through a media ecological lens, video games and culture are intimately connected, but specifically highlighting video game culture reveals significant implications for the social environments that video games create for their users. Finally, procedural rhetoric, a prominent area of rhetorical video game scholarship, offers a compelling case for the rhetorical analysis of video games and also provides an impetus for questions concerning covert persuasion in video games.

#### Chapter Two: Ellul's Sociological Propaganda: Influencing the Masses

In Chapter Two, Jacques Ellul's philosophy of propaganda is analyzed in order to gain an understanding of the widespread nature of persuasion in general and, specifically, covert persuasion in the modern world. Ellul created a helpful vocabulary of terms for the investigation of modern propaganda by parsing out sociological propaganda from political propaganda. Through Ellul's philosophy, it is evident that video games function as sociological propaganda. Ellul also introduces, generally, the idea that meaning can be put into messages without the direct intention or recognition of content makers. Additionally, Ellul, who died before the explosion of the video game industry, shared his concern for the rise of electronic and digital games. Ultimately, Ellul's philosophy of propaganda expands an initial understanding of covert persuasion in video games by recognizing its scope and influence.

## Chapter Three: Burkean Rhetoric: Understanding Culture, Identification, and Unconscious Persuasion

In Chapter Three, Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory is explored in order to better understand the relationships between culture and language, particularly highlighting the impact that rhetoric has in directing the public's attentions and promoting certain actions, attitudes and ideals. Covert persuasion, through its mechanisms and power, is illuminated through focusing on three areas within Burkean theory, culture, identification, and the unconscious. Burke, throughout his writings, emphasized the importance of rhetoric on culture and its interpretations due to its dialectical nature. Central to his rhetorical theory, Burke's identification explains the function, means, and effectiveness of rhetoric. Finally, Burke's discussion of the unconscious, always tied to his rhetorical theory, is critical to the creation of a theory of covert persuasion.

### Interlude: Bridging Jacques Ellul and Kenneth Burke

This brief section works to construct, rather than compare and contrast, an understanding of video games and their influence through the cooperation of ideas found in Ellul and Burke. While each scholar offers significant implications and ideas in their own right, together their theories create a model through which covert persuasion in video games can be explored to offer new insights into how video games are shaping culture.

### Chapter Four: Covert Persuasion in Video Games

In Chapter Four, a theory of covert persuasion is introduced, allowing for the future investigation of covert persuasion in video games. The union of Burke and Ellul highlights how video games are used for persuasion overtly and internally, as well as

covertly and without intent. Several axioms for understanding covert persuasion are presented, leading to the definition of the four principles of covert persuasion in video games. As a brief example, this chapter considers *America's Army* (2002), the video game created by the United States Army, to offer an initial exploration into the overt and covert uses of persuasion in video games. By building an awareness of the intentional ways in which video games are used to persuade audiences to change their attitudes, beliefs, and actions, this chapter sets the stage for the investigation of covert persuasion in video games through a theory of covert persuasion.

#### Chapter Five: Covert Persuasion in Video Games: A Case Study of Hispanic/Latino Depictions

In Chapter Five, depictions of Hispanic and Latino characters and culture in three popular video games are examined. The three games, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* (Ubisoft), *Battlefield: Hardline* (Electronic Arts), and *Just Cause 3* (Avalanche / Square Enix), are analyzed for their portrayals of minority characters and culture in both positive and negative lights. Ultimately, the overwhelming lack of positive portrayals of these groups, accompanied with the negative depictions found in many games, produces a complicated relationship between developer, consumer, and culture. The gendered and racial stereotyping found in popular video games propagates attitudes of prejudice and further disenfranchises minority groups from having a respected, free, and public voice. Video games are a primary communication and entertainment medium that reaches an audience across gender, age, wealth, and political standing. Video games are not the only culpable party in this venture, but they can create meaningful and lasting change in the world.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

In Chapter Six, this project attempts to answer the question, “so what?” Specifically, this chapter offers recommendations for particular ways in which players, developers, and scholars can begin to combat the issue of covert persuasion in video games. In the end, this project targets both the video game industry and the scholarly discussion currently surrounding the video game medium. This chapter outlines the key aspects for players and developers to adjust their thinking around and directs the attention of scholars in communication, rhetorical study, games studies, and media studies toward a new way of understanding the video game medium.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Gaming, Culture, and Gaming Culture: Video Games as Communication Medium

#### **Introduction**

Video games, in the modern, technological world, continue the element of play that has always existed as a necessary part of the human experience. While video games differ from other forms of non-digital play in significant ways, they also provide a medium of play, a potent tool of cultural creation, maintenance, destruction, and change. The immense popularity of video games in the modern world, properly understood through the vast history of human play, elucidates their important role, but their ubiquity also demands an investigation into the medium as an environment and the gaming culture that surrounds them. This chapter discusses the nature of video games as play and the implications of the intersections between gaming and culture.

This project is primarily influenced by a rhetorical perspective, however, it is strengthened through the rich texture given by the fields of ludology, pedagogy, and media ecology. Each of these fields of study offer significant contributions to a rhetorical study of video games, particularly as it relates to meaning and cultural attitudes. Ludology, the study of play and games, focuses on the necessity of play for human beings and explains their cultural relevance. Pedagogy, the study of teaching and learning, shows much of the current contention surrounding video games and their utility in the modern world. Media ecology, the study of media as environments, considers the implications, whether positive or negative, of particular technological mediums. Finally, rhetoric, the study of persuasion and language use, begets an understanding of the potency of video games to create meaning within users. It is only through a textured, multi-disciplinary approach that video games can best be understood.

This chapter sets the groundwork from which to further delve into the study of persuasion and video games. First, an overview of ludology will provide initial coordinates for understanding the importance of play and games for individual human beings and also for culture. Second, the definition and history of video games will further advance their role as a medium of play in the modern world. Third, the cultural and scholastic reception of video games will reveal significant conclusions about current gaming culture and the potential environment(s) that video games bring about. Fourth, a leading theory on video games from a rhetorical perspective, Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric, will provide an initial overview of how video games can be used to intentionally create meaning in players and perhaps guide them to planned attitudes and actions. Video games are becoming a more substantial component of culture, and it is important to investigate and attempt to understand what that means for human beings.

## **Play and Games**

Play is often thought to be an activity for children. While play is certainly a necessary aspect of childhood, one of the main arguments in support of play is that it also teaches important lessons. The list of lessons that play and games can teach usually includes teamwork, following rules, creativity, and in some cases physical fitness, athletic prowess, and strategic planning. Play, however, is important for more than just children, because it is through play that human beings learn, grow, and discover new insights about their identity, human life, and the culture they live in.

Ludology, or the study of play, upholds the philosophy that play is an essential component to human life. Johan Huizinga (1949/2016), often referred to as the father of ludology, established a theory of understanding the tripartite relationship between the individual,

culture, and play. His work, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, is a foundational work to both ludology and game studies. Roger Caillois (2001), who spent much of his academic life in literary criticism and sociology, also dealt seriously with the claims of Huizinga, offering agreement, critique, and also expanding the field of ludology in significant ways. In recent years, the study of ludology has continued to produce conversations that deal with new forms of play in the technological world. By an investigation into the history, theory, and philosophy of ludology, it is clear that play is one of the most crucial components in a vibrant human life.

### Homo Ludens: Humanity and Play

Despite the jovial, free-spirited feelings produced by either structured or creative play, the theory of play is a serious subject that is worth unpacking. Johan Huizinga (2016) establishes a working theory of play through investigating the historical coordinates, the philosophical essence, and the practical implications of play. Huizinga investigates play stretching back to Plato and earlier, finding that “play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society” (p. 1). Basing his work on the ludic function, Huizinga projects the immense power that play has, pulling both from deep within the human imagination and providing structure and rules that translate directly into relevant instances of human life and culture. Throughout his work, Huizinga continually points back to the idea that “all play means something” (p. 1). This section grapples with Huizinga’s ludology, establishing definitions, forms, history, purposes, and the overall importance of play.

Johan Huizinga (2016) defines play by the following characteristics: play is imaginative, voluntary, orderly, rule-based, superfluous, meaningful, and is not ordinary or “real life,” but rather is “the direct opposite of seriousness” (p. 5). This definition, while not offering a specific

“play-is-this” level of conciseness, opens up a new manner of understanding the complex union between play and people. Play itself is tricky to pin down because of the seemingly infinite iterations, choices, and conceptions of play and games. Unpacking these list of terms reveals a fuller understanding of the nature of play.

*Play is imaginative, superfluous, and separate from real life.*

When Huizinga identifies play as imaginative, he is separating the time-space of play from the reality that surrounds it. Play exists only because of the boundaries created by the rules and purposes of the game. While the ludic function can be met by a variety of human activities, such as art, theater, music, etc., each of these activities is based on the fundamental essence of play as imaginative. Play as superfluous further distinguishes play from real life and work. A conclusion drawn from the imaginative nature of play is that play cannot be limited to the rational world, but rather, while still being based within and meaningful to the real world, play allows for the widest stretching of human imagination.

*Play is voluntary, rule-based, and has order.*

Choice is a fundamental necessity to play, because being forced to play can disrupt the free enjoyment of playing. Work is not incompatible with play; however, play must exist quartered off from the demands of every-day labor. That said, however, play is exceedingly connected to order and rules. When something breaks the order of the game, it no longer functions in the same way. Despite the order demanded by true play, it will always exist with some amount of tension, as play cannot have its conclusion known at the start. Thus, cheating “spoils the game,” and other forms of manipulation not established by the rules or order directly break the spirit of an individual game (p. 10-11). Play’s nature as voluntary, rule-based, and



orderly begin to speak to the effective use of play and the importance of considering play seriously.

*Play is meaningful.*

Huizinga includes this in his definitional work, but it also sets the stage for the remainder of his theory. In the end, play is meaningful for the human beings involved in it, whether as participants or spectators. The nature of play commits those involved to experience additional aspects of the human condition, learning about themselves, the other participants, and the larger society that contains the playing. Thus, play is intimately tied to culture, and it offers considerable insights into the innermost workings of cultural systems, lessons, moral and ethical codes, and even the day-to-day lives of its citizens. Through this light, Huizinga argues that the rise of culture cannot predate elements of human play.

The need for play is one of the fundamental human qualities, and this need has shown itself through human history. Huizinga (2016) writes that “the spirit of playful competition is, a social impulse, older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment” (p. 173). Huizinga, further arguing that play predates culture, claims that “culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning” and that “it is through this playing that society expresses its interpretation of life and the world” (p. 46). He points to massive, historical shifts in play. The first historical period of play largely predates the rise of nations and states. Before the first pivot, play had a much closer connection to regular life, and in many ways they went side by side, but can be seen most specifically in the ritual forms of culture, such as feasts, sacrifices, festivals, and rites (p. 54). The purpose of play in these early centuries was to transmit cultural ideas, tribal norms, life lessons, and also for enjoyment.

The first major transition in the history of play comes from the rise of complexity and seriousness of play that began as civilizations formalized play and assigned to it the importance of being victorious. Huizinga argues that as play became a more serious endeavor, it was assigned a secondary role in human life (p. 75). Play, still vitally important to life and culture after this shift though less integrated with work and typical life activities than before, became more of a hobby or pastime, and thus lost some of its accepted relevance. That said, however, until the second major pivot play remained a crucial part of life and society. According to Huizinga (2016), “Roman society could not live without games” and “Mediaeval life was brimful of play,” stretching even to the poetic play of romanticism through the 18<sup>th</sup> century (p. 177, 179, 189). Play, though, was about to be downgraded, for “the 19<sup>th</sup> century seems to leave little room for play” (p. 191). After the industrial revolution, the superfluous nature of play caused the major power structures of the world to largely ignore the cultural and historical importance of play.

Play was not squelched by the attitudes of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Certainly sport remains one of the primary cultural outlets of play, but other forms of play have arisen throughout history as well, to fill the needs of human creativity and cultural maintenance during times when more traditional forms of play were proverbially swept under the rug. Huizinga points to many common activities that are based on the same roots of play, such as law, philosophy, poetry, art, and music. Each of these activities furthers the ludic function, allowing human beings to engage in the nature of play while still finding additional purpose and use for their lives outside of play.

Huizinga does, however, separate play from one human activity that is often considered in relation to play, war. While arguing that there is certainly a connection between play and war,

Huizinga cautiously warns against the conclusion that war is a form of play. The major distinction that he draws out is in terms of the fairness of war, finding that for war to be play, it must be between equals (p. 89). Huizinga's conclusions about war provide further insights into the complex texture of play and society. He writes: "we might, in a purely formal sense, call all society a game, if we bear in mind that this game is the living principle of all civilizations" (p. 100). It is through the various forms of play and the games that each society constructs and utilizes that the underpinnings of society are revealed, providing the principles for human life, cooperation, conflict, and community.

Johan Huizinga wrote *Homo Ludens* in 1949, in the years just following World War II, which certainly influenced his thinking significantly. It also, however, explains his pessimism about the state of play in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He claims that "more and more the sad conclusion forces itself upon us that the play-element in culture has been on the wane ever since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when it was in full flower. Civilization today is no longer played, and even where it still seems to play it is false play" (Huizinga, 2016, p. 206). Huizinga did not live to see the rise of technological forms of play via video games and the digital worlds they create. Video games, counter to most of the other modern forms of play and games, bring back many of the original characteristics and purposes of play that were lost through the industrial revolution and modernity. Video games have rediscovered the ludic function in the modern world, and this project relies on the ludology put forward by Huizinga in his considerations about the nature of play and its relation to humans and culture.

Huizinga's work is considered the primary text of ludology, the study of games and play. His foundational work in defining play and games, elucidating the purpose and importance of games, and tracing the history of play, allows others from distinct and various disciplines to pull

from an established theory with consensus. Scholars continue to grapple with Huizinga's work today, but ludology also was influenced by Roger Caillois, who produced one of the first commentaries based on theories of Huizinga. Caillois affirms much of what Huizinga claimed in his earlier work, but also pushed to reveal new insights about play and games in a transitioning world.

### Man, Play, and Games: Extending Ludology and Texturing Play

From a single perspective, play is difficult to define. While Johan Huizinga delivered a well-functioning definition and analysis of the ludological perspective, others have continued to fill in the gaps, critique certain issues, and push the ideas of play further. Roger Caillois, in his book *Man, Play, and Games*, takes on the task of extending Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* to better understand the nature of games and playing, in order to discover, along the way, important conclusions about human culture. Caillois (2001) writes: "The spirit of play is essential to culture, but games and toys are historically the residues of culture" (p. 58). Caillois views his work as continuing the conversation started by Huizinga, and through an analysis of his thinking, the complex nature of play further reveals itself.

Caillois largely agrees with Huizinga's definition of play, offering that play is "free, separate, uncertain, and unproductive, yet regulated and make-believe" (p. ix, 9-10). Many of these definitional terms have direct correlation with Huizinga's, but while Caillois begins with a similar form, he moves beyond looking at the nature of play in general to looking at four specific qualities or modalities of games. In order to classify games, Caillois proposes "a division into four main rubrics, depending upon whether, in the games under consideration, the role of competition, chance, simulation, or vertigo is dominant" (p. 12). Each of these classifications has

its roots deep within human history, and each of them offer much into the discussion of the role of games within and upon culture.

Competition, which Caillois refers to as *agôn*, represents a large section of games that emphasizes the importance of winning. Competitive games promote discipline and perseverance, all assuming that the games are played with some amount of opportunity for either (or any) competitor to achieve victory. Caillois (2001) claims that “the point of the game is for each player to have his superiority in a given area recognized. That is why the practice of *agôn* presupposes sustained attention, appropriate training, assiduous application, and the desire to win” (p. 15). Based on the rules of the game, when engaged in *agôn* the goal is to be set apart by one’s ability to out-plan, outwit, outlast, and overcome one’s adversaries.

Games of chance, or *alea*, also function to produce a winner, but there is no contingency on the player’s skill. According to Caillois, “*agôn* is a vindication of personal responsibility; *alea* is a negation of the will, a surrender to destiny” (p. 18). Caillois offers that in many cases *agôn* and *alea* function side by side, because many games combine the two, but whereas in competitive games one can achieve victory through increased training, *alea* equalizes all participants. Also important in the distinction between *agôn* and *alea*, *alea* is, as Caillois writes, “peculiarly human,” because no animals seem to leave things up to chance (p. 18). Most modern games are some combination of *agôn* and *alea*, competition and chance.

Simulation, or *mimicry*, perhaps casts the widest net, because it can be done outside of the specific constraints of a game. Caillois defines this type of play as “becoming an illusory character oneself, and of so behaving” (p. 19). The enjoyment of simulation is to experience life differently, as other. The major distinction that simulation offers is that it is not necessarily rule-based. Caillois stretches his notion of *mimicry* far enough to even include spectators, arguing that

“identification with the champion in itself constitutes mimicry related to that of the reader with the hero of the novel and that of the moviegoer with the film star” (p. 22). *Mimicry*, despite its contrasting nature with *agôn* and *alea*, does also have the ability to permeate the boundaries of other games, as seen when one’s role changes throughout the course of a game to find greater success or higher fortune.

The final classification of games, vertigo or *ilinx*, represents the type of game that is played for the feelings or perceptions that can be had. Vertigo can be present in the other categories, but it also can exist outside of the bounds of the other classifications. Vertigo, by its very nature, is destructive. Caillois writes that “those which are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic on an otherwise lucid mind” (p. 23). In vertigo, one either destroys one’s own perception or sense of self, or through destruction of an object or another person creates a sense of chaos or social vertigo, which can be achieved physically (by force) or mentally (by lie or abuse).

The four classification of games offered by Caillois presents a compelling case behind human rationale for engaging in certain games over others. He describes how some societies prefer *agôn* to *alea*, or *ilinx* over *mimicry*, or any other combination or ratio. Ultimately, however, Caillois agrees with Huizinga and finds that play is an essential quality of human life. He writes that “play is simultaneously liberty and invention, fantasy and discipline” (p. 58). Play is motivated by certain attitudes and impulses that are found within the human condition, such as the desire to win, an appeal to destiny, the lure of secrecy, the overcoming of fear, the satisfaction that comes through repetition, the solution of mystery and the unknown, and the overall desire to explore one’s imagination and appease curiosity (p. 65). Given Caillois’

definition and classification of play and games, he moves to further embellish the social and cultural importance of play and games, but also warns against the corruption of play found in modern society.

Games, viewed from the perspective of ludology, play a crucial role in culture. “In fact,” writes Caillois, games “reflect the moral and intellectual values of a culture, as well as contribute to their refinement and development” (p. 27). One of the ways in which Caillois diverges slightly from Huizinga is in the consideration of solitary play. While Huizinga recognizes solitary play as important and valid, Caillois is greatly disheartened by the prospect that someone would rather play alone. Caillois explains the importance of play and games on the very institutional structures that constitute much of human life, arguing that games “sustain permanent and refined structures, institutions of an official, private, marginal, and sometimes clandestine character, whose status seems none the less remarkably assured and durable” (p. 41). Play, particularly play that occupies the realm of *agôn*, is an activity of communion, despite the polarization it creates with winners and losers and the fierce sense of competition that can exist among rivals. Culture, according to both Huizinga and Caillois cannot exist fully without play, but Caillois also points to a more sinister outlet of games, when they become corrupted.

Caillois warns that games can be easily corrupted, and thus misused, when the spirit of play has been broken or scandalized. While *agôn* can be corrupted when competitors are not even remotely equal, Caillois is most concerned about the corruption of *alea* and *mimicry*. He notes that *alea* is corrupted by superstition, where one no longer views an outcome as chance but as reward or punishment for past actions. Likewise, the corruption of *mimicry* “is produced when simulation is no longer accepted as such, when the one who is disguised believes that his role, travesty, or mask is real. He no longer *plays another*” (p. 49). Perhaps the corruption of mimicry

is worst of all, because the original self is forgotten, replaced and alienated by the new identity. Overall, play is corrupted when the game itself no longer functions as intended or when certain essential components of play are broken, such as when play extends beyond the borders of space and/or time, or when elements of games enter into real life without the same distinct margins. If Caillois is correct when he claims that “games discipline instincts and institutionalize them,” then while games have constructive power to build and maintain culture, they also can be misused for nefarious ends.

Games have great cultural power. Games, according to Caillois, “lead to habits and create reflexes. They cause certain kinds of reactions to be anticipated, and as a consequence the opposite reactions come to be regarded as brutal, snide, subversive, or disloyal” (p. 83). The philosophical foundation laid out by Huizinga and Caillois creates a ludology that has potency in terms of its ability to analyze and critique elements of play and culture. Any discussion or investigation into play and games would be incomplete without the work of ludology, and it is necessary to view video games as a technological continuation of the vast history of human play. Jane McGonigal (2011), a video games scholar, argues: “The truth is this: in today’s society, computer and video games are fulfilling *genuine human needs* that the real world is currently unable to satisfy” (p. 4). Video games are an outflowing of ludological claims in the modern, technological world.

### Ludology Now and Next

In recent years, the main advances in ludology have been found in the video game research and scholarship. In fact, ludology has come under some scrutiny because games studies scholarship reaches from such broad methods that ludology can often be underplayed or even ignored. Over the last few decades, there has been a wavering tension between games studies



scholars who prefer ludology and those who prefer narratology. Aside from the important coordinates laid out by early ludologists in terms of play and the human condition, this project's emphasis on ludology is deliberate because, as many note, games can best be understood by exploring what sets them apart, namely their ability to be played (Anderson, 2013; Hess, 2007). The perspective offered by ludology, rather than ignoring other methods, strengthens them by recognizing the benefits and flaws that exist within game elements across diverse media.

The future of ludology has the potential to isolate itself away, focusing solely on game elements in research; however, it is far more likely that ludology will find itself included in more and more scholarly endeavors because of its unique ability to parse out important differences between games and other human activities. By itself, ludology provides an interesting lens through which to explore and identify games as both fun hobbies and as cultural powerhouses. Placed with other fields of studies, however, ludology becomes a wealth of resources to propel diverse scholarly impulses that can find a basis within its deep theory and history. Particularly as video games continue to skyrocket in popularity, ludology will continue to play a crucial role in significant decisions and scholarly conversations.

Major current trends in ludology pull from a history of understanding the importance of play to human life and show that, into the future, games will continue to have an impact. A rhetorical perspective is enhanced through the ludological frame because of the observation that games are a form of communication and also that games function as epideictic rhetoric. Thus games can be viewed as cultural troves of knowledge, propriety, history, and imagination. The following section will explore video games as technological play by defining video games and exploring their historical development over the last 50 years.

## **Video Games as Technological Play**

Video games are a technological medium that permits the play element to exist and thrive in the technological world. It is no small matter to point to the depth and breadth of technological advancements over the last few decades, but it is important to recognize that human proclivities toward play have kept on par, if not pushed technological advancements forward as well. Video games and the consoles or systems that run them, once based on some of the most simplistic computing systems, now boast teraflops of power. Almost as soon as significant technological advancements happen, human beings find ways to play within them. As with the television and game shows decades prior, the computer from its earliest years was considered in terms of how we can play with it and through it. This section will briefly define the unique characteristics of video games as a technological medium, summarize the history and rapid growth of the medium, and consider the current gaming culture as it relates to communication and play.

### **Video Games: Terminology and History**

The term “video games” covers a wide spectrum of areas and topics, but certain things must be true in order for something to be called a video game. The introduction to this project established a basic definition of video games, pointing to their digital nature as one of the most essential features: Video games cannot exist apart from 1s and 0s, programmed meticulously by developers to be enjoyed by the consumer. This certainly distinguishes video games from other games, but it offers nothing in the way of distinguishing video games from other forms of new digital technology. Video games are distinct two major ways; first by their digital nature, separating them from other forms of non-technological or electronic play, and second by their nature as games, set apart by the intent and rules that create game boundaries as play and game,

to distinguish them from other technological and communication media, such as the television and other uses for computer technology.

In the same way that the modern computer can be used in a variety of ways, such as to view television shows, listen to radio programs, or sending emails through the internet, video games must be viewed as a separate medium, despite their reliance on computers to function. Ruggill and McAllister (2011), in considering the plasticity of the video game medium, claim that “games can look, sound, and play in ways limited only by taste, imagination, and technology. The medium is, for all intents and purposes, a sculptor’s blank from which developers can carve whatever they want, however they want” (p. 3). Much has already been said in the previous section and in the introduction about the nature of games themselves, but video games allow for diverse and imaginative games to be shared easily among a worldwide audience. The growth of the medium over the last few decades is an unprecedented spread of the play element, and video games can be used to transmit a specific culture’s playing to vast audiences and players, which can certainly be used to promote and celebrate diversity, but it can also hinder such efforts, as can be seen in the history of the video game medium.

#### *A brief history of video games*

The historical development of video games can be summarized under five main coordinates: origins, the arcade, home devices, the Internet, and the divergence between casual gaming and e-sports. While these major movements in the history of video games cannot portray the entire story, they do get at the heart of how video games have risen to the level of cultural ubiquity that they now possess. The history of video games is not long in the grand scheme of things, but to ignore the changes of the medium over the course of the last half-century would be

to miss out on important ludological implications and conclusions that can be drawn about video games and the current culture of gaming.

Video games began as a hobby, an offshoot from computer programming and digital advancement. In the early years of video gaming, they were viewed as a novelty and received little to no cultural attention (Wolf, 2001). While commercial video games began in the early 1970s, the first instances of video games happened in computer labs in the early 1960s. There is some debate over the very first video game, but most give the title to Russell and Graetz' *Spacewar!* in 1962. The first games were certainly clunky, but they also set the stage for many years to come, as many of the first widespread video games were based on the first programmed games. The historical origins of the video game medium point to the proclivity of human beings to find creative ways to turn even new technologies into an environment of play and games, as well as explicating the importance of the early years to the video game medium to this day.

The arcade performed a vital function in the growth of video games because they allowed the general public to experience video games for the first time. Once confined to university labs or those with great wealth, video games in arcades were available to anyone with some spare change. While available to the general public, video games in their arcade years were still by and large a niche hobby, where certain players (particularly young men) would spend a great deal of time at the arcades but many simply ignored them. The arcade years lasted through the 1970s and 1980s, and many significant changes happened during this time. The visual appeal and gameplay mechanics of video games grew as the technology allowed for more detailed and complex games. In this era of video game development, many franchises that still exist and thrive today were created, such as *Pac-Man*, *Donkey Kong*, and Mario, to name a few. Perhaps the most significant change in the late 1970s and into the 1980s was the push toward

competition, whether by attempting to best one another by achieving a high score or in games that allowed more than one person to play simultaneously. The arcade era was the first time that the general public became aware of video games, but it also saw the rise of multiplayer gaming, competitive aspects, and the birth of what would become gaming culture.

While the arcade brought people together to share in the enjoyment of diverse video games, the movement of video games into individual homes brought significant, lasting shifts into the video game medium. Early video game consoles, such as the Atari, took many of the games that were popular in arcades and made them available in living rooms, albeit for a fairly high price tag. What the rise of home gaming did that was most significant, however, was that it took away the public nature of games during the arcade years. While arcades, and the changes they brought to the video game, persisted through the home console era, the popularity of arcades diminished significantly as more and more people were able to play the same games from the comfort of their own homes. In turn, games became much more of a single-player experience, or they could be played by small groups of people, but either way the spectatorship of video games that existed within the arcade was lost, increasing the individuation of video games and ultimately hindering the continuation of gaming culture.

Despite the growth of an individualized video game experience created by the advent of home consoles through the 1980s and 1990s, the fourth great shift occurred in the late 1990s and through the 2000s in the connections between video games and the internet. The internet paved the way for the future of gaming by allowing players to experience video games together who were once forced to play individually. Online games, from the competitive shooters to the cooperative role-playing games, encourage interaction with other people who share similar interests. In many ways, without the internet, gaming culture would still largely be tied to

arcades and high-score lists; whereas in the late 2000s and into the 2010s, video gaming, thanks to the internet, has achieved immense cultural power and public awareness. As with every advancement, the growth of the internet has also created many unfortunate consequences, such as cyberbullying, but the ultimate connection between video games and the internet allowed video games to thrive in ways previously impossible.

The final shift in the history of video games is still largely happening now, and it represents the diversification of both video games and video game culture. While there are many areas in which video games have grown in recent years, such as in terms of education which will be discussed later, the internal swings of e-sports and casual gaming have truly established video games as culturally ubiquitous. E-sports and casual gaming are both significant and lucrative areas of video game culture, but are tied to a very dichotomous split. Casual gaming, according to Jesper Juul (2010), is “not about video games becoming *cool*, but about video games becoming *normal*” (p. 1). Juul points to the mobile gaming market and specifically the Nintendo Wii console as the roots of the causal gaming movement. Casual gaming points to the idea that video games can be played by anyone, anywhere, whereas once video games were considered a niche market and an enormous time waste. Through popular games like Words with Friends, Farmville, and titles like Wii Sports, casual games brought video gaming to an accessible, easy-to-enter place and propelled their popularity to the point that now over 67% of households own a device for the primary purpose of playing games (ESA, 2017). The casual games movement created widespread public acceptance and popularity of the video game medium.

The development of e-sports also brought significant changes to the video game medium. As an offshoot of the advancement of internet technology in video games, e-sports are massive competitive tournaments that take place either online or at huge in-person events. Mirroring

popular sports on television, these tournaments draw in millions, both in terms of the audiences and in the dollar amount of prize pools and tournament earnings to the winners. E-sports, propelled by streaming services such as Twitch or Youtube Gaming, have made video games one of the most consumed forms of media in the modern world. E-sports have continued the competitive trends created by the arcade era, but also continue to expand the reach and power of video games onto the larger culture.

The history of video games presented here shows the rapid growth of the video game medium from humble beginnings to the worldwide stage. It is difficult to predict where video game culture will be in the next 10 years, but what is clear is that video games will continue to grow, and that the video game medium will continue to advance, both in terms of technological possibilities (as seen recently with virtual reality) and cultural power (as this project argues). Video games are a medium of technological play, and they also serve important communicative implications. The culture of video games is as diverse as the games themselves have become, but it is also important to identify and describe gaming culture and how that culture interplays with the larger cultural groups.

### *Video game culture*

Video game culture is just as diverse as the games that we play. Much of what is considered gaming culture has direct correlation to the historical shifts mentioned above, what once was a niche hobby for only the most enthusiastic users has become readily available and accepted to a wide audience. While gaming culture includes historical remnants, the culture that exists today centered on gaming is an environment rife with tension. Even though casual gaming has become pervasive among nearly all demographic groups in the United States and the developed and developing world, gaming culture is primarily defined by those most involved,

those who identify themselves as “gamers.” Additionally, it is important to note that gaming culture contains many subcultures, focused on particular genres or games themselves, each one relating to the larger culture in some way. Despite cultural shifts over the last few years, the subgroup of “gamers” largely defines and controls the gaming culture.

Video games are a media environment, and the people who consume the media the most have established a culture of gaming. Media ecology, defined briefly in the introduction and revisited more in the next chapter, contends that particular forms of media create environments for their users. Neil Postman (2005), considering the role of television in the modern world, points out the prevalence of media to direct what people see and know, but also recognizes that the push of media largely goes unnoticed. Just as with the television in Postman’s argument, video games have created an environment that has great sway over the lives of gamers, but that the existence of gaming culture is an assumption that is nearly always unnoticed. While video game culture has done many great things, unfortunately, like Bakhtin’s two-faced Janus, gaming culture has also revealed dark and damaging attitudes and behaviors that permeate through the entirety of gaming culture and into human, personal lives.

Video game culture has many positive characteristics. For many, gaming culture has been a stable and safe community through which to explore particular passions and experience a wide variety of topics. Games, if successful, are fun. Video games, falling in line with the history of play and ludology, are a modern representation of the human need to play and have fun. Gaming culture is built around the major tenet that fun should be readily available to any person whenever they want and also however (which game or genre) they want. On a surface level, gaming culture does include anyone who plays games, but to view the major positive



reverberations from gaming culture is to look at what the “gamer” subset considers to be gaming culture.

E-sports, one of the historical shifts in video games, represents some of the best that the gaming community can offer. Professional video game players, and the teams that support and sponsor them, contribute extensively to video game culture. Taylor (2012) discusses the rise of e-sports on a worldwide scale, explaining that in Korea, e-sports has “established itself there as a viable leisure and professional activity, weaving together a cultural inclusion of video games with elite competition and spectatorship” (p. 27). She points to the popularity of e-sport stars, finding that they are treated as national celebrities and receive widespread public recognition. While e-sports may not be as big in the United States as in Korea, e-sports around the world continue to grow at a rapid rate. Not only has e-sports brought excitement and camaraderie to video game culture, it has also made it possible for video game players to be rewarded for their skill and hours of practice by the financial boom created by e-sports. On the other side of the equation, fans are able to spectate their favorite players and teams as they relate to others, discover new skills and strategies, and increase their interest into the games they like to watch. E-sports is perhaps the most hopeful area of video game culture, but even with all of its beneficial qualities, there are massive issues with video game culture and individual gamers themselves.

Video game culture represents many distinct subgroups, but there is an overall lack of diversity among people who would self-classify as part of gaming culture. The stereotypes of people who play video games, usually considered teenage boys or nerdy men who live in basements, actually do not represent all of the people who play video games at all. In fact, the most demographically relevant group to play video games are middle aged women, even though

they would traditionally not identify as “gamers” (Entertainment Software Association, 2017). Despite the growth of popularity in video games over the last decade, video game culture has not changed to reflect the same gender, age, socio-economic, or educational qualities as the players themselves. The lack of diversity, or appreciation thereof, within video game culture is by far the most substantial problem that exists today. Lack of diversity, particularly in an online space, creates hardships for those who are not considered part of the in-group, and in video games this is no different. Video game culture has enormous problems to grapple with, beginning with rampant cyberbullying and online toxicity, and extending into entire social movements, as seen with the Gamergate controversy.

The internet is the biggest arena for free speech in the modern world. Aside from a select few rules and laws attempting to halt certain messages, such as death threats and defamation (libel), the internet is an under-legislated communication medium that leads to further linguistic complexities, moral concerns, and ethical issues. While insults, bullying, toxicity, and trolling exist throughout the internet, perhaps the most prime example can be found in online, competitive video games.

The main term designated for problematic online communication is cyberbullying. Tokunaga (2010) defines cyberbullying as “any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others” (p. 278). This definition functions as an excellent foundation for understanding the nature of internet toxicity, as it emphasizes the importance of intent to harm or discomfort. While much can be said about what makes someone choose to harm or discomfort another person, it is without question that these interactions happen on the internet every day.

Cyberbullying, as opposed to regular bullying, can be much more difficult to identify because the cyberbully is physically and temporally distant from the victim. One of the major concerns with cyberbullying is the anonymity of the attacker. Novak (2014) points to four key characteristics of anonymity, claiming that the identity, confidentiality, privacy, and protection of the individual or group often dictates what actions they feel more comfortable with making in an online or anonymous environment. Novak argues that “the more anonymity a person feels, the more likely they are to experiment with risky or dangerous behaviors,” and that “anonymity lends itself to undesirable forms of speech and behavior” (p. 41). The anonymity involved in most cases of cyberbullying allows for aggressive communication without personal consequence.

In recent years, one of the clearest instances of cyberbullying happening within the video game industry is Gamergate, described by Goldberg and Larsson (2015) as a “civil war” of video game players, developers, and journalists. In the fall of 2014, the Gamergate controversy received national media attention, all centered on the issues of harassment, feminism, and video games. According to Dan Golding (2015), “Gamergate was a semi-autonomous campaign that appeared online at the end of August 2014, giving a name and a brand to the ongoing harassment of women in games that has been growing louder in visibility and intensity for years” (p. 128). The peak of the Gamergate controversy involved Anita Sarkeesian, a video game journalist and avid game player, who received a barrage of internet toxicity. Starting as early as 2012, Sarkeesian (2015) claims that “all of my social media sites were flooded with threats of rape, violence, sexual assault, and death” (p. 107). Aside from being the central figure, or target, of the Gamergate controversy, Sarkeesian also provides insight into the environment of problematic communication on the internet and within video games.

Sarkeesian (2015) believes that anonymity is not the main culprit in the dissemination of harassment and bullying online. She argues:

Anonymity online plays its role in giving people another way of shifting accountability, but the broader problem is that even if you aren't wearing a mask, this behavior is so commonplace and acceptable that few will even bother trying to hold you accountable for cyberbullying or harassment. This isn't about anonymity, it's about dehumanization. (p. 115)

The key move that Sarkeesian makes here is away from determining why people engage in such problematic behavior, but rather looking at the internet itself as an environment of institutionalized harassment and bullying. There exists within the video game industry widespread acceptance of bullying as "the way it is," rampant stereotyping and racist attitudes, and a promotion of the antiquated "good ol' boys" clubhouse (Golding, 2015; Narcisse, 2015; Sarkeesian & Cross, 2015).

Gamergate was an embarrassment to many people who consider themselves gamers, because the general environment offered by gaming should be one of accepting difference and diversity, like some of the games we play. Gamergate, however, accentuated the massive divide that exists between people's perception (that video games are by men and for men) and the reality of the situation (that video games are played by more adult women than teenage boys). Gamergate was more important for video game culture than the media attention it received, but there are other problems that exist in the environment of video games that have yet to receive much public attention at all, and even less scholarly attention. Cyberbullying and internet toxicity creates an environment where many people lose their voices to the crushing weight of continual and intentional attacks. There are more instances, avenues, and systems for harassment and bullying in online video games than one cares to admit.

The rampant toxicity, cyberbullying, and lack of diversity in modern video game culture, along with the controversies that have arisen in recent years, are not indicative of the video game medium itself nor the majority of the player base. That said, however, it is important to consider the negative facets of video games and video game culture that exist along with the ways in which video games and culture are working together constructively.

### *Culture and video games*

Video games do not exist in a micro-climate, but rather are a part of a much larger, societal entity. The general public society has a tense, fluctuating relationship with video games and video game culture. The tension shows the juxtaposition between speculative concern, as seen with the continual false assumption that video games are making people more violent, and curious interest, as seen in the growth of mobile gaming in recent years as well as the current virtual reality craze. Large groups of people outside of traditional gaming culture occupy both of these positions, and that leads to complicated and confusing public acceptance of video games teetering between outright distrust and scruple, and on the other side that there is potential good that can come from video games and the communities that gaming creates.

Many outlets of culture and research have taken a constructive and appreciative stance to video games, including in medical research in elderly patients, training in the military, aeronautics, and engineering, and in general educational contexts, as exemplified by many schools incorporating games and video games into the classroom as learning tools. The latter, using games and video games in schooling contexts, provides one of the most discussed and relevant issues to the current debates on the beneficial qualities of video games in modern society. While many in the general public are still opposed to video games, the tide seems to be turning most rapidly in educational environments, particularly in schools using creative and

novel pedagogical strategies to reach students of all abilities and prowess. Unpacking the current scholarly conversations about the educational use of video games reveals both their power to be used as educational tools as well as the cultural, attitudinal shifts happening in response to the inclusion of video games in school.

The educational games movement has made great strides over the last 20 years. Scholars, researchers, and educators continue to find and apply new methods of productively incorporating games (including, but not limited to digital) into the classroom. If video games, once excluded or banned in the classroom, are utilized in school contexts as an educational tool, then it follows that games outside of the classroom can also offer substantial learning opportunities. Video games provide an opening for players to learn knowledge, hone skills, and gain wisdom in matters significant to both educational contexts but also to individual and societal life. Scholars have been debating for decades whether or not it is beneficial to incorporate video games into the classroom. Many will remember *Mavis Beacon*, a video game played in schools years ago to teach and improve typing skills for a generation of kids that did not grow up with home or personal computers. Certainly very few people are still playing *Mavis Beacon* because of its intricate gameplay or photorealistic graphics (because it did not have those), but people *did* learn typing and improve their skills by playing the game in school.

One aspect of games and learning is how gaming has been successfully incorporated in educational contexts. An item once banned on school playgrounds, video games, are now being effectively used inside classrooms across the United States. There are many methodologies and philosophies for the best ways to teach, and one of the growing trends in classrooms is to explore the ways in which video games can be understood as educational tools for the unique characteristics that they bring to the table. While there are many examples of schools using video

games productively, it is crucial to consider, rather, how video games (and other games, generally) can have such an impact on education.

A common phrase in the tech-savvy world is “gamification,” or attempting to make non-game aspects of life more entertaining or rewarding by including elements of games, such as a progression system or rewards/consequences for performance. Greg Toppo (2015) calls this the “game layer,” defining it as “a carefully designed overlay of game mechanics added to everyday tasks to make them more compelling, more thrilling, or, in a few cases, more consequential” (p. 65). Gamification can certainly be used effectively, but it is most often a façade. Real learning through gaming, however, takes a strong theoretical stance on the necessity of understanding the coordinates for how games can provide meaningful educational tools. Toppo, who argues that games can be one of the most effective educational tools if used correctly, identifies three major theoretical foundations for the relationship between gaming and education: the “ludic loop,” rewards and consequences, and forging expertise.

A game is made with the intent that people will play it and wish to keep playing it. Toppo (2015) references the term coined by Natasha Schüll, the “ludic loop,” to describe the ways in which games employ certain tactics in order to keep players engaged. It is a term most often used to discuss the addictive components of certain games, such as gambling or pay-to-win games; however, the ludic loop also accurately describes how games can be used for bettering educational experiences and learning outcomes. As many argue, one of the largest problems that plagues the educational system, specifically for the modern context but also true elsewhere, is an overall lack of effort, involvement, and enjoyment in students.

Games, however, can solve the problem of supposed lethargy in education with intentional thought and strategy. According to Toppo (2015):

Whatever game your child loves, she loves it in large part because it reacts instantaneously to her input every time, shows whether she's improving, and encourages her – actually, it requires her – to improve her skills. When the rest of life is unsatisfying, indifferent, or worse, think about the pleasure a kid can take from something that responds to her every gesture and that holds her accountable for results. (p. 209)

Toppo argues that if educational contexts were better able to encourage students to continually improve of their own volition, it would solve one of the greatest blocks toward learning. He ultimately concludes that games provide a “*density of experience* that few interactions do” (p. 212). One of the major reasons as to why games can be used so effectively in educational contexts is because they are made to be enjoyable.

That games produce enjoyable feelings is no secret, but that does not explain how they can be used to teach meaningful lessons as supplement to or replacement of standard teaching and pedagogy. There are no succinct, clear cut answers to that question. One of the components mentioned above was the disparity between games and education in terms of reward and consequence. Whereas games, as Toppo (2015) claims, “forge expertise,” education typically shares information and knowledge (p. 140). Toppo argues that games “reward practice, persistence, and risk-taking,” and continues by writing that “they implicitly reward those who learn to enjoy the tasks they offer” (p. 140). In this light, games produce meaningful rewards because the players are encouraged by both successes and failures.

The gaming components of the ludic loop and forging expertise both point to the ability of games to be used in meaningful ways to better captivate the attention, interest, and ability of students in educational contexts. Whereas once games were anathema in schools, they are being used more and more to students' benefits, increasing learning and showing effective learning outcomes. Over all of these claims is the benefit that games can bring to education based on their ability to deal with risk and failure in healthy, safe ways. Games allow students to learn at their



own pace with limited repercussions for failing, unlike in traditional learning where if a student begins to fall behind they will continue to be behind. Games can provide effective learning environments, but not all games function equally in education, learning, or improving the player's skills.

A second aspect of games and learning is *how* players can best learn through playing games, whether in an educational context or not. Many games have messages that they want their players to pick up on, whether overtly or hidden within the game world itself. While it is important to investigate and critique the messages that games purvey to the players, it is just as necessary to understand some of the major ways in which video games can teach players certain lessons. Games, in the grand scheme, teach players certain lessons through two main avenues of playing: (1) practicing/probing and (2) interweaving identities.

Video games encourage the player to learn in ways that will help them get better at the game. This is true in most aspects of human life: People improve at particular tasks the more they practice. Practicing, through a method of probing, hypothesizing, re-probing, and rethinking, allows players to significantly improve at a given game in a largely safe context, where the rewards are high and meaningful (game progression, visual or textual messaging, etc.) and the consequences are usually minimal (starting over from a checkpoint, etc.) (Gee, 2003, p. 88). Gee correctly identifies that “learning should be both frustrating and life enhancing” or as he also claims, “pleasantly frustrating” (p. 3). When players want to practice and get better, because the experience is rewarding and safe, they will submit more of their time and energy into the game, and thus, will learn more from the game along the way.

Identity in video games is tripartite. Gee (2003) points to three distinct identities in playing video games: the virtual identity (the character or avatar in the game), real-world identity

(the player), and projective identity (the interconnection between player and avatar that encompasses thoughts, ideals, and goals) (p. 49). Gee argues that “video games recruit identities and encourage identity work and reflection on identities in clear and powerful ways” (p. 46). The interweaving of identity between player and avatar in a video game context allows the player to experience a given world through a particular lens, whether familiar or foreign. While the player may feel more comfortable when they are most similar to their in-game appearance and demeanor, players are given the opportunity to learn more by taking seriously the perspective of those that are different from them, even if the difference is digitally programmed. There is not a video game about someone writing academic essays (because who would want to play that?), but there *are* video games that allow the player to experience life differently.

Gee’s discussion of identity in video games promotes them as an educational tool. By further engaging with a game, the player becomes more identified with the game, the characters, the world, the rules, the goals, and the real-world community. Identity in games is split into multiple facets, each which can increase or decrease one’s identification and connection with the game. Using identity construction and tools in games allows the player to experience the world from a different perspective, which in itself is a learning opportunity for the open-minded player. One of the most important components of any video game is the player’s ability to identify themselves through playing the game.

Video games can be used to teach important lessons and educate players, both in schools and generally. By exploring the ways in which video games have been used effectively in schools, it reveals the ways that video games can teach people outside of educational contexts as well. Throughout this overview of video games and learning, two major concepts have been explained. First, games have great possibility in educational systems based on their utilization of

systems of rewards and consequences, but in terms of within classroom environments the games allow learning to happen at variable rates depending on the ability and growth of the students. Second, games are able to teach players lessons, skills, knowledge, and wisdom by allowing the player to identify more and more with the game and the game world. All of these culminate in the third, identification, because in each of them the player will only receive the benefit of the lessons the more that they identify with the game or identify through the game.

Identification necessarily points to rhetoric. The final section of this chapter deals with rhetoric and video games. While Chapter Four will further discuss video games rhetorically, it is important early on to introduce some of the key figures and theories. In terms of game studies, the most prominent rhetorical scholar is Ian Bogost, who created the theory of procedural rhetoric. It is important to discuss Bogost's procedural rhetoric not only because it is helpful for the ultimate goals of this project, but it is also important to distinguish the aims of this project from those of Bogost and other leading rhetorical scholars in game studies. Rhetoric allows for new perspectives to be illuminated in terms of video games and persuasion.

### **Procedural Rhetoric**

While a select few have been studying video games academically for decades, the recent uptick in games studies has led to more scholarly interest across academia. There are many useful methods for researching games, and some of the most popular ones are found in the fields of sociology, education, and psychology. Despite not being as popular as the other areas, the field of rhetoric has important contributions to make to games studies research. Rhetoric is the study of persuasion, and video games are a persuasive medium. After a brief look into some of the leading scholars and theories looking at the rhetoric of video games, Ian Bogost's procedural

rhetoric will be shown prominent in the discussion of rhetoric in games studies. Bogost's theory is essential to any rhetorical investigation into video games, but it can also be used as a jumping-off-point to uncover more elements of persuasion that the video game medium allows. Because of the persuasive nature of modern video games, they must be explored through a perspective propelled by rhetorical theory.

Video games are a persuasive, communicative medium. Thus, video games can, and should, be studied with rhetorical interests in mind. Considering rhetoric in the broader sense, in terms of human expressiveness and persuasion, video games are rhetorical artifacts. Beginning in the early 2000s, scholars such as McAllister (2004; 2011), Bogost (2006; 2007; 2008; 2011), and Anderson (2017) uphold many rhetorical ideals as they study video games. Much of the early work in rhetoric and video games was spent creating the bridges and explaining how rhetorical theory in general can apply to the study of video games. For instance, according to McAllister (2004), "Like other forms of media, computer games can work to build up, maintain, or reject what players (among others) believe about a wide range of subjects, from the constitution of truth and goodness to understandings of social mores and global politics" including, but not limited to, efforts to "maintain the status quo, celebrate liberation, tolerate enslavement, and conjure feelings of hope and despair, assent and dissent, clarity and confusion" (p. ix). In McAllister's assessment, video games are one of the richest areas of rhetorical study, for their diversity in application and consequence.

More recently, scholars such as Anderson (2017), Hess (2007), and Smith and Just (2009) have utilized rhetorical theory to explore specific areas and topics within video games. Anderson (2017), extends the extensive scholarly investment into the rhetorical nature of bodies, explicitly considering the rhetorical implications of video games on bodies. Through an analysis of space,

identity, and engagement, Anderson argues that understanding the body in relation to video games reveals the importance of a corporal shift that takes place in the players' minds, writing about the current virtual reality trends that "the future of gaming bodies will never be limited to motion-tracking software or VR technology inasmuch as all gaming, as we currently know it, occurs within the embodied contexts of people's lives" (p. 31). The implications brought forth by Anderson and others create a rationale for new rhetorical studies into video games.

The most recognized name in the rhetorical study of video games is Ian Bogost. Bogost stretches beyond the exclusive study of video games, despite describing his theory of procedural rhetoric through the medium of video games. Bogost's theory falls in line with the broad history of rhetoric and the specific rhetorical interests of the modern, technological world. There are many connections between Bogost's procedural rhetoric and the aims of this project, and procedural rhetoric is one of the most impactful rhetorical theories in dealing with technology and digital, programmed environments. It would be quite neglectful to attempt any rhetorical investigation into video games without giving credit to Bogost's procedural rhetoric.

Ian Bogost crafted his theory called procedural rhetoric in his 2007 book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*. Bogost (2007) defines procedural rhetoric as "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (p. ix). Procedural rhetoric is set apart from other theories, specifically focused on what defines the computer: programmed code. Indeed, while Bogost explains procedural rhetoric through the communicative medium of video games, the theory itself can readily apply to any form of digital communication. That said, however, video games provide one of the best outlets from which to explain and explore procedural rhetoric because they are, according to Bogost (2007), "the most procedural of computational artifacts"

(p. 44). Bogost employs his theory of procedural rhetoric to understand the persuasive power of video games.

Video games are programmed by people and imbued with meaning. Meaning in video games must be understood generally. While certainly there are lessons and values portrayed by the narratives and characters in video games, according to Bogost (2007), it is the procedural representation created by developers through the code that sets up video games as “computational artifacts” (p. ix). What interests Bogost most explicitly are the procedures that “present or comment on processes inherent to human experience” (p. 5). He continues: “Not all procedures are expressive in the way that literature and art are expressive. But processes that might appear unexpressive, devoid of symbol manipulation, may actually found expression of a higher order” (p. 5). Procedural rhetoric is aimed at finding the persuasive arguments that others have implanted within the code that they have created.

The meaning that video games can convey stretches beyond the particular game and pulls from the richness of culture that exists in the (real) world. Bogost (2008) argues that “video games are not just stages that facilitate cultural, social, or political practices; they are also media where cultural values themselves can be represented – for critique, satire, education, or commentary” (p. 119). Because cultural values are expressed through the procedures generated by the code that is the foundation of any video games, playing games becomes a process of exploration of the symbol systems within a game. Bogost (2008) calls this the “possibility space,” explaining that the constraints or rules set by a particular game are the realm of exploration, and it is where much of the meaning creation happens within a particular game (p. 121-122). He adds that “we need to play video games in order to understanding the possibility spaces their rules create, and then to explore those possibility spaces and accept, challenge, or

reject them in our daily lives” (p. 137). Bogost’s (2007) procedural rhetoric serves as a useful tool for analysis and critique of any computational medium, but particularly in terms of video games his arguments sheds much light on the power of persuasive procedures.

Through his theory of procedural rhetoric, Bogost (2007) unpacks many instances of persuasion that exist in video games, both in small and popular titles alike. By explaining certain video games in terms of their procedural rhetoric, Bogost brings light both to the persuasion that happens in video games and in the relevance of procedural rhetoric for the modern, technological world. Throughout his book, *Persuasive Games*, Bogost (2007) deals specifically with video games and procedural rhetoric in terms of three main content areas: politics, advertising, and learning. With these categories in mind, Bogost hits many of the key areas of public life and the intersections with video games, game development, and game studies.

Bogost’s (2007) key interest with procedural rhetoric is to find out how videogames create arguments about the material world and “how things work” (p. 29, 47). He discusses *The McDonald’s Game*, finding that it decently functions to inform the user about the basics of supply chain management while playing a game. Bogost claims that while this can be done through other methods, such as verbal or visual rhetoric, the procedural rhetoric brought about by the video game creates a more compelling rhetorical message system and can stretch beyond the initial persuasive goals. According to Bogost (2007), “*The McDonald’s Videogame* mounts a procedural rhetoric about the necessity of corruption in the global fast food business, and the overwhelming temptation of greed, which leads to more corruption” (p. 31). The game, by creating difficult situations for the players, seems to suggest that the only way things can be done is with a little bit of corruption in tow. In other words, this game makes people become more on-board with some of the major hot-button issues with McDonalds and their ethical practices. The

analysis and conclusions provided by procedural rhetoric bring a more textured understanding of what a video game is doing with persuasion.

A second example that promotes understanding through procedural rhetoric is with the United States' Army's game, *America's Army*. While this game will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, a cursory overview of Bogost's argument will bring further clarity to his diverse use of procedural rhetoric. The game, created for multifaceted purposes, works to invite the user into the Army's way of doing things, promoting ideals of teamwork, following orders, and punishment for failure to comply with the rules provided by the game. Additionally, Bogost (2007) describes some of the other ways that the game functions procedurally, pointing to the unique aspect of the game whereby the player is always playing as an American soldier and the enemies always appear as other (p. 77-78). The genre of first-person shooters (FPS) itself also performs a similar function, promoting procedurally the glorification of guns. Video games can transmit political ideologies through fun and play (Bogost, 2006).

A final example of how Bogost develops his theory of procedural rhetoric falls under the umbrella of learning. Bogost (2007) points to flight simulator games, particularly *Microsoft Flight Simulator*, in their ability to teach "professional knowledge" via "pedagogical apprenticeship" (p. 239). Thus, while video games teach abstract skills such as shooting aliens, it also can teach "general problem-solving skills and learning values" (p. 239). As discussed in a previous section, video games can be effective learning tools, and they are being used each and every day to teach important lessons and hone one's skills in a variety of subject matters. Understanding how Bogost works through different artifacts with an emphasis on procedural rhetoric, it is clear that procedural rhetoric is an important rhetorical theory in the modern world.



Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric is an effective methodological lens through which to analyze computational procedures, including video games, to emphasize their persuasive power and reveal their messaging goals. Procedural rhetoric opens the door for further understanding of video games and persuasion, and it can be used in a variety of contexts to elucidate the persuasive nature of the video game medium. While procedural rhetoric functions well in analyzing video games, it is by no means the only way to explore video games' persuasive power. Bogost, through his explanations of procedural rhetoric, opens certain scholarly doors through which to consider other theoretical additions in terms of his work on procedural rhetoric. One area that procedural rhetoric reveals, but does not fully capture, is whether or not there can be persuasiveness in video games that stretches beyond the intent of the game developer's goals, whether done intentionally or inadvertently. Procedural rhetoric recognizes the need for analysis of covert or unintentional persuasion in video games.

Bogost, while studying the use of video games to generate persuasive meaning, acknowledges that there is persuasion being done that is less readily apparent. Bogost (2008) argues that: "some games' procedural representations serve mostly to create an entertainment experience, a fantastic situation that transports the player to another world. But other games use proceduralism to make claims about the cultural, social, or material aspects of human experience. Some do this deliberately, while others do it inadvertently" (p. 123). Games reveal something about their creators and the culture that they arise from. In fact, Bogost claims that "one use of procedural rhetoric is to expose and explain the hidden ways of thinking that often drive social, political, or cultural behavior" (p. 128). In this line of argument, procedural rhetoric can not only reveal aspects of persuasion in video games, but might further bring light to societal biases and issues that plague the modern world.

Procedural rhetoric is a functional and effective method for analyzing video games, but it can be strengthened by further employing other aspects of persuasive and rhetorical theory. Because procedural rhetoric sets as its first goal understanding intentional persuasive messages sent by video games and through procedural code, it has less interest in the investigation into covert or unintentional persuasion in video games. Certainly procedural rhetoric points to the existence of this type of hidden persuasion, but more nuance is required in order to analyze and critique instances of covert rhetoric. This project suggests that by extending the work of Jacques Ellul and Kenneth Burke, we can better understand when and where covert persuasion happens in video games, how it functions, who is affected, and what can be done in situations where the covert persuasion is promoting ideologies through video games.

Ian Bogost's procedural rhetoric is an important pivot in the history of video game research. His emphasis on rhetorical theory pinpoints the persuasiveness inherent in procedural coding. Covering all aspects of computation code, Bogost's main interest is in understanding the ways that video games can be used persuasively to create desired effects in a given audience. He shares a growing concern that video games spread ideologies that are largely unregulated by any industry standards. Bogost (2007) writes:

Like all cultural artifacts, no video game is produced in a cultural vacuum. All bear the biases of their creators. Videogames can help shed light on these ideological biases. Sometimes these biases are inadvertent and deeply hidden. Other times, the artifacts themselves hope to expose their creators' biases as positive ones, but which of course can then be read in support or opposition. (p. 128)

Through procedural rhetoric, Bogost brings a better understanding to the persuasiveness of the video game medium.

One area in which this discussion on procedural rhetoric reveals a key issue is in terms of persuasion that is done unintentionally, inadvertently, or persuasion that is deliberately hidden

from the consumer, despite their ability to be affected by it. While Bogost spends much time building up his theory of procedural rhetoric by examples from politics, advertising, and education, he offers little more than the possible existence of covert persuasion in video gaming. This project attempts to build on Bogost's procedural rhetoric to explore the ways that unintentional and covert persuasion works within video games.

## **Conclusion**

The growing field of video game research can be strengthened by further investment into rhetorical theory and the persuasiveness of video games. This chapter discussed four significant aspects to this project: ludology, the video game medium, culture and games, and rhetoric and games. The section on ludology emphasized the importance and power of play from antiquity to today. Next, the video game medium was examined via its historical developments and the benefits and drawbacks of video game culture. Following this was a larger discussion on the general culture and its relations to video games, particularly connecting to educational goals and identity construction. Finally, a primer on rhetorical investigations into video games solidified the importance of Bogost's procedural rhetoric and also discerned the importance of this project in relation to other prominent rhetorical theories and methods. Ultimately, each of these areas contributes to the overall argument that video games are changing the people who use them in significant ways, and in order to best grapple with this acknowledgement, it is necessary to be informed by a wide spectrum of scholarly perspectives.

Great strides are being done to better understand the persuasiveness of the video game medium; however, while most research is done on the ways developers intentionally persuade their audience, there is a significant gap in the research done to understand the covert or

unintentional persuasion that can happen within video games. Just as when video games can be used intentionally to promote certain ideologies, such as building national pride as seen in *America's Army* and other first-person shooter games, they can also distill messages and attitudes that are less apparent on the surface, but are still affecting players. Of particular interest to this project are the ways in which prejudice and stereotyping permeate the video game industry and the effect that this has on a world-wide player base. Video game developers may not be intentionally including their own biases and ideologies into their games, but that does not admonish them when these attitudes show up in some of the most popular games, each and every year.

In video game research, there must be a way to understand, analyze, and critique, as necessary, the instances of covert or unintentional persuasion that happens in video games. Aspects of covert or unintentional persuasion are prevalent in the video game industry, but there is yet little being done in the attempt to create a theory which will be potent to explore these issues. In the remaining chapters, a theoretical perspective will be laid out and then utilized to explore an issue of growing concern in modern video game persuasion. Chapters Two and Three will each deal with a particular scholar, Jacques Ellul and Kenneth Burke respectively, in order to lay the groundwork for understanding covert persuasion and the power of identification. Chapters Four and Five will revisit this chapter and extend an informed theory of covert persuasion in video games, pointing to the ways that video games have great persuasive power in ways that were not necessarily the intent of game developers. Ultimately, video game scholarship must do a better job in dealing with all of the various facets of persuasion that exist in the current video game industry.

The following chapter unpacks Jacques Ellul's (1973) *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* and some of his other philosophical works in order to better understand the prevalence of persuasion in the modern, technology-filled world. His deep understandings of the ways in which technology effects people daily provides a position from which to begin to explore hidden persuasion in video games. While Ellul wrote in a time before video games became ubiquitous in the modern world, his philosophies touch on many of the important issues and implications that are beginning to reveal themselves in the video game industry. His philosophical and theoretical work helps construct a theory of covert and unintentional persuasion in video games.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Ellul's Sociological Propaganda: Influencing the Masses

#### **Introduction**

Video games are a powerful and unique communication medium, but in the grand history of communication technology, they are quite a recent development. While one can study video games apart from the historical narrative of technological advancement, understanding video games as part of the bigger story elucidates many key coordinates for investigation, consideration, and critique. Jacques Ellul (1973) anticipated a major discourse in video game scholarship in his discussion of sociological propaganda. The presence of propaganda in the modern era is unquestionable, but Ellul's distinction between political and sociological propaganda sheds light on a growing issue of new forms of mass persuasion. Indeed, video games flow out of the development of other forms of media to create a multi-faceted medium of art, enjoyment, and persuasion. In order to best investigate the persuasiveness of the video game medium, it is important to consider the mediums and technological advances that led to video games and their persuasion.

Media ecology is the study of technological and communicative mediums as environments, focusing specifically on the ways in which those environments effect human beings. Jacques Ellul's work is rooted in the field of media ecology, due in large part to his extensive philosophical work on technology but also in his unique perspective that attempts to be objective, rather than deterministic. Ellul's contributions to media ecology are significant, but his philosophy often stretches beyond philosophical investigations and into more practical matters. One such case is his *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (1973), which presents a philosophy of propaganda with practical applications for the study of communication and

technological media. Even though Ellul's *Propaganda* does not deal with video games specifically, his arguments offer significant implications for the video game medium and their societal role as a purveyor of sociological propaganda.

This chapter unpacks Jacques Ellul's (1973) *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* in order to better understand the persuasive power of the video game medium. First, Ellul's scholarly importance in the conversations involving technological media and video games will be discussed. Second, Ellul's philosophy of propaganda will be investigated, considering and comparing his philosophy to other thinkers. Third, Ellul's sociological propaganda will be discussed in greater detail. Fourth, Ellul's specific writings and thoughts on video games and related subjects will be discussed in order to explore some of Ellul's harshest technological criticisms and respond to his concerns as the video game medium has continue to grow beyond his temporal scholarship. Finally, the focus will shift to the implications of Ellul's (1990) philosophy on the video game medium, specifically highlighting video games as a communicative medium of sociological propaganda. Ellul's philosophy of propaganda is indispensable for the proper understanding of how video games function persuasively.

### **Jacques Ellul: An Overview**

Jacques Ellul is best known as a French philosopher who felt a deep concern for the ways in which the use of technology affects human life. Also a sociologist and lay-theologian, Ellul is a key figure in media ecology because he dedicated his life to questioning human issues in an era of rampant technological growth, while not neglecting his personal beliefs in important areas of human responsibility, thought, and action (Arthos, 2013). Born in Bordeaux, France, he continued to live there for much of his life, studying at the University of Bordeaux and also for a

small time in Paris (Menninger, 1975). While heavily influenced by thinkers such as Karl Marx and Soren Kierkegaard, Ellul established his own unique perspectives and philosophies through a scholarly career spanning thirty years (Alves, 2014). He was a prolific writer whose thinking continues to have great impact in scholarly conversations years after his death in 1994.

Ellul's scholarly corpus spans decades of thought and enormous cultural shifts, but major trends always permeated his writing. He wrote about technology, politics, sociology, propaganda, and theology as he saw the world change before him in terms of technological advancement through what he coined as *la Technique*, or the goading force of technology (Ellul, 1964). Ellul wrote from a unique combination of perspectives, pulling deeply from his personal beliefs about faith and religion but also from his time serving in the French resistance in WWII. With that in mind, it is important to consider Ellul's critical thinking and to evaluate his influence on relevant modern issues. Ellul's scholarly influence is as wide as his own interests, but he is most relevant in the modern world with his involvement in the field of media ecology.

Media ecology, simply, is the study of media as environments. Approaches of media ecology share the common assumption that every media has a significant influence on the user in ways that are not always readily obvious or pronounced. Neil Postman coined the term media ecology in the 1960s, pointing to a group of scholars concerned with similar issues of media, technology, and human agency. Postman (1992), in his book *Technopoly*, offers further clarification, claiming that in matters of ecology, "one significant change generates total change" (p. 19). Ellul, among others like Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Lewis Mumford, fit snugly into this categorization not by their similarities but due to their differences of thought in matters of the relationship between humanity and technology (Strate, 2014). It is important to recognize Ellul's contribution to media ecology for the implications that can be drawn from his philosophy



on the video game media. Before the attention is turned to video games, however, it is necessary to first consider Ellul's greatest contribution to the field of media ecology, his metaphor of *la Technique*.

Jacques Ellul is best known for his technological trilogy, which includes *The Technological Society* (1964), *The Technological System* (1980), and *The Technological Bluff* (1990). These three books, spanning over three decades, show Ellul's thought process as he tries to understand technology and its impact on humanity. Ellul's (1980) project, as he claims, "is not to evaluate what is good, but to establish that the very fact of technology has wrought a transformation" (p. 70). By its presence in human lives, technology has changed the world. *La Technique*, Ellul's moniker for technology and the spirit of technology, becomes the driving force throughout these works.

Ellul's *La Technique* can be characterized in a variety of ways. Simply, according to Ellul (1964), "technique has only one principle: efficient ordering" (p. 110). In this way, technique is essential to modernist ideals (Ellul, 1964, p. 190; 1980, p. 193, 197). The technique that Ellul is writing about is more than the media or individual technologies. Ellul (1964) uses *la Technique* as a "blind force" to describe that the individual technologies can all fit into the same category (p. xviii). Though they are connected, technology and technique are not equals (Ellul, 1980, p. 32). Ellul (1980) writes that "technologies all have a reciprocal action upon one another, they interpenetrate, associate, condition one another" (p. 159). *La Technique* can be seen as the union and nature of technologies.

"Technique," Ellul (1964) writes, "integrates the machine into society" (p. 5-6). Furthermore, technique is autonomous in that "there is no difference at all between technique and its use" (p. 98). Additionally, Ellul postulates on the future of technology, claiming that if it

can be done, then it must be done (p. 99). In many discussions of technology, a conclusion emerges that while technology seems good on the outside, that the consequences of technique are disastrous. Ellul, while affirming this claim, never insists that humans stop using technology. Instead, Ellul (1990) claims that “technical development is neither good, bad, nor neutral. It is a complex mixture of positive and negative elements” (p. 37). Thus, in order to receive the benefits of technique, one must surpass the problems caused by technology.

Ellul’s ultimate ‘solution’ to deal with the issues of technology, if one should even call it that, was simple: be more human (Troup, 2012). Among all other things, Ellul’s readers are instructed to continue to be as human as possible. The most human activity, and the best way to counter *la Technique*, is to engage in communication and communion with other human beings doing likewise. It is far too late to remove ourselves from the technological system completely, but the only thing getting in our way from continuing to *be* human is an obsession with technology.

Throughout his life, Ellul was keenly aware of the serious ways in which the technological environment in the modern world affects human life and community. His guiding metaphor of *la Technique* accurately depicts the nature of technology and the complex consequences that arise from its prominence in the world. One of the major mechanisms of *la Technique* in the modern world is the widespread use of propaganda, another key aspect of Ellul’s philosophical argument. In fact, the two were intimately connected throughout many of his major works, and he continued to contemplate their coexistence and of the implications that connection creates. As seen in Sichel’s (2013) 1983 interview, propaganda was intimately connected to the rest of his thinking. As such, Ellul’s discussions of propaganda throughout his scholarly writings provide key coordinates through which to explore important issues of media

ecology, technological advancement, and human life. The following section discusses Ellul's philosophy of propaganda.

### **Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes**

Jacques Ellul is well known for his philosophy of *la Technique*, but one his other major areas of influence is in understanding the nature and reach of propaganda. Ellul's stance on propaganda was informed by both his scholarly interests and by his own life experiences. While many have tried to understand and analyze propaganda from a variety of perspectives, Ellul stands out as a cautious onlooker who expands the role of propaganda to include many, if not most, instances of modern mass persuasion under its umbrella. This section will consider a general understanding of propaganda weighed against the philosophy of Ellul, ultimately presenting the case for Ellul's (1973) *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* as a prominent perspective on the relationship between propaganda and human beings.

Propaganda is a word with strong connotations. The most common association with propaganda is during times of war, particularly WWII. Wartime brings about some of the clearest examples of the use of propaganda, but to only consider propaganda in terms of its political or wartime use drastically diminishes the ability to understand how it works on many levels and for many purposes. Perhaps the most prominent figure in the popular, modern understanding of propaganda is Edward Bernays, a significant public relations expert from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Bernays (2005), in his book aptly titled *Propaganda*, discusses propaganda with an honorific tone, arguing that propaganda plays an important function in modern life, but that it has been reduced over time because of the historical instances of propaganda being used as a weapon

(p. 14-5). Bernays defined propaganda as a “consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea, or group” (p. 52). Despite being one of the main figures in the history of propaganda, Bernays’ understanding already diverges from that of the general public. Alves (2014), who considers Bernays’ view as the “instrumental view of propaganda,” also recognizes the importance of propaganda as having a “fundamental role in this system of conditioning the ideological content of symbolic culture” (p. 175, 169). This viewpoint was predicted by Hunt (1951), who declared that “for better or worse our future will be shaped by propaganda” (p. 159). While Bernays and others have significant things to say on propaganda and its use, it is important to consider the scholarly legacy of Ellul’s philosophy of propaganda before investigating it in more detail.

In order to understand how Ellul’s propaganda can be viewed with, or even superior to, the other alternatives, we must explore how his understanding of propaganda has spread into the scholarly conversation. Many, including Silvestri (1970) and Schick (1985), come to the conclusion that Ellul’s offers something that the others do not. According to Silvestri (1970), the benefit that readers receive from Ellul is that he disregards the standard definition of propaganda as manipulation, and this extends the study of propaganda to include messages of all sorts, including those of sociological outgrowth. Schick and Posner (1985), in the search for the best model of propaganda, moves through various propagandistic theories, claiming that Ellul’s model provides both necessary insights in terms of advertising and sociological propaganda in the technical system, but also Ellul’s insistence on promoting the importance of individual responsibility in the face of the technological system and the propaganda therein.

Ellul has received much attention from scholars spreading across the last half century. Tal and Gordon (2016) present a case that examines the reach of Ellul’s philosophy in terms of the

ways that propaganda has been treated in the scholarly conversation. Working through the 8 categories of propaganda that Ellul introduces, which will be discussed soon, they find that the overwhelming majority of scholars are using only the aspect of political propaganda from Ellul's thinking, and thus are ignoring the wealth of understanding that can be found in the rest of Ellul's philosophy of propaganda. By only emphasizing one aspect of Ellul's thinking, they neglect the importance of considering Ellul's understanding and concern for the modern, propaganda-filled world.

A final word before Ellul's philosophy of propaganda is unpacked in detail comes from Ellul himself, through a 1983 interview he did with Berta Sichel. In this interview, Sichel (2013) pokes and prods in order to see what aspects of Ellul's thinking have remained from his earliest writings and which he would change or modify in some way. While the interview covers a wide spectrum of Ellul's thinking, a large portion of it is dedicated to propaganda. Of particular interest to this project is that within this interview is also one of the few places in which Ellul explicitly refers to video games as dangerous and deeply connected with propaganda. He claimed, when asked about the ways that propaganda has shifted over time, that:

Man is directed toward computer games. Now, that is dangerous, because we are going to start to play. And we will make other games and will forget to try to change society. Propaganda has already changed its character. Now propaganda is being used for amusement. Now propaganda is much less political and much more divertissement. (Sichel, 2013, p. 321)

Ellul, through the Sichel interview, showed extreme concern with the connection between propaganda and video games. This thought, however, was not new. Ellul (1973) claimed that if he were given a chance to rewrite his book *Propaganda*, that "the central themes would remain exactly the same ... because propaganda ... has remained almost the same" (p. 327). Thus,

Ellul's philosophy of propaganda is effective for studying the ways in which propaganda functions in the modern world.

In Ellul's (1973) *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, he discusses propaganda in unique, new ways and with enlightening new terminology. He begins with no prejudgment as he discusses technology, sociology, and propaganda. Ellul (1973) writes that "to study anything properly, one must put aside ethical judgments" (p. x). What distinguishes Ellul from other writers thinking about the issue of propaganda is that he expanded the understanding of propaganda, both in function and scope, to a vast audience that touches nearly every person on the planet. Many other thinkers have extensive theories of propaganda, but Ellul's work provides a perspective that balances concern with the use of propaganda. Ultimately, Ellul's way of thinking about propaganda provides a more textured approach to the use of propaganda as it spreads to new mediums and as the world becomes more technological.

Ellul's perspective on propaganda extends the discussion of propaganda, persuasion, and rhetoric. It does so, initially, through his philosophy of technique. Ellul's (1964) *The Technological Society*, published eight years before *Propaganda*, began his initial discussion of propaganda and technology. In *The Technological Society*, Ellul (1964) raises two key points about the nature of propaganda. First, he claims that "propaganda must become as natural as air or food" (p. 366). Propaganda, thus, becomes an environment, hidden to those who live and breathe in its fumes on a day to day basis. Second, Ellul compares propaganda to amusement, finding that the techniques of amusement are identical with those in propaganda (p. 375). Ellul situates the force of propaganda within the entertainment technologies of mass communication.

While not offering an explicit, fully-detailed definition of propaganda, Ellul (1973) provides a definitive framework and environment within which propaganda can be better

understood. He writes: “Propaganda is a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization” (p. 61).

Propaganda functions most effectively, according to Ellul, in terms of the creation of needs. Like the technological system which functions according to the phrase, ‘if it can be done, it must be done,’ propaganda also is self-propelling (Ellul, 1964, pp. 99, 105, 110). Propaganda confuses human needs and creates new demands for which the only solution is to submit to the propaganda message (Ellul, 1973, p. 176). As such, Ellul (1973) discusses propaganda as it “performs an indispensable function in society” (p. 160). The use of propaganda only demands that more propaganda be used, in what becomes a never-ending cycle of persuasion and propaganda among the general public. In addition, Ellul (1973) argues that “propaganda is called upon to solve problems created by technology, to play on maladjustments, and to integrate the individual into a technological world” (p. xvii). Propaganda is inseparable from the technological world.

Ellul (1973) believes that for propaganda to function most effectively, it must be in an environment of individualism and omnipresent mass media (p. 90). Ellul notes, “nowadays propaganda pervades all aspects of public life” (p. 119). Propaganda creates an environment of passivity, even in its call to action. The technological world demands that humans become more passive, but propaganda acts as a bridge between an individual’s passive interest and beliefs into the realm of action (p. 148). Even though propaganda functions in terms of both thought and action, its force comes in turning new thoughts into active participation within some larger, unified organizational structure. While Ellul explores the intricacies of propaganda theoretically,

he also builds a functional model of the multiple faces of propaganda in its practical application and everyday use.

Ellul's insights into the nature of propaganda stem from his argument of the eight different categories of propaganda. These categories include four dichotomies: political and sociological, agitation and integration, vertical and horizontal, and rational and irrational. While each dichotomy plays a role in further understanding the connections between propaganda and video games, the most important pair for this project is political and sociological propaganda. Political propaganda "involves techniques of influence employed by a government, a part, an administration, a pressure group, with a view to changing the behavior of the public" (Ellul, 1973, p. 62). In addition, political propaganda is deliberate and precise, often focusing on political objectives. While political propaganda is more akin to what is traditionally accepted as the standard definition of propaganda, of government messages and self-promotion, sociological propaganda is much important when it comes to the realm of advertising, movies, technology, education, and social services (p. 64). As opposed to political propaganda, Ellul (1973) claims that "sociological propaganda is a phenomenon much more difficult to grasp than political propaganda, and is rarely discussed. Basically it is the penetration of an ideology by means of its sociological context" (p. 63). The goal of sociological propaganda is to "make the individual participate actively and to adapt him as much as possible to a specific sociological context" (p. 64). The split between political and sociological propaganda leads directly into the next pair, agitation or integration.

Both agitation and integration propaganda share a similar end: conformity; however, the mechanisms for each differ greatly. Much political propaganda is also propaganda of agitation, using strong emotions of hatred or fear in order to create widespread unease in the general



population. Ellul (1973) explained that “it would appear that propaganda for peace can bear fruit only when there is fear of war” (p. 45-6). On the other hand, “integration propaganda aims at stabilizing the social body, at unifying and reinforcing it” (p. 75). Despite the split between agitation and integration propaganda based on the persuasive force, Ellul admits that ultimately agitation propaganda must turn into integration propaganda in order to have a lasting effect, because the emotional work done by agitation propaganda will eventually wear off or be counteracted by other propagandas.

The third pair of categories is vertical and horizontal propaganda. Perhaps the most literal pairing, vertical propaganda comes from above, usually from a small group of message creators, whereas horizontal propaganda is seen more often in group dynamics, pulling on the importance of social pressure and human relations. Both rely on a certain level of isolation, whether it is isolation from other forms of vertical propaganda or within horizontal instances that the group is separate and distinguished from other groups. Both can also function in terms of education and are important in “civic education” which, according to Ellul (1973), is “addressed to the entire man” (p. 83). More than the other categories, often vertical and horizontal propaganda work hand-in-hand.

The last pair is rational or irrational propaganda. In this pairing Ellul responds to the public’s general assumptions of propaganda, within which people believe that propaganda, by its very nature, must be dishonest and full of lies. Ellul (1973) disagrees, arguing that while propaganda and information are not the same, that propaganda must be based in truth in order for it to have a great effect. He claims that “propaganda’s content therefore tends to be rational and factual,” because instances where propaganda is based on rational arguments have an overall higher success rate among practitioners. With these eight categories in mind, Ellul is able to

move beyond the traditional limits of understanding propaganda and can move toward a place of analysis and critique.

Ellul's analysis of propaganda is powerful because it offers a framework of the characteristics of a multifaceted understanding of propaganda that theoretically extends the possibilities and promise of studying propaganda amidst new and rising questions. Ellul (1973) finds that propaganda can be characterized in the following ways, each unpacked below: Propaganda is continuous and lasting, it functions by short-circuiting thought, it necessarily intertwines with media usage, and it functions through a variety of types and classifications. While this discussion does not deplete the trove of Ellul's theory of propaganda, it serves as coordinates for modern analyses of propaganda.

First, propaganda is continuous and lasting. Ellul (1973) writes that "propaganda must be continuous and lasting," because "propaganda tends to make the individual live in a separate world; he must not have outside points of reference" in a process that he calls a "slow, constant impregnation" (p. 17). While propaganda has influence on the individual, propaganda functions at the organizational level, where the individual believes themselves to be a crucial part of a bigger organization, losing their sense of reality along the way. As such, when the perceived group is active in fulfilling the wishes of propaganda, the members of that particular group will also be more likely to give in to the propaganda and create coherence between its message and their own beliefs (p. 50).

Second, propaganda functions by short-circuiting thought and allowing no time for reflection, skimming along the surface between the conscious and the unconscious. Ellul (1973) believes this to be one of the greatest general problems in modern world, that of "the separation of thought and action in our society" (p. 27). The short-circuiting of thought and action operates

on the level of the unconscious. Thus, propaganda functions by, according to Ellul, skimming along the surface, allowing no time for thought or reflection (p. 46). Ellul offers further comment on how propaganda functions:

Propaganda in its explicit form must relate solely to what is timely. Man can be captured and mobilized only if there is consonance between his own deep social beliefs and those underlying the propaganda directed at him, and he will be aroused and moved to action only if the propaganda pushes him toward a *timely* action. (p. 43)

In this section of his writing, Ellul argues that propaganda must create a sense of urgency in addition to the short-circuiting of thought. The combination between the two of these makes propaganda into a very powerful tool for social and organizational action, but this can only take place because of the widespread nature of mass media and the technological environment.

Third, there is a strong integration between propaganda, media, and technology. Ellul (1973) claims that “without the mass media there can be no modern propaganda” (p. 102). Propaganda functions by negating the possibility for thought and spreading to as wide of an audience as possible so long as they can believe that they are in the same organization or social group. The mass media allows the widespread nature of propaganda because it “permit[s] crowds of diverse individuals from all over to assemble easily and frequently” (p. 89). While all technologies propel the ability to assemble, modern technologies such as the radio, television, and the internet have made it such that people do not even need to leave their houses to assemble together. As Ellul argues, basically everything now is more (p. 142). Propaganda only exists as it does in the modern world because of modern technology and the pervasiveness of current media use.

Propaganda is inescapable in the modern world. Jacques Ellul (1973) discusses propaganda in a way that corrects many of the common misconceptions of the nature and use of propaganda. Through his understanding of the eight categories of propaganda, he offers an

explanation that permits his readers to investigate and consider propaganda more fully. Ellul's philosophy of propaganda provides a nuanced and effective perspective through which to explore modern examples of propaganda, but his considerations of sociological propaganda offers the best groundwork for this project. In order to understand the connection between video games and propaganda, it is crucial to elucidate Ellul's philosophy of sociological propaganda.

### **Ellul's Sociological Propaganda**

Ellul's (1973) understanding of propaganda opens up new avenues for exploration of the ways that various forms of media function persuasively. Specifically, Ellul is one of the earliest modern thinkers to discuss sociological propaganda. While the distinction between political propaganda and sociological propaganda was mentioned above, it is important further unpack the latter for its relevance to the video game medium. Ultimately, through Ellul's arguments of sociological propaganda, it will be clear that video games function as sociological propaganda, and that they spread particular ideologies to vast amounts of people.

Ellul (1973) defined sociological propaganda generally as "the group of manifestations by which any society seeks to integrate the maximum number of individuals into itself, to unify its members' behavior according to a pattern, to spread its style of life abroad, and thus to impose itself on other groups" (p. 62). Sociological propaganda is aimed at creating group coherence. He adds further distinction, arguing that sociological propaganda is "a precise form of propaganda; it is comparatively simple because it uses all social currents, but is slower than other types of propaganda because it aims at long-term penetration and progressive adaptation" (p. 67). Not only does sociological propaganda point to the culture of an in-group, but it also attempts to maintain the status quo of that group, despite other disruptive forces working counter to it. Based

on these two definitional statements, it is clear that Ellul took the power of sociological propaganda seriously, and that by distinguishing it from other forms of propaganda, he was able to theorize what makes it so powerful to broad audiences.

Sociological propaganda, while having vast diversity in terms of its use and potential, functions around similar forces: creating an environment whereby a particular style or way of life is promoted to the point of an ideological position through a use of widespread forms all working together to achieve the same ends. Ellul (1973) describes the way that sociological propaganda works as persuasion from within (p. 64), having people within an environment evaluate their choices based on societal forces. Ellul creates the understanding of these forces when he argues:

What starts out as a simple situation gradually turns into a definite ideology, because the way of life in which man thinks he is so indisputably well off becomes a criterion of value for him. . . . He is perfectly adapted to his environment, like a “fish in water.” . . . everything that expresses this particular way of life, that reinforces or improves it, is *good*; everything that tends to disturb, criticize, or destroy it is *bad*. (p. 67)

In sum, sociological propaganda functions by (1) emphasizing a correct style of life, (2) promoting a particular ideology, and (3) utilizing a variety of forms toward the same end.

Sociological propaganda initially works by focusing specifically on upholding a certain style of life as honorific or desirable. As Ellul (1973) claims, the influence of sociological propaganda “aims much more at an entire style of life than at opinions or even one particular course of behavior” (p. 62). One of the main forces of sociological propaganda is to establish a way of life that people not only want to achieve, but that can be viewed as consistent across all aspects of their life. This can readily be seen in the United States, as values such as independence and freedom drive the way people engage with each other in the public arena. In fact, Ellul pointed this out, claiming that “sociological propaganda in the United States is a natural result of the fundamental elements of American life” (p. 68). The first way that sociological propaganda

works to put people into its own environment is by establishing a way of life to which people feel as though they must adhere to.

The second step of how sociological propaganda works is promoted way of life from step one until it becomes an ideology. Ellul (1973) writes, “basically it is the penetration of an ideology by means of its sociological context” (p. 63). The ideological nature of sociological propaganda helps to describe both how it works and how it differs from more traditional, political propaganda. Ellul explains that sociological propaganda functions in the reverse of political, arguing that “the existing economic, political, and sociological factors progressively allow an ideology to penetrate individuals or masses” (p. 63). Instead of spreading a particular message that you want people to think in terms of the economic, political, or social structures, sociological propaganda takes the already present issues and utilizes them to strengthen support of the ideology and to continue the goal of the status quo.

The second phase of establishing and promoting a particular ideology is to further reinforce the intended ideology as good and every other as bad. In this, sociological propaganda functions similarly with other types of propaganda, because “it is a matter of propagating behavior and myths both good and bad” (Ellul, 1973, p. 65). When an ideology becomes prominent, it leads to the existence and growth of ethnocentrism, which Ellul argues, claiming that the ideology “leads people to believe that the civilization representing their way of life is best” (p. 67). Sociological propaganda can function by promoting ethnocentrism and judgmental attitudes toward diverse viewpoints or critique. Sociological propaganda is intimately connected to the ideologies of a particular culture.

The third force of sociological propaganda is its inclusivity of using various forms of communication and technology to spread the ideological messages. Ellul (1973), finding that

sociological propaganda functions through the use of advertising, public relations, human relations, motion pictures, and more, argues that “sociological propaganda combines extremely diverse forms within itself” (p. 63). Ellul also claims that through the activities listed above (advertising, public relations, etc.), sociological propaganda “produces a certain general conception of society, a particular way of life” (p. 65). The key point is that since sociological propaganda functions on such a broad scale, there is rarely a single person driving the reigns; rather, sociological propaganda further promotes a society’s ideological stances across all aspects of social life. Sociological propaganda works because it places people into an environment that they do not even realize that they are a part of due to the multitude of sources and forces that guide everyday life.

One key aspect of Ellul’s (1973) argument that further explains how sociological propaganda functions is in his discussion of film. Ellul considers the ways in which popular culture promote sociological propaganda through film by writing that:

[Sociological propaganda] is based on a general climate, an atmosphere that influences people imperceptibly without having the appearance of propaganda; it gets to man through his customs, through his most unconscious habits. It creates new habits in him; it is a sort of persuasion from within. ... Sociological propaganda springs up spontaneously; it is not the result of deliberate propaganda action ... many practice it unwittingly, and tend in this direction without realizing it. For example, when an American producer makes a film, he has certain definite ideas he wants to express, which are not intended to be propaganda. Rather, the propaganda element is in the American way of life with which he is permeated and which he expresses in his film without realizing it. (p. 64)

Ellul, in this passage, conveys that sociological propaganda functions largely behind the scenes, often unintentionally, but also often more powerful than overt, direct, and planned propaganda because it gets to the individual who is a “card-carrying” member of a larger sociological group. For example, in the United States, those involved with film directly promote certain ideologies about the proper way to be an American, but film is only one example of this. All major forms of

mass communication are continually engaging in what Ellul called sociological propaganda, and the people producing the content often do not realize their role in the dissemination of society-wide propagandistic ideologies.

Sociological propaganda is one of the most powerful forces in the modern world, working across a variety of levels to create an environment in which a particular way of life is promoted as the correct ideology. Ellul (1973) argues that “each medium is particularly suited to a certain type of propaganda” (p. 10). By emphasizing that the persuasion of sociological propaganda comes from within, Ellul cements the connection between sociological propaganda and video games. Ellul did not directly discuss video games as a medium in much detail, but his philosophy of propaganda applies directly to the widespread nature of video games as a medium of entertainment and persuasion. Ellul writes that “modern man deeply craves friendship, confidence, close personal relationships. But he is plunged into a world of competition, hostility, and anonymity” (p. 175). The world Ellul describes here can be easily compared to the world of modern video games. While Ellul did not spend much time discussing the role of video games in terms of their persuasive power, he did give a good deal of thought to the nature of play and the human use of games. Ultimately, this discussion is helpful because it raises important concerns about the nature of technologizing play, which further allows for the dissemination of sociological propaganda.

### **Ellul on Games**

The connections between video games and sociological propaganda are evident. While this alone would be reason enough to investigate video games, Ellul (1990) offers further



rationale by writing about play and games and the growth of video games in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, some of Ellul's greatest concerns towards the end of his life centered on the conflation between propaganda and amusement, pointing to how modern technologies are environments of diverting attention (Sichel, 2013). Ellul was only alive for the early years of video games, but his concern has proven warranted as video games have continued to evolve beyond his death. Although Ellul harshly critiques video games, it is possible to find some reasons why Ellul may have reevaluated the video game medium as it transformed over time. This section, while not dealing with propaganda directly, takes a close look at Ellul's philosophy of play and games and what that means for the current conversations on the video game medium.

Alongside the field of ludology, Ellul began by distinguishing the nature of play and human games. Ellul (1980) argues:

The need for play, which is discovered to be so fundamental to a human being, is put to use by the technological system. Man has a wonderful time playing with all the machines at his disposal—and this playing will be so much more exciting, because of technicity. (p. 114)

In the modern world play has, in many ways, become a technique in itself, despite the human need for playfulness. "Play," Ellul (1990) writes, "is one of our essential human characteristics" (p. 360). While play and sport have been overcome by technique, Ellul (1990) has hopeful things to say about games: "Games are indispensable, but they are rare and they are played with others in a relation that has a metaphysical and a social dimension" (p. 360). In light of that, games are perhaps one of the best ways for humans to be human – games demand a social dimension. Not all games, however, are good. Ellul writes that "money games" are games of obsession, which is a technical characteristic. These games, he claims, are an obsession of "having something new," but they do not last because "the players quickly lose interest" (p. 362). While Ellul certainly had

concern for games of obsession or greed, he also understood that games can function along various motives.

Ellul (1990) acknowledges that some games “create a social bond” (p. 363). Families who participate in “game nights,” where all members of the family are included in the activities of playing various board and card games, have a stronger social bond with one another. One of the main concerns Ellul has, however, is not about families who play card games together, but on the inclusion of digital games. Ellul (1990) claimed that “the computer is a vampire” (p. 364). He further argues that “the essential vice of all electronic games (including wargames) is that you are alone with the machine” (p. 363). The most dangerous factor of digital games, for Ellul, is the creation of an unreal world in that “they divert us radically from any preoccupation with meaning, truth, or values and thus plunge us into the absurd” (p. 365). The games Ellul is warning against separate the user from his or her own reality and create environments of deception. Ellul (1990) writes:

People are diverted for nothing (except the pleasure of winning) by a gigantic socio-technical mechanism. People today are perverted, not morally but in intelligence, attention, and scale of values they are perverted by diversion. There is nothing except a constant repetition of games. I would say quite plainly that the greatest threat to Western society today is not communism or Americanism or the economic crisis or drugs or alcoholism or resurgent racism, but our absorption in games and the softening, degradation, disengagement, escapism, and loss of meaning that come in and through games. (p. 365-6)

These words are a serious warning from a serious thinker. Ellul saw the way in which games divert human beings in disastrous ways – more so than drugs and racism. He is no less hard on sports either, claiming that “sports are the second great diversion, distraction, entertainment, deception, illusion, and social conjuring trick for people in the West” (p. 366). Ellul is an important scholar because he sees the true consequences of *la Technique*. Technique and technologies divert human being and perpetuate the technological system.

Ellul's (1990) thought on games, play, and sports appears to be an open and shut case: play and sport have been overcome by the technological system and human beings are deceived into the technological system through their engagement in technical play and sports. In addition, digital games deceive the user into disregarding reality and truth, and thus human meaning. Within his work on the technological system, he consistently shares that technique acts under its own laws, and that it is alluring because technique solves technical problems created by past technological advancements. His concern is not that we discontinue using technology, but that humans begin to resist the technological system by being more human. Because play, sports, and digital games have the potential to blind participants and observers of the dangers, humans must tread carefully in our engagement with these pastimes.

However, games do function in multiple ways. Today's games have just as much potential to distance human interaction and pull players, participants, and observers deeper into the technological system. On the other hand, digital games have evolved rapidly over the past two decades since his death, and many of the characteristics of games that Ellul was concerned with have likewise changed. Since the advent of the internet, a change has been taking place in digital games toward a more interconnected end. Ellul (1990) reminds the reader that the technical system perpetuates technological advancement by promising progress and efficiency (p. 102). Before the internet, digital games were increasingly efficient and isolating. The environment was as Ellul described it: A single human being interacting with a single device. To that extent, Ellul's concerns are warranted.

The digital game environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been taken up a social component that the digital games of Ellul's day simply did not have. The growing popularity of online games is staggering. The growing realm of e-sports draws the attention of many scholars

discussing online games, participant interactions, and real-life events (Gee, 2007; Hjorth, 2010; Williams, 2006; Williams, 2007; Riatti, 2014). T.L. Taylor (2012) claims that the internet is the “lynchpin in the history of e-sports” (p. 9). Whether or not Ellul (1990) would change his mind about the current environment of digital games does not change the fact that he would still be studying the phenomenon with gusto. Digital gaming has changed, and with it, so has the human experience of digital games.

E-sports can be seen as the human reaction to the issues created by the influence of *la Technique* on the video game medium. Online video games allow people to interact with each other, but real life e-sports competitions can allow humans to communicate meaningfully with others while they engage in activities they are passionate about. Ellul is hard on play, sports, and digital games in his writing because of their ability to deceive the users into ignoring reality and losing critical capacities. The existence and popularity of e-sports can be seen as a human reaction to the technological system – even in a medium that for years has isolated its users, people are coming together once again to share embodied spaces with each other. Despite the tendency of many video games to isolate individual people and limit potential creativity and freedom, one of the ways to view e-sports is as an example of the ability to reunite human beings who have been separated and isolated by the technical system. At the heart, we are still, and will always be, social beings – and it is our social nature that makes us human.

Ellul had strong words against video games. Despite writing in the early years of widespread video game development (1980s), Ellul’s (1990) concerns remain relevant to this day. Video games have a propensity to individualize and isolate the user, functioning as sociological propaganda to limit critical thought and to solidify the status quo. Video games, however, also have an important role to play specifically because they function along the same

lines as sociological propaganda, whereby they can teach important cultural knowledge and can push toward narratives that uphold and support diversity of thought and experiences.

Additionally, video games have the potential to take a technology and reincorporate the human, bodily presence. This, however, does not admonish the video game environment from the consequences created by its nature as sociological propaganda.

## **Conclusion**

Jacques Ellul's philosophy of propaganda enlightens our understanding of the persuasive effect of video games. Ellul (1973) discusses propaganda in a unique and substantive way, finding that the technological, modern world is filled with propagandas. Ellul establishes a vocabulary for working with modern forms of propaganda from a standpoint without prejudice, arguing that to best understand the nature of propaganda one must observe both its positive and negative qualities and functions. In the exploration of video games in terms of persuasion and propaganda, Ellul's philosophies stand out among other theories of propaganda due to his introduction of a new classification of propaganda: sociological propaganda. Video games are one of the primary examples of sociological propaganda in the modern, technological world. Due in part to their ubiquity in popular culture and the lives of many, video games offer a massive platform for message construction and persuasive dissemination.

This chapter's primary focus was on Ellul's sociological propaganda and how it can be used in conjunction with a study on persuasion in video games. Ellul's (1973) thinking in *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* sets him apart from other theories of propaganda both from his in-depth study of the nature of propaganda and by further expanding propaganda to a level that includes far more than political propaganda during times of war. Specifically,

through his philosophy of sociological propaganda, Ellul allows for the analysis and critique of mass forms of communication and the messages, willingly or unknowingly created, that have an immense effect on the general population. Despite the strong concern that Ellul had about video games later in his life, it is clear that through his concern he urged to consider them more fully, particularly in their connection to sociological propaganda.

Ellul provided a case for studying various forms of media for their propagandistic qualities, but he also pointed to the need for a critical awareness of the dangers of the prevalence of propaganda in the modern world. Specifically, Ellul (1973) argues that “conformity of life and conformity of thought are indissolubly linked” and that “such conformity can lead to unexpected extremes” (p.68). Propaganda works by making the individual so connected to the aims of society that they can no longer function outside of that context or those beliefs. Ellul’s greatest concern with propaganda was that it would limit critical thinking and creativity to such a degree that people would cease to live out some of the most important characteristics of human life. That concern is also the primary concern of this project, that video games are creating an environment that limits human thought, growth, and prevents players from engaging with important issues in their lives.

The arguments raised in this chapter will return in Chapter Four, focusing on the ways in which video games function as both overt and covert persuasion. Through Ellul’s philosophy of propaganda, video games can be understood persuasively based on their sociological implications. By exploring the ways in which video games can be used as overt persuasion, it allows for a theoretical framework through which to explore covert persuasion in video games in Chapter Five. Ellul’s thinking helps to construct an indispensable portion of this theoretical framework by his philosophy of sociological propaganda and concern for the scope of modern

propaganda. The final theoretical addition is found in Kenneth Burke's theory of persuasion through identification, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Through the intermeshing of their philosophical and theoretical foundations, it is possible to craft a theory capable of analyzing and criticizing examples of covert persuasion happening in video games.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Burkean Rhetoric: Understanding Culture, Identification, and Unconscious Persuasion

#### **Introduction**

Human beings communicate over a wide array of media using sounds and images, natural and manufactured channels, and surpassing temporal and spatial distances. With the advent of computer technology and the transition to the video game medium, messages have been spread to massive audiences. Messages that are sent through video games exist on a spectrum between very simple and exceedingly complex, both in terms of how the individual games work but also in the meaning behind the games. Thus, video games are inherently and firmly within the realm of rhetoric and rhetorical theory. Kenneth Burke, one of the most prominent rhetorical scholars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, provides a theoretical vocabulary for the analysis and critique of video games and the meaning systems they employ and promote.

Kenneth Burke was a prolific writer, covering a vast series of multidisciplinary subjects that all intertwined with his understanding of how rhetoric works within and among human beings. Even from his earliest writings, his thinking remained relevant to the remainder of his work; in many ways his scholarly corpus continued to build upon the same major coordinates of rhetorical theory and criticism. Burke's most important contribution, at least to this project, is his considerations of the connections between culture and rhetoric. Through an exploration in two of his major texts, *Permanence and Change* (1954) and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1969b), and a few select other writings, Burke aids in the construction of a theory through which to explore the persuasiveness of the video game medium. Additionally, Burke also begins to further unpack the idea raised by Ellul's (1973) sociological propaganda through Burke's understanding of covert or



unconscious persuasion. Burke provides a rhetorical lens that can be used to analyze and critique human messages and meanings.

This chapter unpacks the rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke in order to move forward in the creation of a theory to analyze and critique the persuasiveness of video games. Initially, Kenneth Burke's life and scholarship will be briefly discussed to present his major scholarly contributions to the field of rhetorical studies as well as to introduce some of his major metaphors. Second, Burke's (1954) *Permanence and Change*, among his other writings, will present a case for the deep connection between rhetoric and culture. Third, Burke's (1969b) *A Rhetoric of Motives* will be considered for a fuller understanding of how persuasion works, via one of his major ideas raised in the book, identification. Fourth, Burke's inclusion of covert or subconscious persuasion expands the possibilities of his rhetorical theory into the analysis of video games and also connects his rhetorical theory to the philosophy of propaganda raised by Ellul discussed in Chapter Three. Finally, the main contributions of Burke to this project will be addressed and summarized, ultimately pointing to the importance of rhetorical sensitivities in the understanding of video game persuasion.

### **Kenneth Burke: An Overview**

Kenneth Burke is an important figure in the field of rhetorical study, but his scholarly influence stretches to many other fields of study. Burke was exceedingly well read and largely self-taught. He dedicated his life to thinking about questions that most people neglected to consider, and by doing such he was a pivotal figure in the shifts that were happening throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of historical rhetoric, philosophy, and human nature. He was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1897, attended Ohio State University and Columbia University

(dropping out of both before receiving a degree), and lived much of his life on a farm near Andover, New Jersey until he died in 1993. Burke was heavily influenced by other thinkers, such as Aristotle, Marx, and Nietzsche, but also had a unique mind that could see connections that others would (and still do) miss. While Burke certainly was a theorist who influenced many other thinkers, he was also, in many ways, his own greatest critic and continued to edit and reflect on his own thinking and writing throughout his life. Burke has had a gigantic impact on the field of rhetorical studies (among other areas), and his thinking will continue to play a significant role in the years to come.

Burke never ceased to write, and then rewrite, about a wide range of thoughts and concerns. His scholarly corpus officially covers well over 30 years, from his early works of literature in the 1920s to some of his last completed theoretical works in the 1960s. These dates, however, fail to tell the whole story, as Burke continued writing into the 1990s. In fact, having left unfinished some of his final projects, his work continued to be published posthumously for years after his death, and there are still aspects of his writings that are in the process of being published. Another aspect of Burke's writing was his vast correspondence, including Malcolm Cowley, William Carlos Williams, and Ralph Ellison. Aside from his scholarly writing, he also wrote prose and poetry, and he also was very well versed in musical history and theory. He was an editor of *The Dial*, lecturer, translator, and critic. Burke's thoughts and writings were informed by his particular circumstances, but they continue to have a significant impact on modern scholarship, particularly in terms of rhetorical study.

Throughout his life, Kenneth Burke wrestled with understanding the human condition and language use. These issues are the driving force behind most of his major works: *Counter-Statement* (originally published in 1931), *Permanence and Change* (originally published in

1935), *Attitudes Toward History* (originally published in 1937), *Philosophy of Literary Form* (originally published in 1941), *The Rhetoric of Religion* (originally published in 1961), and *Language as Symbolic Action* (originally published in 1966). Burke, however, is best represented by his trilogy/tetralogy of motives, including *A Grammar of Motives* (originally published in 1945), *A Rhetoric of Motives* (originally published in 1950), and the unpublished volume *Symbolic of Motives*. *A Grammar of Motives* and *A Rhetoric of Motives* are consistent with Burke's other writings and together present a summary of Burke's rhetorical theory.

Burke is commonly referred to as a critic, with an extensive knowledge about literature and music and his time spent both as an editor of a journal and a music critic for a magazine. Burke, however, was also his greatest critic, never being completely happy with his own writing he continually edited, reworked, rethought, and ultimately argued with himself. This was, in large part, due to his emphasis on the dialectic, whereby two terms or ideas may seem to be polar opposites, but can actually work much closer together, despite inherent tensions that may exist. This is readily evident in one of his titles, *Permanence and Change*, in which Burke (1954) explains that humans exist in the tension between the flow and stability of culture. Dialectical matters pervade Burkean theory, and in order to fully engage with his theory, it is important to recognize their dialectical basis.

Kenneth Burke lived a long, productive, and influential life. His thinking continues to be included in scholarly conversations decades after his death. He was a foundational thinker in rhetorical theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but his theoretical frameworks also extend into new and exciting areas. Specifically in terms of video games his theories reveal the enormous persuasive power that they can have. The remainder of this chapter grapples with specific ideas from within

Burkean theory that are most relevant to the discussion of video games and persuasion, starting first with the cultural insights that Burke raised in *Permanence and Change*.

### **Understanding Culture: Permanence and Change**

In *Permanence and Change*, Kenneth Burke (1954) presents a case for the dialectical nature of culture as he explores the complex relationship between human life and the societies that we form. The book represents a key point in Burkean thought because it pulls heavily from his other, earlier writings and begins to draw poignant conclusions about the nature of cultural shifts. Burke (1984) himself claims that “*Permanence and Change* in effect takes up where *Counter-Statement* left off” (p. 302-3). Moreover, the theoretical framework crafted in *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950) has clear connections to Burke’s argument throughout *Permanence and Change*.

*Permanence and Change*, in Burke’s (1954) opinion, is “more like one voice in a dialogue” (p. xlix). This does not, however, mean that Burke shies away from making strong critiques in his argument. Rather, Burke’s purpose throughout *Permanence and Change*, is threefold: (1) to explore where meanings come from, (2) examine how meanings change, and (3) explain what happens when meanings become solidified or if they cannot remain as they are. Hugh Duncan, in the introduction to *Permanence and Change*, summarizes the book claiming that “the heart of Burke’s argument is simple enough, namely, that symbolic forms affect conduct because of the ways in which they affect communication, and thus all action” (p. xx-xxi). The themes that exist throughout the work all circle around the same notion, “that all living organisms interpret many of the signs about them” (Burke, 1984, p. 5). To best understand the importance of Burke’s thought, it is necessary to come to terms with the vocabulary he builds

into his theoretical work. This section will explore major themes found in *Permanence and Change* in order to trace Burke's (1954) argument on cultural meaning and flux, first through the interplay of interpretation, orientation, and motive, and second through the metaphors of piety, guilt, order, and recalcitrance.

Burke (1954) begins *Permanence and Change* with the argument that human experience is shaped by human language and the meanings of our signs and symbols. Humans are not unique in our engagement with the environment in terms of *that* we interpret, but rather *how* we interpret. Human beings, because of our capacity to use language, not only interpret our environments, but, as Burke argues, "We may also interpret our interpretations" (p. 6). Interpretations arise from deep within human beings, often revealing significant aspects of one's inner-most thoughts. For this reason, Burke claims that effective communication must appeal to the interests of those involved (p. 37). Human interpretations, albeit complex on their own accord, contribute to a larger framework that Burke names orientations.

Burke (1954) compares orientations to the German *weltanschauung*, or worldview, and further argues that "an orientation is largely a self-perpetuating system, in which each part tends to corroborate the other parts" (p. 169). Thus, being "a schema of serviceability," a person's orientation is one of the driving forces in how they live, what decisions they make, and what thoughts occupy (or preoccupy) them on a regular basis (p. 21). One's orientations drive one's interpretations of meaning, but meaning also comes from the environment, from other people through interactions, and from the groups to which one belongs.

Motives, according to Burke (1954), "are subdivisions in a larger frame of meanings" (p. 19). Whereas an orientation questions how a person perceives and interprets the world, a motive is connected much closer to action, how one engages with the world. Burke argues that motives

function in terms of broader orientations, claiming that “a motive is not a fixed thing, like a table, which one can go and look at. It is a term of interpretation, and being such it will naturally take its place within the framework of our *weltanschauung* as a whole” (p. 25). Coming full circle, Burke argues that motives, as “distinctly linguistic products,” function as patterns through which one engages in the process of interpretation (p. 35). To sum, one interprets the world, other people, and interactions according to their orientations, and they further act according to how their motives cohere or conflict with the systems of orientations that generate their larger environment or culture. This, by its cyclical nature, is Burke’s argument for how meaning, and thus culture, is formed. Burke then moves into a discussion of how meaning and culture changes, and the difficulties associated with times of change.

Permanence, in cultural terms, is reinforced by the meaning structures above. Burke (1954) introduces the concepts of piety, guilt, and order in his discussion of how a culture maintains itself over time as a self-perpetuating structure on a grand scale in a similar way as individuals function according to their orientations. Burke, extending motives as linguistic products into the realm of cultural manifestations, writes that “we discern situation patterns by means of the particular vocabulary of the cultural group into which we are born” (p. 35). All actions within a culture are measured according to what has been established, accepted, and promoted as what is *right*. Burke explicitly claims that society is a structure of “doing the right thing” (p. 268). Society and culture exist because of an established order, which is certainly influenced by the makeup of the individuals, but extends beyond their individual preferences and interpretations. Order, in Burkean theory, is regularity and authority (p. 276). The system of order is held to such strong standings that it functions, in many ways, as similar to a religious

framework. It is because of this resemblance that Burke uses the term piety to explain the perpetuation of culture.

Piety, according to Burke (1954), is “a schema of orientation” that determines, or provides, “the sense of what properly goes with what” (p. 76, p. 74). Piety is the metaphoric glue that holds much of culture together, because it is a unifying power that fits interpretations, experiences, and actions together into a coherent whole that is held up by shared meaning (p. 74). Similar to motive, piety eludes tangibility. Burke argues that “piety is a response that extends through all the texture of our lives but has been concealed from us” (p. 75). Individuals who comply with their cultural orientations can behave as zealots, further enforcing the status quo and helping to determine what behaviors, identifiers, thoughts, and feelings can be considered as normal, and what is identified as abnormal and, thus, wrong.

When one encounters a split between their individual orientation or interpretations and those of the culture to which they belong, they will experience guilt. Burke (1970) argues “order leads to guilt” (p. 4). Failing to have proper fit within the cultural meaning structure or hierarchy will invariably cause an increase in the feelings and drives of guilt in the individual. This is further extenuated by the pressure of piety. Burke (1954) extends a discussion of guilt-redemption and the scapegoat mechanism throughout many of his writings, but it is important to recognize that in each case the guilt is in reference to an established hierarchy. This hierarchy, through its system of orientations, self-perpetuates as it “moves to form a closed circle” (p. 262). Culture is maintained and permanence thrives until something gets in the way of the status quo.

Meaning shifts. This is seen in the history of the world, cultures ebb and flow, civilizations prosper and die, and notions of what is right fluctuate. This fact is alluded to by Burke (1954) when he first is discussing motives in *Permanence and Change*, where he claims

that as the systems of orientation and motivation change, “one may expect a change in the very motives which people assign to their actions” (p. 25). When one experiences the guilt mentioned above, one can attempt to alleviate their guilt either by changing themselves, through the utilization of a scapegoat vessel, or by altering the meaning structures. Despite the difficulty, if one chooses to attempt to change the culture, “he must not *surrender* to the environment; he must *change* it” (p. 172). Cultural change often arises out of the conflicts found within the system, when guilt drives individuals into action.

Burke (1954), in addition to his argument for the impetus for cultural shifts, also explains the process and impact of cultural change. He writes: “When a superstructure of certainties begins to topple, the individual minds are correspondingly affected, since the mind is a social product, and our very concepts of character depend on the verbalizations of our group” (p. 173). Those who are at the forefront of a cultural shift, according to Burke, “try to salvage whatever values, still intact, may serve as the basis of new exhortations and judgments” (p. 173). Cultural shifts happen, and they are often replaced by similar structures or systems, but with pivoted value systems or orientations. The permanence of culture goads its human participants, but change of culture can violently disrupt meaning and interpretation.

There is another source of change in the Burkean argument: recalcitrance. Recalcitrance, often tied to the natural order, refers to the pushback that comes about from a culture or society moving beyond its means. While recalcitrance can refer to the actions of individuals, it most often stems from the environment. The continual bumping up against the limits of a culture’s progress will eventually lead to the change of course or dissipation of certain cultural ideals. Recalcitrance, in Burkean theory, can be a powerful scenic force of cultural change.



On the whole, *Permanence and Change* presents Burke's (1954) argument about culture and cultural shifts. He defines civilization as the "whole complex" of the "manifestations of the ethical or creative impulse" (p. 263). He further explains that through societal participation individuals are oriented according to an established hierarchy (the right thing) that separates normal from abnormal (p. 266). Breaking from the established hierarchy can bring about cultural change, where new meanings and orientations are prioritized. Change can also be a result of recalcitrance, to which Burke writes that "men build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of an abyss" (p. 272).

Burke's (1954) *Permanence and Change* provides an important and effective case for the discussion of cultural meanings, interpretations, and interactions. The arguments presented here will aid in the forthcoming analysis of persuasion in video games by creating a structure from which to understand how cultures come to be and what can cause cultural change. Without a more complete understanding of how persuasion itself happens, however, the investigation would come up short. The following section expounds persuasion through the Burkean discussion of identification.

### **Understanding Identification: The Power of Persuasion**

Kenneth Burke believed that the best way to understand rhetoric was through a term he utilized heavily throughout his writing: identification. Identification in Burkean theory is best presented in *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1969b). Occupying the central position of his trilogy of motives, Burke's *Rhetoric of Motives* plays a key role in his arguments about rhetorical theory. Through this text and a later work, an article titled "The Rhetorical Situation" (1973b), this

section aims to establish Burke's theory of rhetoric through explaining his understanding of identification.

Burke (1969b), in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, builds a case for viewing how people interact with each other rhetorically through the mechanism of identification. Burke claims that "the *Rhetoric* deals with the possibilities of classification in its partisan aspects; it considers the ways in which individuals are at odds with one another, or become identified with groups more or less at odds with one another" (p. 22). Classification, one of the means of language use, provides a key insight as to the ways in which individuals and groups function, commune, and are at odds with one another. Thus, the partisan aspect of rhetoric is built into the functioning of identification or, as Burke points out, division. Burke's understanding of rhetoric, identification, and division reveals the effect and potency of rhetoric.

Kenneth Burke (1969b) defines rhetoric in a few different ways. On the whole, Burke ultimately concurs with an Aristotelian definition of rhetoric, a fact evident by his explicit definition: "Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, or a study of the means of persuasion available for any given situation" (p. 46). Burke deliberately mirrors Aristotle's definition in his discussion of rhetoric, but he also pushes beyond the "traditional" understanding to unpack more of the implicit meaning behind Aristotle's philosophy. Burke further offers a description of rhetoric by stating that rhetoric is "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (p. 43). Additionally, he also offers that rhetoric is "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (p. 41). Despite the differences in these definitions of rhetoric, they each point to the same conclusion: Human beings, through language use, engage in persuasion through a process of identification and division.

Burke (1969b) announces the two major aspects of rhetoric: identification and audience. Central to this argument is the importance of determining who is similar and who, or what, is different. Burke writes, “Since identification implies division, we found rhetoric involving us in matters of socialization and faction” (p. 45). He continues, explaining how rhetoric functions:

A speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker’s interests; and the speaker draws on the identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience. So there is no chance of our keeping apart the meanings of persuasion, identification (“consubstantiality”) and communication (the nature of rhetoric as “addressed”). (p. 46)

In this statement, Burke is arguing for the necessary inclusion of identification in rhetorical theory, because identification is the main force of persuasion between a speaker, an idea, and the audience. While the inclusion of identification into the discussion is now evident, little has yet been said here about the implications of a rhetorical theory informed by identification.

Burkean theory holds that identification is an important and inseparable aspect of rhetoric. Burke (1969b) defines identification as “uniqueness as an entity in itself and by itself, a demarcated unit having its own particular structure” (p. 21). This is a useful definition, particularly given Burke’s discussion of the ability for a message or action to change one’s identification. During times of change, shifts in identification are most possible. Introducing the concept of consubstantiation, or when two separate entities believe themselves to share some identification with each other, Burke unifies the two aspects of rhetoric mentioned above, identification and the audience. When one is identified with an audience, Burke claims that one “is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (p. 21). Identifying with one another, or in Burkean terms, becoming consubstantial, points also to the other side of the dialectic: division.

Burke (1969b) explains identification by offering the critique that while one is aiming to identify with their audience, they will always be distancing themselves from a different audience. He claims that “identification is compensatory to division,” and further argues that “if men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity” (p. 22). It is through this idea that the Burkean understanding of rhetoric gains such important traction in the discussion of rhetoric. Rhetoric is a matter of identification, and thus division, because people are very much so *not* consubstantial with one another. Burke clarifies: “In pure identification there would be no strife ... but put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric” (p. 25). Because pure identification does not exist, there will always be uncertainty, ambiguity, and strife. Burke, while understanding the importance of identification in rhetoric, also points out some of the problems that can arise when identification goes awry.

In “The Rhetorical Situation,” Burke (1973b) extends his earlier discussion of identification and rhetoric. The key addition Burke makes to his previous theory of identification is in terms of the context that the individual exists in. He writes, “even when considered close up, the identity of the “self” or “person” becomes part of a collective texture involving language, property, family, reputation, social roles, and so on – elements not reducible to the individual; and the same is true of our physical nature” (p. 265). Burke certainly alluded to the influence of one’s environment when crafting his argument around identification, but even within his own claims, earlier mentions of identification neglected, at least in part, the role of the environment on the individual. He continues: “After birth, the *identity* of each separate human organism then undergoes various modes of identification, first with mother, nurse, immediate surroundings,

toys, etc., then developing out of infancy into identification with family, friends, church, nation, etc.” (p. 266). The individual, while being one combined substance, is multifaceted. “In brief,” Burke argues, “he may *identify* himself with such bodies or movements, largely through sympathetic attitudes of his own” (p. 268). The individual, while a unique entity that functions along the principle of individuation, exists among others, both in terms of other individuals and with groups, whether together or opposed. Burke explains how identification works between an individual and other entities via what he calls the three heads of identification.

Burke (1973b) establishes three heads of identification: Sympathy, antithesis, and inaccuracy. The first, sympathy, is the most relevant to common persuasion. Also referring to it as rapport, Burke discusses sympathy as creating similar thoughts, feelings, values, and emotions between the individual and the audience, thus working to create consubstantiality and ultimately to persuade the audience toward a particular attitude. The second, antithesis, points to the notion of division. Antithesis, as a head of identification, functions through the mechanism of segregation, emphasizing a particular union or disunion and pointing to the divide between “us” and “them.” This can also be used persuasively to unite against a common enemy, despite lacking a more permanent basis of consubstantiality, for example in allegiances during wartime.

The final, and most troublesome, head of identification is in inaccuracy or false assumption. Burke’s (1973b) central argument here is pointing at the third head, and he argues that “we fail to draw the lines at the right places” (p. 271). Identification by false assumption or inaccuracy happens when consubstantiality is believed or perceived, but in actuality does not exist. Burke, arriving at a media ecological conclusion, argues that one example of this type of identification exists between human beings and machines. He writes “here is a fundamental *moral* problem. It seemed to me that we, as individuals, are easily tempted to mistake these

mechanical powers for our very own” (p. 269). He further argues that “such thoughts concern man’s *identification* with his machines in ways whereby he mistakes *their* powers for *his*, and loves himself accordingly” (p. 270). While there is much to unpack from these two statements, it is important to remember that Burke is using this as an example of identification by false assumption, but that this relationship can also exist between individual people and also between and among groups. Identification by false assumption is of paramount importance to the discussion of rhetoric, especially in a partisan society.

Burke did not wish to change the historical understanding of rhetoric, but rather wanted to reorient rhetoric through identification as a way to better understand the complexities involved in engaging with rhetoric. Indeed, the theoretical framework of identification provided by Burke throughout his writings expands the possibilities for studying language use in all forms. Identification explains the power of rhetoric, but it also points to how rhetoric can be used and exploited. Burke raised a major concern with identification in rhetoric because of the potentialities of misidentification, or identification by false assumption or inaccuracy. In instances of this, mistaken consubstantiality can lead to problematic, even dangerous, conclusions. While identification and his work on rhetoric is probably the most significant aspect of Burke’s *Rhetoric of Motives*, there is one additional concept that Burke raises, specifically for an investigation into covert persuasion in video games, that of unconscious persuasion.

### **Understanding Unconscious: Covert Persuasion**

Kenneth Burke does not spend much time discussing the intersection between the unconscious and rhetoric, but the places in which he does reveals significant implications about the way that rhetoric can function in the world. The unconscious was a term popularized by a

variety of thinkers in the psychoanalysis movement, particularly Sigmund Freud, and it continues to be at the center of many scholarly and professional debates. According to Johnson (2009), “Burke mentions Freud in nearly every concept that rhetorical scholars have employed in rhetorical criticism” (para 6). Burke also deals with psychoanalysis in many places throughout his writing, though because of the scope of this project, this section will largely stick to the specific passages in which Burke makes an explicit connection between rhetoric, language, and the unconscious.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the connection is important to consider because, as Ambrester (1974) argues, “it is of utmost importance that the rhetorician understand Burke’s concepts of the unconscious, for they are in essence propaedeutic to comprehension of Burke’s rhetorical theory” (p. 205). Because of Burke’s emphasis on identification in his rhetorical theory, the unconscious has a vital role to play in this discussion.

One of the most interesting passages on the unconscious in Burke’s (1969b) writing comes from the introduction to *A Rhetoric of Motives*. He writes: There is an intermediate area of expression that is not wholly deliberate, yet not wholly unconscious. It lies midway between aimless utterance and speech directly purposive” (p. xiii). Much of rhetorical history focuses solely on that which is intended to be persuaded and determining the best ways to accomplish those goals; but, what Burke does by making this argument is to open the doorway to study persuasion that happens outside the realm of direct intent. Burke offers an extended commentary by providing one example as to what he means, claiming that a person may be selfish or communal, and that their purposes in persuasion, while unbeknownst to them, will push toward one of those goals via public expense or self-sacrifice. While this is a helpful example up front, it

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<sup>1</sup> Wright (1993) recommends using the metaphor of the preconscious because in many instances Burke refers to the unconscious practically as things yet brought to the conscious. Wright’s argument centers on keeping the unconscious separate and pure without removing the thrust of Burke’s argument. For the sake of clarity, Burke’s own linguistic choices will be presented here.

is limiting and fails to capture the breadth and depth that Burke's statement can cover. Further unpacking Burke's notion of the unconscious will elucidate both its connection to rhetorical theory and also will push toward the ultimate purpose of this project, discussing the implications of covert persuasion in video games.

Burke discusses the unconscious in a few main sections, but it is important to consider how his argument moves from the introductory statement from *Rhetoric of Motives*. Later in the book, Burke (1969b) further discusses the unconscious as that which is "not yet made verbally explicit" (p. 167). He writes: "at the point where the rhetoric of "identification" merges with the "unconscious," we might consider Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia*" or, additionally, Longinus' *On the Sublime* (p. 167). The movement Burke makes in this section is toward poetry, or, as he specifically writes, the "realm where poetry and rhetoric cross" (p. 167). In this section, Burke draws a line connecting Dante's (and Longinus') texts to modern notions of the unconscious, which can be implicitly seen in Burke's (1966) *Language as Symbolic Action*, which will be discussed soon. Burke (1969b), through Dante, references three types of "infancies" or "speechlessness:" infant (or lack of speech because one is an infant), nonverbal (ideas or experiences that are "beyond language"), and unconscious (things yet unsaid) (p. 167). Of primary importance to the questions of this project are the things yet unsaid, because whereas each of these represent the places where language comes from, the arena of the unconscious is heavily influenced by video games, and those influences further impact future decisions, actions, and attitudes. It is clear, throughout *Rhetoric of Motives*, that Burke's understanding of the unconscious is that it plays an important role in identification, and thus rhetoric, by representing the category of things that have not yet been, or perhaps cannot be, made symbolically linguistic.



The previous paragraphs provide an important jumping-off point to understand Burke's use of the unconscious in his writings, but there are two other key passages that further clarify the connection between the unconscious and rhetoric. While Burke's notion of the unconscious might be informed by others' perspectives, Burke always considered the unconscious in his own terms, through his dramatism and rhetorical theory. According to Ambrester (1974), "Burke's idea of the unconscious views man as the actor dramatizing his role function to himself as a means of justifying whatever courses of action he chooses in his drama of human experience" (p. 206). Even though Jameson (1978) argues that "Burke's system has no place for an unconscious" because dramatism happens in the conscious (p. 521), Coupe (2005) argues that it is specifically *because* of dramatism that Burke needs the unconscious, because of the demands of the pentadic term, scene. The unconscious in Burkean terms is irrevocably connected to identification, however, and he expresses his understanding of the unconscious further in *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966) and in the article "Rhetoric—Old and New" (1951).

Kenneth Burke (1966) identifies 8 varieties of "unconscious" in an essay titled "Mind, Body and the Unconscious" in *Language as Symbolic Action*. The eight varieties are: (1) physiology or bodily processes, such as a wound healing, (2) history or things that are temporally prior but have been forgotten or repressed, (3) experience or memories that can be recalled, (4) relation, meaning the relationship between different subcategories in the unconscious, such as with different life phases, (5) entelechy of future possibilities coming to fruition, (6) pre-attention as things yet to become conscious, (7) intuition, and (8) a "catch-all" of "error ignorance, uncertainty" and inadequate knowledge (p. 71-2). Each of these eight categories has direct relationship with an individual's self-identification. Unconscious, in the argument presented here, is tied to consciousness through the negative. In essence, in the Burkean system,

the unconscious provides content to be processed and is deeply intertwined with consciousness (p. 78). Burke writes that “our conscious life introduces associative material for the kind of uncriticized expressions that the unconscious seeks to transform” (p. 77). The most important categories for the purposes of this project are numbers 4 (relation), 6 (pre-attention), and 8 (catch-all).

The unconscious relationship (Burke’s number 4 variety of unconscious) describes the subcategories of the unconscious that interact with each other to inform the conscious. Burke (1966) uses the unconscious relationship to explain that at times it seems as though as one is self-identifying, there also may be conflicting motives. For example, Burke refers to being under the influence of alcohol as one unconscious relationship because the individual may appear to be a completely different person depending on one’s inebriation. The pre-attentive unconscious, in many ways, represents the form of the unconscious. In Burke’s argument, the unconscious is drawn out as one changes one’s attention in the conscious, thus revealing the inseparable connection between the unconscious and the negative. Finally, Burke’s “catch-all,” which may seem on the surface to be a lazy, final inclusion, actually reveals much about his views on the unconscious. Burke uses this category for things that are currently unknown, or that someone is unaware of the particulars. As an example, Burke refers to a certain food dish that may or may not contain harmful allergens for an individual, but the individual’s body will ultimately react unconsciously to the presence of dangerous ingredients. Thus, while this appears to be similar to the physiological unconscious, it differs because this stems from information that *could have been* conscious, but was not.

The eight categories offered by Burke (1966) provide more weight to his understanding of the unconscious and reveal some about how it functions in the lives of individuals. The

implications of the relationship between rhetoric and the unconscious become more pronounced when considered in terms of the three categories above. To make the relationship more explicit, Burke includes the unconscious in his definition of the changing between old and new rhetoric.

Burke (1951) writes:

If I had to sum up in one word the difference between the “old” rhetoric and a “new” (a rhetoric reinvigorated by fresh insights which the “new sciences” contribute to the subject), I would reduce it to this: The key term for the old rhetoric was “persuasion” and its stress was upon deliberate design. The key term for the “new” Rhetoric would be “identification,” which can include a partially “unconscious” factor in appeal. ... But identification can also be an end, as when people earnestly yearn to identify themselves with some group or other. Here they are not necessarily being acted upon by a conscious external agent, but may be acting upon themselves to this end. (p. 203)

Burke’s argument points to the significant impact that the unconscious has on the study of rhetoric, in that identification will always be informed by some aspects that are unperceived, unknown, and/or unconscious. This fact is particularly true in the process of self-persuasion or self-identification, whereby one is determining their fit within a particular group or among particular others. The unconscious concerned Burke in its connections to identification and rhetoric, but the implications of that relationship are pronounced in investigating instances of covert persuasion.

The connection between the unconscious and rhetoric raises serious concerns for the implications of covert persuasion. Covert persuasion covers a variety of contexts and intents; it can refer to intentionally hidden messages or any persuasive content that was unintended by a particular sender. The first certainly has a sinister quality, as it implies some level of deception or manipulation against the freedom of choice of the audience. The second has import for the study of advertising, pointing to the possibility that a message can affect audiences differently and create different persuasive outcomes. The last, and most important for this project, is troubling

due to the possibility for persuasion that was not only unintended but might also be unwanted or problematic, as will be seen in terms of racial prejudice in the analysis in Chapter Five.

Unintended effects of persuasion are nothing new; rather, they have been a key part of rhetorical theory from the beginning. The goal of historical rhetoric was not just to determine the many ways that persuasion can be done, but to find the *best* way to persuade. When all is said and done, the most important element of rhetoric must be the audience. If not for the existence of an audience (including oneself), there could be no persuasion. A recurring question in the history of rhetoric goes along the lines of: How can we be sure that the audience will understand and be influenced by our message? The answer, ultimately, is that certainty is impossible when it comes to the effect of persuasion. In the Burkean system, this may be due in part to the role of the unconscious in identification and persuasion.

While covert persuasion is largely inevitable, covert persuasion can be highly problematic. While the category of unintentional persuasion might not be as overtly sinister as intentionally hidden messages, it can be just as dangerous in application. Audiences have the capacity to interpret messages in their own way. The unconscious has an important role to play in covert persuasion due to its impervious nature: Covert persuasion is difficult to recognize as it is happening and the fluidity involved can make it even harder to track over time. In Burkean thought, however, the unconscious represents that which has not yet been made conscious. Thus, to inspect covert persuasion is to reveal it, thereby making it conscious so that the informed audience will better be able to think, choose, and behave according to their own rationality. To do so, however, requires a critical lens through which to explore areas of possible covert persuasion.

While just one aspect of his views on rhetoric, the unconscious represents an important turning point in Burkean theory. Burke's emphasis on the unconscious and its connection to identification and rhetoric reveals how important of a role he believed that the unconscious plays in persuasion. The relationship between identification and the unconscious implicates some of the more troubling aspects of influence, because messages can be persuasive in ways that were unintended or unforeseen. The conclusions drawn here place great onus on message creators to explore the areas of *possible* persuasion in their messages, which is a seemingly impossible task. Even though one can never be completely certain of the persuasive effects of their message, Burkean theory illuminates that in many ways more care should be given to the ways that the unconscious can affect the persuasive process.

### **Culture, Identification, and the Unconscious in Video Games**

Video games, as persuasive tools, function along the Burkean theoretical lines of culture, identification, and the unconscious. Burke's (1954) argument about culture in *Permanence and Change* can explain how video games can be used to create, change, and maintain culture and cultural ideals. Identification, a central term for Burke (1969b; 1973b), offers a new perspective on rhetoric and rhetorical theory, ultimately showing the ways in which identification can be used in video games toward persuasive ends. The unconscious plays an important role in identification, but it also lays bare the possibility that video games are creating persuasive messages that are unintentional, unperceived, and potentially problematic. This section will move through the theoretical foundations from above into a discussion on video games and persuasion.

Culture, by its very essence, is dialectical. Burke (1954) emphasizes this nature of culture as he discusses how culture is formed and how culture changes in *Permanence and Change*. Video games certainly play an important role in cultural consistency because they are products of a given culture and often support or promote cultural ideals, but they can also be used toward the aims of cultural change, by pointing out particular attitudes, beliefs, or knowledge surrounding given topics. More importantly for this project, video games also play an important role in cultural interpretation. Video games present ideological frameworks that support and reinforce particular cultural piety. As an example, many popular video games involve shooting elements, a factor that encourages players to reconsider their views on guns and gun legislation, to the point where some games have been banned for their glorification of violence, guns, and killing, despite no evidence supporting direct correlation or causation.

Despite the propensity of the video game industry to reinforce cultural piety, in many ways video games can also create cultural change by making explicit a player's conflict with societal norms. By being a cultural misfit, pronounced by certain video game ideals, one experiences guilt in the Burkean sense. Even if one separates out broader culture from video game culture, one still sees the existence of what Burke (1954) calls "cultural lag," where ideals from other cultures (or past cultures in terms of cultural shift) permeate through to different cultural layers (p. 179). Burkean cultural theory sets an initial framework to explore video game persuasion, but the investigation is further strengthened by Burkean rhetorical theory.

Identification is *the* key term in Burkean rhetorical theory. Through identification, Burke explains the function, means, and effectiveness of rhetoric. Video games appeal to the same rhetorical bases that any other communication medium does, however certain aspects of accentuated in video games that are less prevalent in other forms. For instance, identification in

video games presents a multi-faceted problem as there are many layers and many parties that are being identified through playing a particular video game, and even more so when one is playing an online video game. All of this gets further complicated when one considers that identification within and through video games all takes place within the context of one's own identification in the real world. While many people feel similarities between their online, digital selves and who they really are, the disconnect between the two often complicates the study of the processes of identification, particularly in the persuasive messages offered up by video games, whether or not the persuasion is covert.

Additionally, through Burke's (1973b) three heads of identification, it is clear that video games function along each of the three heads. Some games aim to make the player feel something for another, appealing to the head of sympathy (as with a game like *Heavy Rain*). Yet other games wish to create a dichotomy between two groups, where one is viewed honorifically (often seen in first-person shooter games, such as *America's Army*). The third head, however, reveals the most serious implications for video games. When a video game invites (or demands) a player to identify by false assumption, it can create persuasive conclusions that can either further promote problematic attitudes or bring underlying guilt to the surface and isolating a particular player. Identification by false assumption in video games can certainly be exploited on an individual level (due to the anonymity of the digital world), but it is also the argument of this project that identification through false assumption is an industry-wide problem that promotes the piety of ethnocentrism and egocentrism without the actual intent by industry leaders. In significant ways, the unconscious is goading along these structures of piety.

Burke's (1969b) revelation that some rhetorical power is drawn from the unconscious is ground breaking when one considers the implications for video game persuasion. He seems to

make the argument quite casually in the introduction to *A Rhetoric of Motives*, pointing to a persuasion that is in-between intent and the unconscious. Burke's use of the unconscious in his rhetorical theory points ultimately to things that have not yet been (or cannot be) made conscious. Video games, particularly in the stories they tell and the worlds they create, are filled with aspects of unconscious persuasion. In Burkean thought, however, covert persuasion can be revealed because things that are unconscious can be made conscious. Through the explication and creation of a working theory to investigate covert persuasion in video games in Chapter Four and the utilization of the framework to explore three case studies in Chapter Five, this project aims to elucidate the existence of covert persuasion in video games.

Each of the sections about video games and Burkean theory from above present a compelling case for the inclusion of Burkean thought in game studies; when they are all assembled together, however, they form a crucial underpinning for the rhetorical investigation of video games. Video games (and video game culture) help to build, maintain, and change general culture. Video games can be used persuasively with intent, but they also have great persuasive power through identification involving the unconscious and the cultural ramifications that connection brings about. By understanding the role of Burkean rhetorical theory, it is possible to begin to critically investigate covert persuasion in video games.

## **Conclusion**

Video games function persuasively, and through the Burkean theory of culture, identification, and the unconscious the persuasive power is more fully revealed. A Burkean perspective also illuminates some of the more covert aspects of persuasion that can exist through the video game medium, and also allows for a critical investigation into how these messages get



spread and what can be done to counteract them. Chapter Four will revisit the ideas presented in this chapter while providing specific examples of overt video game persuasion in the construction of a theory of covert video game persuasion. Chapter Five will employ that theory to reveal, through three examples of covert persuasion in video games, some of the current problems in the video game industry. While Burkean theory is a useful tool for the goals of this project, it is only through the theoretical and philosophical union of Kenneth Burke and Jacques Ellul that one can come to terms with a complete theory for understanding and exploring covert persuasion in video games. The following section aims to unite the theoretical material offered in Chapters Two and Three in order to move toward a stance of analysis and criticism of video game persuasion.

## INTERLUDE

### Bridging Ellul and Burke

#### **Introduction**

Video games are a powerful, global player in technological communication and persuasion. Both Jacques Ellul and Kenneth Burke present important thoughts to consider when it comes to video games and persuasion. Ellul, through his philosophy of propaganda, directs our attention to the messages hidden inside different forms of media and raises concern for the forms of unintentional persuasion. Burke's rhetorical theory, emphasizing identification and the unconscious, reveals the mechanisms for persuasion and points to the implications of attitudes being spread through channels that require less persuasive attention on both sides of the messages. If video games are having effect in covert persuasion, whether intentionally or not, something must be done to better understand how, why, and what is happening in the video game industry and what can be done to correct the problems found through this investigation.

While both Ellul and Burke offer significant contributions in the discussion of video games and persuasion, the impact is much more substantial when they are placed into union with one another. It is not difficult to see the surface-level overlap between Burke and Ellul: both shared a concern for the ways in which technology affected human beings, both believed that language has great power in determining human life and thought, and both viewed culture and cultural change in similar ways. Even though Burke and Ellul would certainly have disagreed about some things, more can be gained through their cooperation on technological persuasion than could have been found in either of them alone. A theory of covert persuasion is best realized through the union of Jacques Ellul and Kenneth Burke.

This interlude seeks to construct an understanding of video games and influence through the cooperation of the ideas presented by Ellul and Burke. First, an overview of Ellul's philosophy (Chapter Two) and Burke's theory (Chapter Three) will be provided. Second, the union between Ellul and Burke will be made explicit, identifying the key coordinates important to the construction of a theory of covert persuasion in video games. Ultimately, the transition between the philosophical and theoretical perspectives will push toward a new perspective that seeks to better understand covert persuasion and allows a space for practical application based on the conclusions found. Video games are inherently a persuasive medium, and they are being used (and misused) to create, maintain, and change individual attitudes and cultural ideals.

## **Recapitulation**

A combination of the perspectives of Ellul and Burke generates exciting and illuminating conclusions about covert persuasion in video games. Through the previous chapters' efforts, it is evident that on their own they both contribute important arguments, but along the way there have also been hints of the possibilities that can come about by the unification of these two scholars. This section offers a recapitulation of the philosophical and theoretical perspectives of Ellul and Burke, emphasizing the key areas of thought that contribute to the ultimate theory of covert persuasion in video games.

### **Jacques Ellul's Sociological Propaganda**

Jacques Ellul's main contribution to this project comes from his philosophy of sociological propaganda and his concern and deep criticism for electronic games. Ellul (1973) crafted a unique philosophy of propaganda, informed both through his educational influences but also his personal experience in WWII as a French resistance fighter. The reason that Ellul is so

important to the goals of this project is not from his general ideas of propaganda, which in and of themselves are important and interesting, but rather from his understanding of sociological propaganda. Sociological propaganda, in Ellul's philosophy, points to the idea that the general, public media presents certain ideological frameworks largely without the direct intent of the content creators. He points to film as a purveyor of American culture, telling not only people in the United States how to *properly* live, but also promoting the value of American life around the world. Video games, while certainly having different qualities than film, functions in a similar way in the modern world. Propaganda, expanded from its general understanding of political and military messaging in times of war, has great power over the daily lives of people who fall under its purview. Video games are a prominent example of what Ellul meant through his philosophy of sociological propaganda.

The second aspect of Ellul's thinking that contributes to this project was his overwhelming concern for the destruction that can come from playing video games unreflectively. Ellul (1990) was not completely against all games, but he did believe they presented a danger to the modern world through isolating the individual and diverting their ability to think critically for themselves as unique agents in a system that promotes conformity. While the nature of video games is currently experiencing flux as a result of e-sports and the internet, both characteristics removed from the philosophy of Ellul, his concerns are still warranted. When read in combination with his philosophy of sociological propaganda, Ellul's discussion on games presents a clear case for the persuasive power of games. Video games are not only a powerful persuasive tool, but due to their role in popular culture, video games are also a prime medium for the covert persuasion that undergirds Ellul's claims on sociological propaganda.

## Kenneth Burke's Rhetorical Theory

Kenneth Burke's main contribution to this project comes from his rhetorical theory emphasizing identification and the unconscious as well as his theory of cultural permanence and change. In Burkean (1954) thought, culture is believed to be dialectical, always being torn between the tension of consistency and flow. Culture, a largely self-perpetuating structure, is built upon certain ideals that are held by a majority, creating a sense of piety. Piety, in these terms, points to cultural ideals that determine the right ways to live, behave, and believe, and it goads people involved in a particular culture to adhere to those principles. On the whole, this explains the permanence of culture, but it also directly follows that when enough people can no longer adhere to the uniform cultural ideals, that change is necessary. Video games can be used to promote both cultural permanence and change, but aside from a few small examples, they most often promote the status quo.

Burkean rhetorical theory is propelled by identification, the power behind persuasion. Mirroring and expanding Aristotelian rhetorical theory, Burke's (1969b) understanding provides an understanding of the means and effectiveness of rhetoric by emphasizing the importance of the audience and the audience's ability to feel unified with a particular speaker or message. While video games complicate the role of identification (because it adds the complexities of tripartite identification within one individual), the metaphor of identification also accurately explains how video games have persuasive power. Furthermore, Burkean identification is further clarified by his argument on the unconscious. The unconscious plays a significant role in identification because it pulls from a multi-faceted self. The unconscious complicates persuasion by explaining hidden qualities of the audience, but it also can be, and often is, manipulated when

it comes to persuasive messages. This is certainly true in the video game industry, where cultural ideals are presented, often without planned intent, and unconscious attitudes are either strengthened or revealed and made manifest when strong enough. Video games are cultural powerhouses of covert persuasion because of the complexities involved with identification and the unconscious, as well as the medium's proclivities to uphold the status quo.

Both Ellul's and Burke's arguments help to unpack some of the complexities of persuasion through the video game medium. Ellul's philosophy of sociological propaganda and Burke's rhetorical theory of identification provide the groundwork to better understand not only the persuasiveness of video games, but also the cultural power that video games have based on their ability to distribute messages that are hidden from the audience, and in many cases from the content creators themselves. Each scholar provides a unique argument through which to explore this issue, but together they can offer the coordinates to determine a theory capable of investigating, analyzing, and critiquing examples of covert persuasion. The following section connects the theoretical perspectives of Ellul and Burke in order to move toward a theory of covert persuasion in video games.

## **Unification**

This project aims to establish a theory of covert persuasion in video games. To best understand covert persuasion, Jacques Ellul and Kenneth Burke both offer significant perspectives that can be employed in tandem with one another. Both Ellul and Burke shared many of the same concerns, albeit from different backgrounds and experiences. Explicating the union between Ellul and Burke will better allow for the construction of a theory of covert persuasion. Through their understanding of culture, persuasion and propaganda, and the realm of

the covert, Ellul and Burke assist in the difficult task of analyzing and critiquing covert persuasion in video games.

## Culture

Even though they use drastically different vocabularies for discussing matters of culture and cultural change, Ellul and Burke both present similar arguments on culture. Not only did they believe in many of the same mechanisms of culture, but they ultimately shared a similar concern for the problems that cultural emphases can create and promote. Both Burke and Ellul viewed culture as a necessary consequence of human relationship. Additionally, they both also understood the complex structures of sub- and counter-cultures. Through the overlaps in their arguments on cultural formation, flux, and the status quo, the theoretical union formed by Burke and Ellul in the area of culture directly contributes to a theory of covert persuasion.

Ellul as a sociologist and Burke as a rhetorician share a great deal when it comes to their understandings of cultural formation. While Ellul's philosophy of culture was not unpacked in its totality, the snippets provided by his argument about propaganda present enough to assemble a case for the union of Ellul and Burke. Both thinkers view culture as an amalgamation of different, and sometimes diverging, ideals, acknowledging that in a culture that has been established, there will always be things that evade rationality. While these cultural attitudes might arise from time to time, they should not be considered as vital cultural building blocks. Certainly prejudice has played a role in every culture that has ever existed, but usually these attitudes are constrained to small subsets of the larger culture, where they may not be felt or acknowledged regularly. Burke explicitly and Ellul implicitly both argues for a dialectical understanding of culture and cultural formation.

Culture, despite frequent belief, is often in a state of constant change or flux. Both Ellul and Burke point to the necessity of cultural change, both because it is an important part of any cultural system but also because human beings must rely on cultural change in order to address the issues that they feel in a particular cultural context. Burke, explaining cultural change as a result of guilt from a failure to adhere to the established hierarchy, emphasizes change caused by frustration. Ellul, on the other hand, shied away from the thought of total technological determinism and believed cultural change to be a result of overcoming obstacles presented by earlier cultural manifestations. Thus, both Ellul and Burke view cultural change as an outcome of correcting problems of the past.

The most substantial contribution from the union of Ellul and Burke in terms of culture comes from the cultural need to self-perpetuate or uphold and promote the status quo. Whereas with the rest of their cultural positions of perhaps coincidental similarities, the importance of their considerations of the status quo divulges the mechanisms of culture. Through both face-to-face and mediated communication, it is a primary function of language to act as a mechanism of unification and separation. While this is directly involved with Burkean rhetorical theory, in Ellul this idea also comes to fruition by his emphasis on propaganda as *the* mechanism of cultural self-perpetuation. Propaganda, and the Burkean understanding of cultural permanence, only functions when it is believed to be correct and then those beliefs are shared by a majority. This bridge between Ellul and Burke directs attention to the second area of unification, persuasion and propaganda, by explaining the ramifications behind the crucial adherence to the cultural status quo. This understanding of the status quo will provide one of the key coordinates in the creation of a theory of covert persuasion in video games.



The dialectical perspective on culture created here from the direct connections between Burke and Ellul provides an important foundation for understanding of the rest of their union. While not glamorous, making strong considerations of the underpinnings of cultural change reveals a great deal about why certain actions are done and attitudes are held in a given culture. Cultural permanence relies more heavily on matters of propaganda, but the role of persuasion is central to cultural change. The unification of the theoretical cultural foundations offered by Ellul and Burke directly leads into a further look at persuasion and propaganda.

### Persuasion and Propaganda

As with culture, Ellul and Burke share much in how they write about propaganda (for Ellul) and persuasion (for Burke). While the differences are not merely found in their chosen vocabularies, the overlap in their systems provides significant insight into understanding the persuasive qualities of video games. It is fairly safe to say that neither of them viewed video games honorifically, but their dual concern is capable of driving an investigation into persuasion in video games that is open to dialectical findings. It is mainly through the similarities in their arguments on the function of influence, identification, and the role of the media in which the union between Ellul and Burke can contribute, through an understanding of propaganda and persuasion, to a theory of covert persuasion in video games.

A primary function of language and communication media is influence. Central to both the schemes of Ellul and Burke is the existence of various forms of influence on the lives of individuals. Whether one calls it persuasion or propaganda, messages are continually being sent to the general public with the sole intent to influence people toward certain behaviors and beliefs. The importance of this type of influence has already been stated in terms of cultural permanence and change, but it becomes even more important when one begins to look specifically at the

mediums of influence. Through the major forms of media, the Burkean hierarchy is established and maintained, goading the members of particular groups into certain patterns of behavior against the fear of being found otherwise. Propaganda, and particularly sociological propaganda, performs this function in Ellul's writing, mirrored by the inclinations toward conformity and piety found in the Burkean system. Ellul's philosophy of sociological propaganda is crucial to the consideration of covert persuasion in video games, but it is further strengthened by the Burkean rhetorical theory and its emphasis on identification.

Identification is not a term that Ellul used in reference to persuasion and influence, but in Burkean rhetorical theory it does provide an explanation for how sociological propaganda functions in influencing the masses. Burke's understanding of rhetoric via identification demonstrates that rhetoric, broadened to human symbol use, must deal not only with the topic but also with the audience. The reason sociological propaganda works so well to promote certain ideals over others is because the audience already shares some amount of group affinity with those particular ideals. This does not mean that everyone inherently agrees with every aspect of a particular ideology, but by being involved in the system an individual recognizes that in order to continue being included, they must adhere to what the rest of the group believes, even if they ultimately disagree with certain aspects of it. Burkean identification explains how certain people, unaware of this process, can develop (or at least condone the existence of) problematic attitudes that they fundamentally disagree with. Without that, they subject themselves to being extracted from the group, and identified as other – a terrifying notion in both Ellul and Burke.

Identification is pushed upon individuals in a given culture by mass-communication media.

The media plays a key role in promoting, through identification, a particular set of ideals that represent a broader culture. Both Ellul and Burke recognized this as each one takes diverse

forms of media very seriously. Propaganda is not possible without mass media, but particular mediums are more effective for Ellul's sociological propaganda. While video games did not exist when Ellul (1973) wrote *Propaganda*, he later claimed that video games are one of, if not *the*, primary medium(s) of sociological propaganda in the modern world (Sichel, 2013). Burke, likewise not writing about video games specifically, leads the way to the conclusion that video games are one of, if not *the*, primary medium(s) of technological identification. The arguments given by Ellul and Burke both culminate in the possible conclusion that video games are an exceedingly important medium to study in the modern world for the possibilities of mass influence. Not only are video games important to general persuasion, but they also help to unpack the complexities involved in dealing with the unconscious and covert persuasion.

While not as explicit as the connection between Ellul and Burke in terms of their thoughts on culture, the union is strengthened through the argumentative overlaps of propaganda and persuasion. Through influence, identification, and the media, it is clear that the union between Ellul's propaganda and Burke's persuasion offers a significant framework from which to investigate persuasion in video games. That said, however, when matters of the covert realm are brought to the fore, the union between Ellul and Burke is indispensable to the formation of a theory of covert persuasion in video games.

### The Covert

Along the same lines as culture and persuasion/propaganda, there is a strong case for the unification of Ellul and Burke in terms of the realm of the covert. Each of them discuss aspects of hidden or covert persuasion. While at times these arguments are implicit, specifically as in the case of Ellul, their arguments surrounding the existence of covert persuasion present similar conclusions on the nature of technological media and its effect on human beings. In many ways,

Burke provides the tools to consider ideas formulated in Ellul. The union formed according to their understandings of the realm of the covert between Ellul and Burke reveal the importance of the unconscious, the relationship between the covert and culture, and the role of games. Through these three key areas, the unification of Ellul and Burke strongly contributes to a theory of covert persuasion in video games.

The way Burke writes about the unconscious directly relates to Ellul's philosophy of sociological propaganda. In Ellul's sociological propaganda, certain attitudes, beliefs, and ideals are promoted by popular forms of media as a result of the context that they come out of. In Burke's argument, the unconscious represents the conglomeration of thoughts and ideas that have yet to be made conscious. The unconscious is, by and large, the realm of Ellul's sociological propaganda. Ellul describes sociological propaganda as promoting ethnocentrism and further distinguishing those who can identify as insiders and the others. Burke uses his understanding of the unconscious to explain actions and reactions that come from elsewhere than conscious, rational thought. Sociological propaganda functions by appealing to the unconscious, inviting people to identify with particular messages in a way that skirts below the edges of reflection and critical thought. The connections between sociological propaganda and the unconscious ultimately move toward the argument that video games, as agents of covert persuasion, are both a product of culture and a producer of culture.

Video games, as with any form of popular media, have a dual role as a product of culture and as a producer of culture. In Burkean rhetorical theory, the unconscious plays a fundamental role in cultural permanence and change due to its capacity to function as an informational and emotional sponge, but also for its ability to direct human behavior and guide human thought. Mirroring Ellul's argument on sociological propaganda, understanding video games through

their ability to engage with the unconscious illuminates their dual role. Next will follow a discussion of the specific role of video games in terms of the unconscious, but it is important to mention before that often the focus is on video games as a product of culture and a producer of individual proclivities. Through the cooperation of Burke and Ellul, one arrives at a more complete understanding of the way video games relate to culture, because while they certainly arise from particular cultural ideals, they also have significant sway on the continuity of the established culture. Much of this influence, however, happens in the realm of the covert.

Video games are a powerful tool of explicit and intentional persuasion, a fact argued by many, including Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric. While video games can be used to send direct, overt messages to a large number of people, by the very nature of the medium they are also always able to transmit covert messages and ideals to the same audience. It has previously been discussed that video games are perhaps the prime example of sociological propaganda and covert persuasion in the modern world, but this is due to their role in the realm of the covert and the unconscious. The unconscious, vital to identification in Burkean rhetorical theory, is a container that is poured into and pulled from without direct conscious effort of the individual. Video games, because of their reflection of the culture that they come out of, fortify a given culture's ideals. Video games are built to be fun and engaging (and to make money), but often in the process of designing video games the creators include aspects that stem from their unconscious, because of the way that cultural ideals work. Often, as this project aims to show, many corners are cut and assumptions are made from cultural attitudes and biases. All too frequently, it will be argued, these cut corners and simple assumptions promoting problematic, if not dangerous, attitudes.

Through the argument of the unconscious raised by Burke and the element of covert messages raised by Ellul, video games can be viewed as both a product of culture and a producer of culture. Specifically through the interplay of these two thinkers, it is possibly not only to see areas in which covert persuasion may be happening, but also to explore how it is happening, what messages are being sent, and ultimately how to seek out possible solutions. Video games have a clear connection to the unconscious, and it is the responsibility of a theory of covert persuasion in video games in order to address that connection. What is most concerning is not *that* video games are persuasive, but rather *what* kinds of messages are being sent through video games that, unless given direct attention, will continue to pervade video games and culture.

The union between Jacques Ellul and Kenneth Burke presented here creates a compelling case for the need of a theory of covert persuasion in video games. Through the theoretical bridges of culture, persuasion and propaganda, and covert messaging, the union of Ellul and Burke offers the tools for which to construct such a theory. The connection between Burkean rhetorical theory (stressing the unconscious aspects of identification) and Ellul's philosophy of sociological propaganda (emphasizing the functioning role of popular media in cultural constitution) demands attention to the ways in which video games persuade covertly. Between these two scholars rests the key to unpacking covert persuasion in video games.

## **Conclusion**

This interlude sought to make explicit the connections between Jacques Ellul and Kenneth Burke. Additionally, their individual contributions were considered in tandem, strengthening both their role in this project as well as the need for a theory of covert persuasion in video games. Through their union, it is clear that video games must be studied with keen

attention in order to determine their role in covert persuasion and cultural creation, maintenance, and change. The following chapters build and employ a theory of covert persuasion in video games. Chapter Four works to build the theory while working through a case of overt persuasion to reveal instances of covert persuasion working behind the scenes. Chapter Five aims to investigate covert persuasion in video games by taking three games and identifying aspects of covert persuasion in relation to prejudice and racist attitudes. Video games, understood through the theoretical and philosophical union of Ellul and Burke, are a medium that is primed for covert persuasion, and it is important to be able to identify, recognize, critique, and offer solutions to a potential issues that are found through a theory of covert persuasion in video games.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Covert Persuasion in Video Games

#### **Introduction**

Every message has persuasive qualities, and video games are no exception. In the most general sense, all video games are trying to persuade their audience to buy and play the game. While some games, like *Pong*, fit into this broad category, it is no secret that video games sometimes are designed with intentional messages or values that the creators wish the players to experience, understand, and identify with. There are many games created specifically for the purpose of persuasion, such as *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game*, published with the intent of outreach and action for campaign support in the 2004 election (Bogost, 2007, p. 93). Other games, however, function along lines harder to distinguish, promoting ideals or viewpoints that might escape the attention of both the creator and the user. Much like other popular forms of media, video games and game designers are, perhaps unintentionally, filling their games with certain values and ideals that can lead to unplanned, uncertain, and even damaging conclusions. The possibilities of covert persuasion in video games must be brought to the forefront in order to better understand the implications of video games on culture and cultural ideals.

A theory of covert persuasion in video games will allow for the critical investigation of persuasive messages in video games that, more often than not, fall below the radar of conscious attention. Adding to Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric and informed by the rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke and the philosophy of Jacques Ellul, this project is aimed at the creation of a theory of covert persuasion in video games, centered on the argument that video games have the potential to distribute messages and values to a wide audience through covert persuasion. Video games are not unique in this problem, but due to the immersion and identification that occurs



when one plays a game, video games are one of the most persuasive mediums in the modern world. If the media environment of video games continues to expand in both popularity and power, the messages and values that certain video games send to the players will likewise grow and expand. If left unattended, the consequences of covert persuasion in video games will continue to permeate culture, limiting social change and creating further distinctions between those who are other.

This chapter seeks to establish a theory of covert persuasion in video games. Following the theoretical framework provided by earlier chapters, covert persuasion in video games will be defined and explained. Second, a theory of covert persuasion in video games will be expanded, highlighting the principles of covert persuasion in video games and identifying where covert persuasion can be found. Third, this theory of covert persuasion in video games will be engaged through an example of both overt and covert persuasion in the video game *America's Army* (2002). Finally, conclusions will be drawn over the importance of a theory of covert persuasion in video games as this project moves into the next chapter, investigating the role of covert persuasion in racial prejudice in three popular video games.

### **Establishing a Theory of Covert Persuasion in Video Games**

Discovering covert persuasion in video games requires a shift of attention to focus on some of the underlying conclusions that arise from playing a particular game. The theoretical work of Burke and Ellul offers a constructive perspective through which to engage in hidden or covert messages being shared by popular video games. It is imperative to consider the implications raised by the existence of covert persuasion in video games as well as looking to specific games in order to identify specific instances of covert persuasion. Before it is possible to

look at examples of covert persuasion in video games, it is important to lay some foundational claims and definitions.

#### Axioms of Covert Persuasion in Video Games

*Video games, through interaction and immersion, are persuasive.*

Video games, like all communication and entertainment media, can be used for persuasion; however, the medium's reliance on interactivity, identification, and immersion, creates an environment ripe for persuasive messages in a way that many other forms of media simply cannot match. The interactivity forced by video games leads directly to identification, whether it is with a particular character, the narrative structure, the game-world, or some other factor. Additionally, video games are an immersive medium. While Anderson (2017) briefly defines immersion as "the uniting of the body's perceptions and the game's fictional world," he points to the phenomenological idea of feeling present within a game, through its world, mechanics, and other components (p. 28). Additionally, Soukup (2015) points to the importance of immersion, finding that a game can offer different avenues of immersion, including "immersion as psychological engagement and immersion in the fictional world of the game, which can create a paradox for the game player" (p. 25). Developers yearn for their games to feel immersive on many levels, and often the affinity that one feels for a certain game or genre are based on feelings of identification and immersion brought about by the interactivity between the game and the player(s).

All video games, at the most basic level, are persuasive. Even the simplest video games, such as *Pong* or later example *Press the Button*, elicit the player to continue playing. In the modern world, video games are not just tools to self-perpetuate people playing games, but they also work, alongside other forms of popular media, to perpetuate cultural ideals and promote

political agendas. There is nothing inherently wrong with advertising particular political positions or consumer products through video games, but the ways in which video games have an effect on cultural ideals should raise attention and concern.

*Video games overwhelmingly reflect and reinforce cultural ideals.*

The goal of video game developers offers a dialectical situation. In the video game industry, profit and fun are not the same thing. Video game developers want their games to be fun and entertaining, but video game developers also want their games to sell so that they can continue to make games. While some developers lean toward one side or the other, they will not be making games for long if the two are not met in some appropriate balance. These two goals work together, and it elucidates the role of video games in reflecting and reinforcing cultural ideals. Video games sell more copies when players feel successful and comfortable with the cultural ideals being promoted, as is the case with some of the most popular video games each year, often of the shooter/war and sports/simulation genres.

Most of the popular video games are not individual games, but series. This makes sense from both a developer and player perspective. A developer will continue to do what has been found successful in the past, and the player will continue to support a game/developer that they enjoy playing. Because of this, most of the popular video games have yearly or biannual releases. The continual releasing of similar games year after year makes financial sense, but it also raises critical concern when the same value systems are also continually promoted each year. Video game culture, like general culture, finds itself in a cycle of self-perpetuation; those who have found success will often continue to find success, which is one explanation for why most of the popular video games are created by just a handful of companies.

Through the preceding paragraphs, it is obvious that the video game industry benefits from the repetition of similar cultural ideals. In and of itself, this is not necessarily a problem, but it is important to recognize the role of video games in the cycle of cultural perpetuation. Video games that seem to go against the grain, while receiving some media attention and much scholarly attention, rarely succeed enough to warrant replication or duplication of alternative cultural ideals. The video game industry is, after all, built on money, and the industry will tend toward paths that will prolong its life and success.

*Video game persuasion happens overtly and covertly.*

The general distinction between overt and covert persuasion is obvious; however, attempting to pin point specific instances of covert persuasion in video games presents a challenge if the overt messages cannot also be readily seen. As such, it is important to clarify the distinction between covert and overt persuasion. Overt persuasion is direct, intended persuasive messages placed into a game that can lead to the user developing affinity with a particular viewpoint or ideal. Bogost (2007) highlights the importance of overt persuasion in his theory of procedural rhetoric, because “video games are uniquely, consciously, and principally crafted as expressions” (p. 45). Overt persuasion represents a large chunk of the persuasion that happens in and through video games, and as such, it does demand serious public and scholarly attention.

Covert persuasion, on the other hand, is indirect, unintended persuasion that happens over time and tends to evade detection and reflection for the average user. The experiences of covert persuasion arise as the user plays through a game, and examples of covert persuasion can rarely be found in single instances. It is, unfortunately, necessary to acknowledge the possibility of intentionally hidden messages, or messages designed to have an effect over a user without recognition; however, this type of covert persuasion would be very difficult to prove. Thus, it is

much more effective to focus on the end-user and proceed forward with the belief that most examples of covert persuasion in video games are not directly nefarious. Additionally, to understand covert persuasion also necessitates the consideration of the messages of overt persuasion, as often covert persuasion exists along the edges of overt persuasion.

Between the lines of overt and covert persuasion, however, there is some complexity. It has already been discussed that any persuasion can create unforeseen circumstances when the audience begins interpreting messages. While one can consider this to be failed overt persuasion, it also can function along the lines of the covert, as users may be swayed on the level of the unconscious. A second perplexing area of is secondary persuasive goals – or persuasive goals that were not intentionally programmed into a game, but promote ideals in line with the developer’s agendas. A video game company often works from a multi-faceted persuasive approach, first persuading people to buy their game and including persuasive goals as people play through their video game, but they also wish to leave the user wanting to play more. An additional complication is online gameplay and other users. Many game developers have certain safeguards in place to protect each and every user, but no developer of a video game can completely account for the persuasive actions or messages of other players. It seems important to consider the persuasive role of other users in online games, but such consideration is outside the confines of this project. Despite these areas of complexity, it remains possible to distinguish between most instances of overt and covert persuasion in video games.

*Covert persuasion in video games is most likely unintentional.*

Between the goals of making money and building the player base, the video game industry often reflects and reinforces similar cultural ideals across the board. With those goals in mind, video game developers often wish to preserve the status quo, as long as they have received

some success over time. Since most of the highest selling video games are in series, the marketplace for video games promotes past successes and often limits novelty and alternatives in terms of the games being made. While in recent years there has been a thriving market for “indie” games (games made by independent developers), and often these games can deviate from the tried and true methods of game development, the bulk of the video game industry is captured by a small number of video game development studios. With all of this in mind, it follows that covert persuasion in games will most often be unintentional.

The unintentional nature of covert persuasion in video games mirrors that of other popular forms of entertainment and communication. While video games are set apart due to their reliance on user interactivity, the cultural values that video games promote are also similar to other forms of popular media. Culture relies on mechanisms of self-promotion, and video games play a significant role. More so than other media, however, video games also have a responsibility to create vast worlds for the player to explore on their own time and in their own ways. Because of the player’s involvement in video games, developers are pushed harder than in other industries to fill in the gaps with content in order to make the game world more coherent and believable on its own. These frequent gaps in video games are largely filled with content from the developers’ own culture, even if the cultural aspects represented conflict with the developer’s moral compass. Video games are a medium primed for covert persuasion in the modern world.

*Covert persuasion in video games can encourage problematic attitudes and ideals.*

To create a video game requires a large investment in time, resources, and effort. Some video games are released to the public in an unfinished state, but many of the leading video games each year are sold as finished products upon release date, maybe having small patches or

updates to iron out some unforeseen bugs. Because of the enormous pressure to put a complete product on the market by the proposed release date, video game developers often find shortcuts to finish their games faster. Often, this includes repeating code, ideas, or assets, whether it is from the same game or from a different game that the developer also has made. Another source of these shortcuts, however, can also be the unconscious and hidden cultural ideals. Over time, the process of finding shortcuts in coding and development work their way into the standard procedures, increasing the potential of covert persuasion.

Shortcuts, such as those found when trying to replicate a real-life environment or culture within a game, happen all the time in game development. It is impossible for a digital game to recreate any given environment of the real world with full meaning. That, however, does not stop developers from engaging with the puzzle of creating real-world locations within their games. The problem that results from this is that the representations within the game will always be incomplete, and they can become facades of real-life. The player, however, may not consciously realize that what they are seeing is only a partial depiction of the specific location. While locations are a good example of some of the shortcuts that developers take when designing games, there are other examples such as the gameplay mechanics, the narrative arc, and even the characters that can be viewed as shallow representations of a particular person or a large group of people with similar, alleged qualities. The final section of this chapter as well as the next chapter will explore the issue of problematic covert persuasion in video games, but first it is important to pronounce the four principles for studying covert persuasion in video games.

#### The Four Principles of Covert Persuasion in Video Games

Video games are an assemblage of code, but they contain so much more meaning than their binary nature. In ludology, all play is said to have meaning deeply rooted in societal

motives and ideals. It is impossible to get a complete picture of the meaning provided by video games while ignoring their programmed existence as claimed by Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric, but the content and format of video games also reveals significant implications about the developers, the players, and their culture(s). Much like other popular forms of media in the thought of Ellul, video games play an important role in the maintenance of cultural ideals. To grapple with the existence of covert persuasion in video games is to delve into the realm of Burkean identification. Through these coordinates of thought, the principles of studying covert persuasion in video games can be established.

*Principle # 1: Covert Persuasion through Identification*

The root of covert persuasion in video games is identification. Identification, as argued by Kenneth Burke (1969b; 1973b), is key to rhetoric because people continually engage in the process of finding similarities to understand themselves through those similarities, but identification also implies division. The dialectic of identification and division explains both how covert persuasion works and also points to the ways in which covert persuasion can lead to unforeseen, unfortunate ramifications. Burke's argument explains, through a nuanced understanding of the unconscious, the process of hidden persuasion, which directly corresponds to the nature of video games and the identification possible therein. These ideas are also mirrored in Bogost (2007), whereby video games are shown to be capable of teaching us, procedurally, how to identify with and divide from others. Video games are a medium that thrives on identification and division.

Human beings have an inescapable pull to engage in the process of identification. Pareidolia, seeing human faces in inanimate objects, is a phenomenon of identification whereby human beings are so intertwined with the goals of identification that they will perceive human



characteristics and qualities in non-human shapes and objects. Human beings are prone to seek out similarities, and that fact demonstrates the power of identification in persuasion. In video games, the player engages in multi-level identification, constantly comparing themselves with the characters or avatars they control, the environments and rules of the game, the stories being told, and even in self-identification as one explores the mixture of player-person in the processes and procedures of gameplay and decision making. Additionally, if the game has online features or components, even if it is just for scoring, the player engages with complicated identification as one engages with one's opponents, one's team, and the order of competition as it is played out. Thus, the interactive and immersive medium itself has direct impact on how a user identifies across a variety of levels. Identification is central to playing video games.

To ignore the counterpart to identification, division, is to miss (at least) half of the point that Burke (1969b) was making with rhetoric through identification. Despite the pull that human beings feel to identify similarities, any coherence found also explicates the differences that exist between dissimilar others. While one of the main functions of identification in human life is to find similar people with which to base one's own identity on, identification via division, or emphasizing what defines *other* or what one is *not*, can be much more potent. In video games, division is just as important to the persuasive process as identification. In fact, it is entirely possible that division is much more significant, specifically when considering the implications of covert persuasion in video games. Division works, much like Sherif's (1965) Social Judgement Theory, by driving individuals and groups of people further apart, not by what they deem similar, but by the very nature of difference. Division goads, prods, or separates in the same way that identification seems to invite or connect. The division inherent in covert persuasion in many modern video games further extenuates already complex and troublesome separations. This

becomes further complicated in online gaming, because not only are people prone to lash out at opponents, but they often do so with the power of division, creating further perceived distance between self and other. While video games function on the principles of identification, it is in the space of division that some of the most troubling aspects of video games come to the surface.

The unconscious might not be the most pronounced component of Burkean rhetorical theory, but it plays a crucial function in his description and analysis of identification and division. The unconscious, to Burke, is comprised of that which has not yet been made conscious. The unconscious is certainly useful and not altogether a bad function of human being, but it can also harbor deep, negative feelings that exacerbate difficult or complex human relationships. In video games, the unconscious is one of the primary receivers of persuasive messages. Beneath the overt claims that the game is trying to make, there is a constant barrage of covert meaning being thrust upon the player. Rarely will new ideas or attitudes permeate the unconscious immediately, but different beliefs and values that, alongside other forms of popular media, are expanded or solidified deep within. The unconscious, upon being made conscious, can either lead to adherence or rejection, but the more unconscious persuasion that is done, the most likely that a given meaning will lead to acceptance. Further, it is crucial to recognize that what is unconscious for some is *very* conscious for others. In the end, despite the complexities surrounding the unconscious in Burke's understanding of identification and rhetoric, there is hope that some of the more problematic unconscious attitudes and values will be made known and, once made conscious, perhaps disrupted.

Through identification, division, and the unconscious, Burke explains the way in which rhetoric works and how it effects human beings. In video games, each of these terms is pronounced, initially through the multi-level identification that happens in video games, but also

due to the prevalence of unconscious messages being sent underneath overt persuasion. While all covert persuasion should be deemed suspect due to its hidden nature, the combination of the unconscious and division implies that attitudes of racial prejudice and judgement can be accelerated through the video game medium. Covert persuasion in video games gets much of its power from attitudes that can be intensified by unconscious messages of division.

*Principle # 2: The Ludic Dimensions of Covert Persuasion: Character, World, Narrative, Gameplay*

The ludic dimensions of a video game are often considered the defining characteristics of what makes a game a game. Elements such as character, narrative, game-world, and gameplay each work together to create a compelling experience for the player. While many games exist without explicit answers to all of these categories, the very nature of video game demands at least one of these categories being employed. Each of them also contribute to covert persuasion in their own way, often accentuating the qualities of identification and division mentioned above, but always providing meaning to the game experience. The ludic nature of video games upholds the medium as a powerful tool of covert persuasion.

The most fundamental ludic element in a video game is the gameplay. Without the programmed mechanisms which allow a user to engage and interact with a particular game, it would fail to be classified as a video game, and instead might be better labelled a digital interactive message. The gameplay, however, also determines some of the persuasive power of a video game. Chapter One discussed many of the different types of persuasive games on the market, including those used for educational purposes, but more importantly is that gameplay is the ludic element that will keep a player coming back for more, and thus will keep the player more susceptible to the persuasive messages that the game contains and transmits. While the

genre of the video game certainly fits into the gameplay mechanics, whether it is a first person shooter (FPS), real-time strategy (RTS), role playing game (RPG), etc., there are always different mechanics that further distinguish games from each other within the same genre categorization. According to Bogost's (2007) theory of procedural rhetoric, any gameplay is persuasive due to its programmed nature. As such, video games can be viewed as one of the most persuasive communication mediums. Even though the gameplay itself is persuasive, and it also can be used for meaning creation and messaging, the importance of gameplay in covert persuasion is most often keeping a player engaged for more time. The more compelling the gameplay, the more there will be the possibility for covert persuasion in video games.

Like gameplay, every video game has at least one character. While characterization of video games can be very complex, it can also be as simple as a dot on a blank background that the player controls. Players, in some games, also play from the perspective of a character that never has on-screen appearance. Most often, however, there are many characters that fill out the narrative structure and environment. In accordance with the first principle (persuasion by identification), the characters in a given game are the most prone to identification by the player, whether the player has any say over the character or avatar or not, merely playing the role. The characters of a video game also inform aspects of division, as the characters that one does not (or is not supposed to) identify with are identified as other, and their characteristics are often portrayed as unappealing or abhorrent. Because they are creations, video game characters have infinite possibilities, but they are often also based on past experiences and relationships of the creators. The characters in a video game often force the player to engage in the processes of identification and division.

The third ludic element, narrative, is the only one that is usually considered unnecessary in the definition of a video game. Often, a game without a narrative structure still has some sort of backstory, lore, or theme that accompanies the game itself, and rarely does a game have no narrative content whatsoever. Many of the most popular games in the modern world aim to tell some kind of story, usually to work hand-in-hand with the characters to invite the player to identify in new ways and with new ideas. Despite the pull toward identification, the narrative structure of video games is often very repetitive, constructed on similar and trite plot twists, and can be easily summarized in a few short phrases. That does not mean, however, that the narrative structure contributes nothing to the persuasive messages of the game, nor to the covert messages. Specifically with the covert messages, the narrative often gives meaning through that which is valued by a given game, or on the other hand, by what is ridiculed or denigrated by the narrative structure of a game. The narrative never works alone in persuasive endeavors, but while much of the overt persuasion that developers plan into their games exists through the game's narrative, covert persuasion can also work along similar narrative lines as one plays through a game.

A final ludic element in the discussion of covert persuasion in video games is the game-world or the environment built within a particular game. Much like gameplay and characters, every video game must have some kind of game-world, but just as with the other ludic elements the game-world may be quite simple or overwhelmingly complex. Whereas much of the overt persuasion happens through the narrative structure, the game-world provides much of the covert persuasion in a game. It is difficult to create a believable world in a video game, but it is even more of a rigorous task to be certain that every aspect of the game-world tells the user exactly what the developer intends. Often, as will be shown in Chapter Five, developers spend so much time on certain elements in building up the game-world that other aspects of the game-world are

ignored or handled with repeated assets and themes. The element of the game-world can lead to overt persuasion in powerful ways, such as with the game *Homefront* (2011), but the possibilities of covert persuasion through the game-world are much more significant, caused by the habits of the developers as well as the unconscious of the players.

Through gameplay, characters, narrative, and the game-world, video games take shape in the modern world. As users engage with a game through the systems and procedures held within, they are receiving many messages, both overt and covert. While some of the ludic elements of video games more directly pertain to overt persuasion, such as the narrative structure and character development through identification with the audience, the other elements of gameplay and the game-world often persuade covertly, beneath the level of complete consciousness. These elements must be considered in any investigation of covert persuasion in video games, but they are much more powerful in their persuasion when the meaning can translate directly back onto the real world and the player's experiences.

### *Principle # 3: Translation of Meaning and Covert Persuasion*

One of the most important questions when considering covert persuasion in video games is what meaning translates into the real world. Many games are made as representations of the real world, or at least of the real world given a certain set of conditions. Other games are based in a universe that is far removed from our own. Whether the game is based on some real life element or not, however, each game can have meaning that directly corresponds to real life experiences. The very nature of video games, that it takes place in the digital realm, seems to be an attempt to get the player to distinguish between the real world and the world of digital fantasy, but the meaning inherent in video games can have a significant impact upon the real world. Of the four ludic elements mentioned above, it is necessary to ask which elements and content can

translate directly back onto the real world as experienced by the players. While games can be persuasive about content outside of reality, covert persuasion must have a direct translatability into real life.

To seek covert persuasion in video games, it is first necessary to determine what the game is telling the player. Games directly communicate with the player from the beginning of the game, often by way of a tutorial or training, but games can also communicate directly with the player through the four ludic elements from above. A game can tell the player many things about real life through the ludic elements, such as if a game portrays a police officer, the player may change their understanding of what it means to be a police officer depending on whether the game treats police officers in an honorific or pejorative light. The other ludic elements function similarly, but through what the game explicitly tells the player, they are receiving a persuasive message that can have real life consequences. Some games target this specifically, as with educational games or games of advertisement, and they wish to intentionally bring about certain results. Other games, though, go through similar motions but lack the initial, overt attempts.

Opposed to what the game is telling the player, it is possible to discern covert persuasion through what the game is *not* telling the player. This can be done in two ways, whether by omitting an argument that usually corresponds to given content, or by making an argument of the negative, proclaiming literally what the game is not saying. Persuasion by omission or rejection requires looking at different games with similarities or from within the same genre. For example, it is possible to compare the ways in which two open-world action games/series (*Grand Theft Auto* and *Saints Row*) for how they depict certain elements. While the historic roots of *Grand Theft Auto* (series) portrayed itself as somewhat of a satirical game, newer versions have taken a much more serious tone by way of character development, in a way to connect even more to the

real world and real world situations. *Saints Row* (series), on the other hand, attempts for over-the-top satire and offers gameplay that vastly disconnects the game world from the real one. Each of these games have in-game currency and apparel shops with which to dress one's character, but they both handle the nature of money differently as a player moves through the game and narrative. Thinking about these games/series side by side reveals that the ways in which each game depicts "real" life in the game world means that each one will translate differently back into the real world.

It is necessary in any instance of covert persuasion to inquire as to which messages apply directly onto the real world, individual experiences, and relationships. Video games tell players, both directly and indirectly, different things about what it means to exist within a game world, but not all of those elements directly translate into real-life situations. The fantastical worlds of video games, however, can also provide compelling cases for and against certain ideals that bear direct resemblance upon the real world. When human beings are portrayed in video games, whether they are based on real people or not, it is always making an argument about how one should or should not live, as one does or does not identify with a given character. Likewise, each of the other ludic elements can also translate directly back onto real life, making significant claims about what it means to be with a particular cultural environment or group. To consider covert persuasion in video games is to both ask what the game is telling the player directly as well as what the game is *not* telling the player.

*Principle # 4: Covert Persuasion on the Fringes of Overt Persuasion*

Covert persuasion often exists on the fringes of overt persuasive messages. When a game is attempting to get the player to believe something about the real world, it is very easy and common for the player to make further assumptions based on the game's content and ludic



elements. Highlighting the fringes of overt persuasion allows investigation into three distinct areas: Claims of value, unintended effects of overt persuasion, and the susceptibility to persuasion over time. Covert persuasion on the fringes of the overt is a persuasive phenomenon that cannot be perfectly controlled, as any message sent puts itself up to the interpretations of the audience, but attempting to better understand it will reveal a good deal about covert persuasion in video games.

To grasp the overt persuasion of a video game, one must answer the question: What does the game say matters? It is readily apparent that different games highlight different values. While the direct connection between the real world and the game world is much easier to see when the games project a version of reality (such as sports games or other games that take place in real life environments), games that present alternatives to the real world still project real world values into their created environments. When playing most games, it is very possible to answer a series of questions about the values of the game given its ludic elements, but it becomes a discussion of covert persuasion when those created elements begin to have sway over real life ideals and attitudes. One of the clearest ways to begin an investigation into covert persuasion is to first look and identify examples of overt persuasion that are happening within the game, and to consider whether they have the possibility for real life consequences for the player.

One of the most important questions to ask in terms of covert persuasion is given what the game says matters, does it *need* to be the way it is? To put it another way, would the game be just as compelling, successful, coherent, and ultimately fun, if certain elements were changed to limit covert meanings getting across to the user. An example of this can be found in many racing games, where the player can be rewarded for clean driving or dirty driving. In more realistic, simulation style racing games, the player is encouraged to race smoothly, hitting little to no

objects and causing no damage to opposing racers. Other racing games, however, congratulate the player for wreaking havoc on the racetrack, sometimes with weaponry. Both types of games can be exceptionally fun, but they make different claims about what matters in the world. The more realistic games bear more resemblance upon reality, but to place realistic driving laws upon the second type of game would drastically reduce the level of fun to be had because there would be no point for a car equipped with a weapon in a race where one is not supposed to damage another racer. Neither of these examples shows that a particular game *needs* to be a particular way, as both are deemed fun particular players, but each type of game would be drastically changed by altering the basic meanings that the games value. The questions of what matters within a game and whether or not it must be that way are both illuminating when considered in conjunction with covert persuasion in video games.

When considering the fringes of overt persuasion, it is often possible to see instances where a particular persuasive message may be creatively interpreted and result in an entirely different conclusion than the one that the developers intended. The unintended effects of overt persuasion are intimately connected with covert persuasion. While this will be more specifically detailed in the following section about the game *America's Army*, the unintended effects of overt persuasion deal specifically with the unconscious attitudes of the player, and as such persuade beneath a level of consciousness. Even though the persuasion may be quite overt, it can always be interpreted in different ways or lead to drastically varied conclusions in the eyes of the player.

Covert persuasion relies on time in order to solidify itself in the unconscious, and then it relies on even more time before those thoughts surface in action or belief in the real world, aided by other forms of media and previous levels of those beliefs or ideals. The way that the unconscious works in persuasion, according to Burke, is as a container for attitudes and ideas

that will eventually contribute to conscious action, whether reflective or not. As a player receives continual messaging toward the same ends, and even more accentuated when the messages are received from multiple games, the player will be pulled toward certain beliefs that may turn into actions given the right set of circumstances. Specific examples of this will be raised in the following section and in the next chapter, but it is necessary to understand that covert persuasion in video games can only work if the player already has affinity for the particular messages or if they continue to receive the message over a long period of time. The more time one spends receiving covert messages, the higher chance that they will adhere to them.

Video games are built on certain value structures, and each video game makes different claims about what matters in the game-world. Often, those meanings directly translate into real life, persuading the player to think differently about the way they interact with the world and those around them. It is vitally important to consider what a particular game values, but it is just as important to question whether that value is necessary to the success and enjoyment of a particular game. The meaning that exist outside of what is necessary for a game to function as it intends reveals the existence of covert persuasion in that particular game. Over time, covert persuasion will build certain ideals, beliefs, and attitudes in the player that may, in turn, affect real life engagement and action.

The four principles stated above function as a theoretical tool belt for investigating, analyzing, and critiquing examples of covert persuasion in video games. These principles are the direct outcome of the philosophical and theoretical foundations established earlier in this project, and they provide the practical tools for applying the theory of covert persuasion in order to grapple with the role of video games in covert persuasion in the modern world. Covert persuasion exists, and it can be explored through an understanding of identification, the ludic

dimension, meaning translation, and persuasion on the fringes of overt. The following section of this chapter works to exemplify covert persuasion in video games through a look at covert and overt persuasion in the video game *America's Army*.

### **Persuasion in *America's Army*: Overt and Covert**

*America's Army* is a videogame that was created by the United States Army in 2002 for the purpose of increasing enlistment and enrollment and to extend favorable attitudes about war (Stahl, 2006; Lemmens, 2011; Bogost, 2007). While the United States Army has often had close relationships with entertainment media, *America's Army* represents one of the most compelling cases to consider (Thomson, 2009; Machin and Leeuwijn, 2005). Within the video game, much of the gameplay takes place online, where two teams compete for various objectives. The single player mode largely functions as training, both in terms of a tutorial for the game and in military action and strategy. As with many other first-person shooter (FPS) video games, *America's Army* puts the player into the perspective of a weaponized soldier on the frontlines of battle. Unlike most other games, however, *America's Army* has important distinction. No matter what team the player plays for, they are playing as an American soldier. Whereas in most other games the player fights for one of two or three opposing factions or nations, in *America's Army* the player always experiences the battle as a member of the United States Army and the enemy team is composed of terrorists and rogue militants. In *America's Army*, America always wins *and* loses.

*America's Army* is one of the most widely discussed video games in terms of persuasion and propaganda, and many scholars have contributed to the overall understanding for how the game functions persuasively. The presence of *America's Army* in this context makes sense, as it is certainly a direct example of a video game being used for the purposes of covert persuasion

and propaganda. Ian Bogost (2010) argues that “*America’s Army* functions as propaganda” (p. 79). Delwiche (2007) claims that “*America’s Army* deliberately taps into the immersive game context in the hopes of recruiting young Americans into the Army,” and that it is “consciously designed to foster support for the military objectives of their creators, while recruiting youth to pick up arms in pursuit of those goals” (p. 91-2). Ottosen (2009) considers *America’s Army* “a tool for recruitment ... the purpose is to strengthen the image of the US Army among the domestic and international public” (p. 40). Stahl (2006) argues that *America’s Army* is not just a militaristic propaganda tool, but that it is a type of “lifestyle marketing” in which there exists “the creation of an immersive cultural universe that surrounds a brand name” (p. 125). Davisson and Gehm (2014) also focus on the ideological nature of *America’s Army*, finding that “each aspect of *America’s Army* is designed to generate trust in military procedure and a belief that war is about community and camaraderie,” that “training *is* the game” (p. 45). *America’s Army*, according to its own overt persuasive goals, was a success.

According to Davisson and Gehm (2014), *America’s Army* was exceptionally effective at its goal of enticing young people to enlist in the Army. They cite that in the years after the games’ release, enrollment rates did increase, and that in terms of high-schoolers beliefs about the military, over 30% claimed that *America’s Army* positively impacted their perception of the military and patriotism (p. 44). Stahl (2006) additionally claims that in a 2005 study, over 40% of people who enrolled in the Army had played *America’s Army* (p. 123). *America’s Army* had such a profound impact that Stahl argues that “*America’s Army* has transformed the rhetoric of “recruitment” as well, imitating a new language that has been adopted in the realm of commercial war games” (p. 125). *America’s Army* was so successful at its overt persuasive goals that other government agencies, both domestic and abroad, began to utilize similar methods, seen

in the Pentagon commissioned *Full-Spectrum Warrior* and the Marines' *Close Combat: First to Fight* (Stahl, 2006, p. 116). As shown here in the case of *America's Army*, video games can function effectively for persuasive and propagandistic messages. While *America's Army* clearly functions as overt persuasion or political propaganda, the game also has exemplifies covert persuasion.

As covert persuasion, or Ellul's (1973) sociological propaganda, *America's Army* influences more than increasing the enrollment in the United States Army. Stahl (2006), as part of his analysis, claims that *America's Army* is not solely about recruitment, but rather education and communication, about "putting the Army in pop culture" (p. 124-125). He claims further that "video games are mobilized to advertise patriotism" (p. 125). *America's Army* certainly has succeeded at persuading more troops to enlist in the Army, particularly in a time of national crisis post 9/11; however, the game continues to have a lasting impact on players and those around them in a far more sociological way. *America's Army* is a tool of both overt and covert persuasion that promotes what it means to be an American – that one must be patriotic, supporting any and all of the United States' military endeavors, and that one should reinforce these viewpoints to their own social organizations.

Bogost (2006) claims that "games created explicitly with ideological bias in mind ... commercial games may be less deliberate in their rhetoric, but they are not necessarily free from ideological framing" (p. 175). Mirroring Ellul's claims of sociological propaganda, Bogost writes: "it is much more likely that they are unaware that... the game can imply a particular ideological stance" (p. 180). Indeed, there are many ideological stances promoted by popular video games. While some promote similar agendas as *America's Army*, other games send different messages. There are many games that support the ideals raised in the messaging of

*America's Army*. Titles in the *Call of Duty* series and the *Battlefield* franchise support pro-military ideologies among their player bases and work cooperatively with the United States Army's *America's Army* in distilling the "militarization of everyday life" (Penney, 2008, pg. 3). These games, and many others, all work together, fulfilling the requirements for successful covert persuasion to create attitudes and beliefs in a broad player base.

There are many examples of overt persuasion in video games, but *America's Army* functions along three major claims of persuasive goals: enlistment, national pride, and military teamwork. The first, enlistment, is the most obvious overt persuasive goal. As shown by Davisson and Ghem (2014) and Stahl (2006), *America's Army* had a significant impact on enlistment, finding that many of the recruits who joined the army in the years following the game's release had played the game, and many claimed its direct connection in their choice to enlist. The second, national pride or patriotism, is less distinct as overt persuasion because the Army, who developed the game, never stated it as one of their persuasive goals, but some of the developers who worked with the army noted that it was certainly talked about internally. It can also be seen as one of the aspects of procedural rhetoric, in that since the player is always playing as the American forces, they are always given the narrative of national pride. Third, teamwork, was explicitly focused on by both the developers and the Army, each arguing that in order to give a direct representation of what real war and battle is like, they wanted to make sure that teamwork was both strongly encouraged and strongly enforced (with significant punishment for failing to comply). These three overt persuasive goals of *America's Army* are clear in the messages provided by the developers, the gameplay mechanics and ludic elements, and also in the experience of the players. The overt persuasion of *America's Army* is very effective.

*America's Army* also effectively exemplifies the prevalence of covert persuasion in video games, particularly in terms of the ludic element of gameplay. While there are many possible examples of covert persuasion in this game, there are three that mirror the three cases of overt persuasion: the glorification of war, nationalism, and in matters of prejudice, terrorism, and outsiders. The first example of covert persuasion, the glorification of war, is not a new concept introduced only by *America's Army*, but rather is a continual trope in video games specifically and popular culture in general. War, as depicted in these popular games, is fun. While games are aimed at the purposes of entertainment, they continually depict only one side of war and fail to represent the harsh realities of being on the front line. This cannot be considered a short-coming of the medium aimed at fun, but it does contribute, along with other forms of media, to create further emotional distance in the minds of players. To the game's credit, *America's Army* does depict a more realistic rendition of war than many of the more popular video games such as *Call of Duty*.

Second, the game's push toward nationalism, can be viewed as an extension of the overt goal of national pride. Nationalism is similar to ethnocentrism in that one believes that one's nation is superior to all others. Once again, the game is justified in promoting national pride due to the political nature of the game and overall intent to get people to enlist in the army, but attitudes of national pride can, in the right context, translate into action informed by the ideals of nationalism. As with nearly all examples of covert persuasion, the game does not act in isolation to create these attitudes, but rather can work over time to build/craft them or further strengthen the thoughts and beliefs that already exist.

Third, and most problematic, is the issue of prejudice, terrorism, and depictions of dangerous outsiders. The key game mechanic of always playing as the American army places a



positive reinforcement on issues of national pride, but it, like the previous point of nationalism, can villainize the other and fortify stereotypical and prejudicial attitudes, most often within this game as enemies from the Middle-East. While *America's Army* is targeted toward an audience of United States' citizens, the game is free to download worldwide. As such, it is important to consider the perspectives and experiences of those from other countries as they play the game. These views, shared by Ottosen (2009), Souri (2007), and others, can create feelings of inadequacy in players from other countries. As seen by these examples, even honorable overt persuasive goals can exist alongside problematic covert persuasion. Like the overt persuasion in *America's Army*, covert persuasion is just as prevalent and perhaps even more powerful to a broader audience.

Video game narratives almost exclusively support militaristic agendas and encourage militaristic ideals among gamers and the general public alike. While counter examples exist in the genre (such as *Spec Ops: The Line*, 2012 or *PeaceMaker*, 2007), especially abroad, the video game environment in the United States does exactly what Ellul warns about with the power of sociological propaganda. Popular, modern, FPS Video games, through covert persuasion, spread an ideology that war is good and that all should think favorably about militaristic endeavors. The video game FPS genre largely shuts down any dialogue that can consider alternatives, not because the games don't exist, but because they tend to not thrive in a context that seems solely devoted to the glorification of war. Video games, by and large, suppress the necessary dialogue to break the propagandistic spell.

The video game world is largely a monologue of pro-war mentality, with nearly all of the major FPS video game franchises using the "us-vs.-them" narrative promoting the United States in the role of global savior. This, however, creates consequences with how video games promote

perceptions of international relations and diverse people. Souri (2007) argues that video games like the ones mentioned above as “responsible for turning Islam into a death cult” and are filled with “hate speech” (p. 10). While *America’s Army* and other popular FPS games produce military values and patriotism, they glorify the United States and vilify much of the Middle East and the Islamic faith. Video games, through covert persuasion, are guilty of suppressing global dialogue about issues of racism and hatred. Stahl (2006) is correct in thinking that “the video game is increasingly both medium and metaphor by which war invades our hearts and minds” (p. 127).

Covert persuasion is pervasive and prevalent in the video game medium. *America’s Army*, designed by the United States army as a recruitment tool, provides a clear example of the differences between overt and covert persuasion, as well as point to one of the biggest problems in that most often the most powerful covert persuasion exists alongside intended persuasive goals. Additionally, while there are many examples of covert persuasion, the ones explained here can lead to unfortunate and even dangerous actions if removed from critical reflection. While *America’s Army* provides a good example for exploration of covert persuasion in video games, it is certainly not the only game that functions such. Ultimately, covert persuasion can be problematic, and it is important to raise awareness for the ways in which video games are influencing people and culture.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter aimed at creating a theory of covert persuasion in video games. Through the theoretical and philosophical groundwork laid by Kenneth Burke and Jacques Ellul, it is possible to investigate, analyze, and critique covert persuasion in video games. In a brief example of overt

and covert persuasion in the game *America's Army*, the importance of studying covert persuasion is clear, as are some of the consequences of covert persuasion in the modern world. One of the key areas of covert persuasion mentioned in this chapter was the way in which covert persuasion can create, increase, and reinforce attitudes of racial prejudice in a widespread audience. The following chapter will take that idea and, through three case studies, investigate instances of covert persuasion pertaining to the Hispanic and Latino communities. Equipped with a theory of covert persuasion, it is now possible to turn attention to the video game industry and how they depict Hispanic and Latino people and culture.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Covert Persuasion in Video Games: A Case Study of Hispanic/Latino Depictions

#### **Introduction**

Video games are an important tool of persuasion in the modern world. While the connection between video games and persuasion is clear, the impact of the relationship between rhetoric and video games is often unclear. Covert persuasion, defined previously as indirect, unintended persuasion that happens over time and nearly always evades detection and reflection, is prevalent in many, if not all, of the newest, best, and most popular video games on the market. There is a pressing need to investigate further the reach of covert persuasion in video games. Through the theoretical perspectives provided by Kenneth Burke and Jacques Ellul, as well as leading research in game studies and ludology, it is possible to not only search for covert persuasion in video games, but to also identify, analyze, and critique instances of covert persuasion and its effect on the player, the industry, and culture.

One of the biggest issues that the video game industry faces today is dealing with race and prejudice. The video game industry, while still fairly new in its historical development, is on the cusp of an event which could be viewed as a revolution. The rapid increase in critical scholarship in recent decades, specifically focusing on games and race or racial prejudice, elucidates the pressing need felt by many of a diverse player base. Much recent scholarship has focused on the ways in which video games depict certain racial minorities, usually focused on Black/African-American or Arab/Middle-Eastern people. The theory of covert persuasion has clear importance for understanding how that underlying persuasion happens through video games. In order to advance this theory of covert persuasion, advance game studies scholarship, and point to inherent problems within the video games industry itself, this project turns its

attention to depictions of Hispanic and Latino people and culture through an exploration of three popular video games, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* (Ubisoft), *Battlefield: Hardline* (Electronic Arts), and *Just Cause 3* (Avalanche / Square Enix). Video games, through covert persuasion, are perpetuating racial stereotypes of Hispanic and Latino people.

This chapter employs the theory of covert persuasion in order to explore the issue of racial prejudice in video games. The first section will revisit the conversation from the introduction dealing with current scholarship on video games, race, and persuasion, solidifying the overall purpose of this project and rationale for the selected games for the case study. Next, each of the three games will be investigated in turn, highlighting specific ludic elements and persuasive content of the game that functions as covert persuasion. The final section will consider the combined findings of the investigation and point to the significant impact of covert persuasion in the video game medium. Ultimately, working through the theory of covert persuasion promoted by this project, this chapter aims to tackle one of the most problematic aspects of covert persuasion in video games.

### **Video Games and Race: A Look at Popular Hispanic/Latino Depictions**

When video game characters are not white or Asian, they are often portrayed in very stereotypical ways. Compared to other races, there is a severe underrepresentation in Hispanic and Latino people in popular video games, and the disparity is even stronger when one ignores sport/simulation games such as the FIFA franchise, which represents real-life players from around the world in the game of soccer. The lack of representation also can further feelings of rejection or lack of fit within video game culture. While there are more video games that represent diversity in their characters each and every year, the current trend has done little to

change the characters into more representative, compelling examples, and rather has continued to build on the already stereotypical nature of video games established by its rather monomorphic history.

Perhaps the most well recognized Hispanic or Latino video game character is Pablo Sanchez, popularized by the video game *Backyard Baseball* (1997). Pablo Sanchez was not the only person of color represented by the game, but he was the only Latino (out of 30 children) to take the field in a sport that is now represented by a 25% Latino player base (as reported by the Society for American Baseball Research in 2016). Not only did the roster of *Backyard Baseball* fail to mirror real life statistics, Pablo himself was an exceptionally stereotypical player. He is described, by the creators of the game, as a short and pudgy kid who only spoke Spanish (Kessler, 2017). While the creators intentionally designed Pablo to be the best character in the game in terms baseball skill, they also developed him specifically to be overlooked, due to his appearance. Ultimately, Mark Peyser, one of the developers, claimed that he wanted to “let the little guy have a chance” (Kessler, 2017). The developers expected nobody to play as Pablo, however, Pablo became a fan favorite very soon after the game’s release. Even in a cartoony video game like *Backyard Baseball*, it seems as though players would have been just as content with a less stereotypical character, and perhaps that gets at the heart of a major problem that the video game industry and culture must begin to recognize.

In the years since Pablo Sanchez, there have continued to be few Hispanic or Latino characters in video games, aside from sports games. Levandier (2016) points this out, claiming that “there is still much more to be done in order to bring more Latino voices in games” (para 3). Aldama (2013) mirrors this sentiment, writing that “while advances have been made in the representation of Latinos in multiple mediated formats, Latinos typically appear as non-playable

character, obstacle to overcome, or simply part of the backdrop” (p. 241). While Hispanic and Latino people might not be vilified as much as their Black or Middle-Eastern counterparts, their lack of representation raises clear issues in video game development and culture. Players who identify as Hispanic or Latino are unable to play as characters that they feel affinity with, and most of the characters in video games that are Hispanic or Latino are portrayed through common stereotypes and with shallow or surface level attributes.

Video games neglect to represent large segments of the continually expanding player base, and when minority groups are depicted in video games, it is most often in either a stereotypical or vilified light. This fact is directly related to the power of covert persuasion in video games. People who play video games are constantly being fed repetitive narratives that solidify the hegemonic meritocracy and power structures mirrored within and outside of the video game industry. The lack of representative diversity in video games clearly affects non-White/Asian players in their experiences of playing games and playing with others, but it also affects the entire player base to fall prey to the covert persuasion at play. The following section explores three specific video games as examples of covert persuasion, specifically focusing on issues of racial prejudice and stereotyping through depictions, or lack thereof, of Hispanic and Latino people.

### **Case Study: Depictions of Hispanic and Latino People and Culture in Video Games**

There are many avenues in the video game medium to explore depictions of Hispanic and Latino people and culture. Whereas in the early years of video games, there were few depictions of characters outside of the homogenous tightknit community of developers, video games in the current world show much greater diversity in character, narrative, culture. Indeed, video games

have come a long way from *Backyard Baseball*'s fan favorite, Pablo Sanchez, and there are an increasing number of Hispanic and Latino heroes in popular, high-budget video games. Not to undermine the significance of greater diverse representation in video games, but the most important question is not the quantity of diverse people and cultures represented in video games, but rather in the quality of how they are being represented and the meaning, unconscious and otherwise, thus created in the player base.

Each of the games discussed below offer examples of the ways in which Hispanic and Latino people and culture is represented by modern video games. They have each been specifically selected due to their relevance to this question, but also according to their development and success. The three games discussed below, *Just Cause 3* (Square Enix/Avalanche, 2015), *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Wildlands* (Ubisoft (Paris), 2017), and *Battlefield: Hardline* (Electronic Arts/DICE, 2015), all fit into the genre of shooter, are all an installment in a larger series of games, were released within a two-year timeframe (March 2015-2017), were developed by major figures in the video game industry, and sold very well at around 3 million, 5.5 million, and over 4 million, respectively (as reported on vgchartz.com in 2018). These numbers are not very surprising, as the shooter genre is one of the most popular in modern video games. According to the Entertainment Software Association (2017), in 2017 the shooter genre is prominent, contributing to around 25% of all video game sales. Each game is also rated M, for mature, by the ESRB (the video game rating system). This means that no person under 17 can purchase the game because of its content and nature. While these games offer conclusions about the shooter genre, it is also possible to observe larger industry trends in their analysis. In matters of covert persuasion in video games, it is important to investigate titles throughout the video game industry, but the games that sell the most have the widest audience and, perhaps, the



most influence. Each of these games has been chosen for this project because of their different emphases on race, as well as to highlight how different ludic elements can be involved in video game persuasion. In addition to the example of *America's Army* from Chapter Four focusing on the ludic element of gameplay, each of these games offer clear examples from each of the remaining ludic elements: *Just Cause 3* and characters, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* and game world, and *Battlefield: Hardline* and narrative. While these games do not represent the video game industry in its entirety, they do represent a small sample of titles that millions of people have played. This investigation will begin with *Just Cause 3* and its protagonist, Rico Rodriguez.

### *Just Cause 3*: Playground Antics

*Just Cause 3*, released by Square Enix and Avalanche in December 2015, is a video game that plays on many common entertainment tropes and provides the player with an action-packed experience through the fictional character, Rico Rodriguez. *Just Cause 3* is an open world game, which means that the player has an incredible amount of freedom when it comes to exploring the world and completing game objectives. The game is set on a fictional island in the Mediterranean, Medici. Medici, also the homeland of Rico, is under the firm reign of a militaristic dictator. The overall feel of the game is loosely connected to reality, and the player frequently is tasked with performing extraordinary feats, such as riding on the back of a missile to divert its course. *Just Cause 3* functions as a practical place to start with this investigation as the covert persuasion of the game is quite straight forward and clear. Because of the sharp separation between the game and reality, *Just Cause 3* seems, on the surface, to be a game that has little attitude-shifting capabilities, but the game reinforces racial stereotypes like most other forms of popular media in the modern world.

*Just Cause 3* is the third game in the Just Cause series, a series popular since 2006 and with a new title that came out in December 2018, Just Cause 4. The series always displays a significant contrast between the game world and reality, highlighted both by the comical levels of action as well as the fictional characters, world, and storyline. Just Causes 3 is the most popular title in the series, selling over three million copies. While the new entry into the series is expected to be more successful from a market standpoint, it is also set in a much darker world. *Just Cause 3*, however, despite taking place in a time of dictatorial tension, keeps an overall jovial tone as Rico wreaks havoc on General DiRavello's forces. Unlike the two games to be highlighted later, *Just Cause 3* is deeply satirical, playing on many popular ideas and attitudes as the player is tasked with raising as much carnage as possible. On the promise of excitement, high-energy gameplay, and unique opportunities for the player that no other game can provide, *Just Cause 3* delivers.

#### *Ludic Overview of Just Cause 3*

To call *Just Cause 3* action-packed feels like an understatement. Within the first minutes of the game, the player's character, Rico, is standing on top of a plane shooting an RPG (rocket propelled grenade launcher) at SAM (surface to air missile) sites spread throughout Medici. Certainly, this is a physics-defying act, but it also foreshadows the possibilities and creativity that the player can have as they explore the game. The ridiculousness of *Just Cause 3* is enforced by Rico's arsenal, which in addition to all of the guns he can use, also includes a grappling hook, wing suit, and always-ready parachute. Compared to other games which use only one of these items, the system built within *Just Cause 3* gives the player fluidity and cooperation between these technological tools for locomotion. Despite being primarily a third-person, run-and-gun shooter, *Just Cause 3* has just as much to offer extreme sports fans and adrenaline junkies.

Overall, the gameplay mainly consists of liberating outposts, towns, and provinces, saving and defending rebels, and ultimately wreaking havoc against General Di Ravello. The always-changing, creative gameplay keeps players coming back for more as they explore the world of *Just Cause 3*'s Medici.

There are three main components that define the game world of *Just Cause 3*: the geography/topography, the culture and politics, and bavarium, a rare and valuable natural resource that has extraordinary abilities and utility. Medici is a fictional island nation in the Mediterranean, loosely off the coast of Spain, near Palma. Spread out over three regions and 29 provinces, Medici resembles other Mediterranean countries, pulling from the natural beauty of Italy, Greece, Albania, and northern African countries. There are roughly five biomes, each with distinguished characteristics from the others, but when put together, the world created in the game is quite visually stunning with vibrant colors, a simulated residential footprint, and a diverse environment for the player to explore on foot, swimming, by vehicle, or in the air.

The culture and political structure of Medici is believable, albeit somewhat shallow. Playing off the trope of an evil, militaristic dictator, Medici is ruled by General Di Ravello. Under his reign of oppression, people are silenced and killed for speaking out, the military is advanced at all cost, and the people are consistently misinformed about what is going on behind the scenes. When the player begins to combat Di Ravello's troops and military bases, the public is informed that the bases were no longer functioning as intended, so they were to be shut down, ultimately attempting to cover up the existence of the rebellion. Culturally, Medici thrives on its tourism industry, made possible by its pleasurable climate, natural beauty, and location. Thus, while the political structure is very strict and controlling, the culture is rather free-going and fluid, and residents of Medici and tourists alike are seen travelling around the islands, visiting

interesting sites, and engaging in fun activities like water sports and shopping. The main element that drives both the political and cultural landscapes, however, is Medici's natural resource, bavarium.

Bavarium is a fictional element known for its explosive qualities and strange magnetism. Loosely based on real-life uranium, it is heavily sought after and even more heavily guarded on the island of Medici. Di Ravello and his government officials are obsessed with the potential of bavarium, as it has been used extensively to create complex weaponry, but it also can be used to create energy. The energy created by bavarium can either fuel the needs of the nation or military, but it can also be used experimentally to create things like force fields. Despite its radioactivity, there seems to be little consequence to using bavarium. At the center of the world of Medici, both in terms of the island's natural resource and its effect on the political and cultural climate, is bavarium. Bavarium, thus, is also central to the story told by *Just Cause 3*.

The narrative of *Just Cause 3* essentially repeats the stories from the first two games in the series. Simply put, Rico fights against an evil ruler of a small nation with intentions to expand its power and dominate other nations. In *Just Cause 3*, Rico returns to his homeland of Medici, under the rule of the dictator, General Di Ravello. Di Ravello, who has massacred much of his own population in his rise to power, rules over Medici with a firm, militarized fist. Rico fights against Di Ravello and his forces, aided by Mario Frigo (his friend), Dimah Al-Masi (a scientist, expert in bavarium), and Tom Sheldon (an ex-"Agency" agent which closely resembles the US CIA). Rico moves from town to town, disrupting Di Ravello's hold on the area and ultimately helping the rebels to free the residents from their plight. In the end, Rico is victorious, killing Di Ravello and returning Medici to its original state. To put it plainly, the narrative

elements are not the reason people choose to play the Just Cause series, and the story told by *Just Cause 3* is no exception.

The characters of *Just Cause 3* are about as interesting as the story they are involved in. Even Rico, the main character, has very little dynamism in his personality, despite being the main character across each of the games in the series. Rico Rodriguez is ambiguously Hispanic, having a fairly strong accent and speaking some Spanish. Many of the other characters only respect Rico for his physicality and ability to perform action-packed sequences, emphasized by the fact that Rico is rarely told why he is doing something, just that he has to in order to save Medici. Mario Frigo, Rico's best friend, is an incredibly incompetent character, and functions mainly as the comic relief of the story. Mario gets in messes, Rico helps clean them up. Dimah Al-Masri is the scientist who is *the* expert on bavarium, but she also helps Rico out with all of his gadget needs as well. Early on she plays a pivotal role in the rebellion, but sacrifices herself during the game to prevent bavarium knowledge falling into the wrong hands. These three characters represent the game's face of the rebellion.

Another character, Tom Sheldon, is less easy to pin down. Sheldon, once an agent for the United States government, is essentially a mercenary who plays for both sides of the war. Sheldon had a significant role in the rise to power of Di Ravello, but also provides the resistance with the weapons and technology they need to fight back. Sheldon, thus, is seen mainly as a selfish character, almost representing a third faction in the game that Rico must deal with as he brings justice and vengeance to Medici. The final major character of *Just Cause 3* is General Sebastiano Di Ravello himself. In the eyes of Rico and the residents of Medici, Di Ravello is an oppressive dictator. Little is known of Di Ravello's life before his military career, but he portrays the trope of villain very well. He rules over Medici through his position as the leader of the

military, and his reign is accompanied by violence, manipulation, and killings. Through this explanation of some of the ludic elements of *Just Cause 3*, it is possible to begin to see some of the implications raised from covert persuasion by the game.

#### *Key Highlight - Character*

*Just Cause 3* was not chosen for this project solely for its ludic elements or exciting gameplay. The main reason for the inclusion of *Just Cause 3* in this project is because it functions as a representative anecdote for the video game industry at large. While the video game industry is incorporating more and more diversity within its games, on the whole the new inclusions are often very stereotypical depictions and rely on common, popular tropes. *Just Cause 3*, with its shallow storyline and stereotypical cast, presents a basic, baseline reading for the video game industry. In broad strokes, while it is encouraging to see a hero of a major video game breaking the norm (white male), the hero of *Just Cause 3*, Rico Rodriguez, does little to disrupt the prevalent stereotyping that exists in the modern video game industry.

#### *Covert Persuasion in Just Cause 3*

*Just Cause 3*, through covert persuasion, reinforces existing racial stereotypes. According to the principles of covert persuasion raised in Chapter Four, the characterization of Rico and Mario allow for these stereotypes to be dispersed through playing the game because of the identification that the player does with both characters. On the whole, these characters, despite being central to the game itself, are incredibly shallow and unidimensional. Rico, while critical to the resistance and rebellion, has little effect over the game aside from his physical feats and acts of bravery. Mario, on the other hand, does not even have those qualities to laud, rather he is seen as incompetent, needy, and careless. The player is led to believe that if it wasn't for the

brains behind the operation, Dimah, little would get accomplished toward the betterment of Medici.

According to the first two principles of covert persuasion in video games discussed in Chapter Four, the impact of various ludic elements through identification and an appeal to the unconscious, *Just Cause 3* promotes negative stereotyping. The third principle of covert persuasion, translation, can explain the scope of the effect of the game. *Just Cause 3* does not make people racist, but while it will not directly cause racist attitudes in the player base, it does ultimately reinforce certain racial stereotypes. Due to the overall popular conflation of Spanish, Hispanic, and Latino people and culture, a theme that will be brought up later in this chapter, most references to any of these people groups in pop culture will instantly be added into the unconscious pool of all of them. While Rico is ambiguously Hispanic, in that Medici is neither a real country nor is it obviously Hispanic, this allows his character to fill in the gaps in their own heads about what his depiction means for the real world. Players who already believe that Hispanic and Latino people are unintelligent will have those attitudes reinforced by this game. The ambiguity and shallowness of Rico allows for the spreading of negative stereotypes through covert persuasion.

While *Just Cause 3* ultimately does reinforce certain stereotypes of Hispanic and Latino people, the game also deviates from the norm in its depiction of a hero that is not from the United States. In the vast majority of popular video game titles, and as will be shown in the next case study, the United States is often seen as the world's police force. This storyline is popular not just in video games, but it is a widely held mentality in the United States in reality. *Just Cause 3*, however disrupts this trend. Rico eventually saves the day with little input from the United States outside of Sheldon, and it is revealed that the United States and Sheldon actually

played a key role in setting up Di Ravello in the first place. Considering the implications of this deviation falls outside of the purview of this project, but it certainly creates an interesting case for the way in which global relations are portrayed throughout the video game industry.

### *Conclusion*

*Just Cause 3* does not directly promote racist attitudes, but it does allow racial stereotypes to be reinforced. Ambiguity plays a key role in unpacking the covert persuasion in *Just Cause 3*, because Rico and Mario, despite having eventual victory, do ultimately strengthen stereotypes against Hispanic and Latino people. In almost every way, *Just Cause 3* provides an accurate look at the game industry at large. When minorities are depicted in video games, they are most often either incredibly stereotypical or shallow. While the game does deviate from the norm in some significant ways, such as the lack of involvement of the United States, *Just Cause 3* also exemplifies how easily stereotypical attitudes and mindsets can permeate a video game. The remaining two games of this analysis provide much more complex implications for covert persuasion in video games.

### *Ghost Recon: Wildlands: A Beautiful, Empty Container*

The second game in this investigation is Ubisoft's *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* (2017). Sold under the Tom Clancy brand, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* was considered one of the best games of 2017, a year that went very well for the video game industry as a whole. Similar to *Just Cause 3*, *Wildlands* presents a massive, open world for the player to explore. Unlike the fictional island of Medici, however, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* is set in an alternative-narrative Bolivia, in which a Mexican drug cartel took over the country and corrupted most of the politicians, military leaders, and police forces. Another key difference is that while *Just Cause 3* takes reality loosely, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* attempts to create realistic, albeit fictional, gameplay. In their attempt to create



a fictional narrative in a realistic environment, the developers behind *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* have included covert elements of prejudicial attitudes to invade their game.

Tom Clancy's name has been used in over 50 video game titles, selling over 70 million copies. Always presenting action-packed shooter games, the series has been popular for the past 20 years. Also including the *Splinter Cell* and *Rainbow 6* franchises, *Ghost Recon* has had the biggest install base for Tom Clancy games. *Ghost Recon*, as its own unique series, focuses on slightly futuristic combat, including technology in its games that is either on the bleeding edge of advancement or still a few years of wishful thinking out. The player in these games takes the role of a special operatives unit roughly classified as "ghosts," a highly classified, secret squad who is meant to not be seen. *Wildlands*, set apart from the rest of the series, is one of the biggest, most detailed worlds that the Ubisoft development team has ever put into a *Ghost Recon* game. It has sold nearly 5 million copies, and was one of the highest selling games in 2017, and has sold more copies than any other *Ghost Recon* game. With that success in mind, it is important to explore the ludic elements that caused *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* to be so successful.

#### *Ludic Overview of Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

The gameplay of *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* is tight and well put-together, but often is quite repetitive and can even feel clunky at times. Being a tactical shooter, the game has a significant number of weapons to find and use, spread across a map that the player must unlock by finding them. The gameplay is most often third-person, but the player is able to aim down the sights (ADS) and it changes the perspective to first-person. There are many vehicles used to get around the massive play area, extending the map both horizontally and vertically to match the natural topography of Bolivia, including cars, motorcycles, and helicopters. Because of this, while the narrative structure is incredibly repetitive, the gameplay itself offers quite a dynamic experience

to the player because they can always find new ways to go about doing their mission.

Additionally, the game offers certain challenges and comparisons between the player and others online to see who can perform certain actions better, such as the longest shot with a sniper rifle, the most time spent using a parachute, or the most enemies killed in a certain amount of time.

Some of the most unique aspects of *Wildlands*' gameplay involve the high-tech accessories for the player to use. The most important piece of equipment is the drone that the player can deploy to act as recon and even an explosive device once the player levels up enough. While other games in the shooter genre have various mechanisms of scouting nearby enemies, the drone offered by *Wildlands* stands out as an example of a helpful tool that the player feels some level of control over, rather than the mere press of a button. Ultimately, the gameplay mechanics of *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* do not deviate far from following a tried-and-tested formula, but the game presents them in a way to give the player significant amounts of freedom to play with its sand-box like environment.

The story or narrative of *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* is simple and straight forward. The player, along with three other special operatives and aided by CIA agent Karen Bowman, are deployed to Bolivia in July, 2019, to "deal" with a Mexican drug cartel, the Santa Blanca cartel led by El Sueño. After an explosion at the United States' embassy in La Paz and an assassination of US agent Sandoval, the Ghosts enter the country without invitation, approval, or jurisdiction. They team up with Pac Katari, the leader of the local rebels fighting against the Santa Blanca cartel, to combat the cartel by attacking cocaine production and storage facilities, disrupt smuggling rings, discredit cartel leaders and corrupt politicians to the general public, and ultimately to kill leading cartel members, including El Sueño. As the player proceeds with these actions, they gain the opportunity to eliminate more important cartel members and leaders, thus

pushing the story in new ways. A third force in the game is the Unidad, a heavily armed military police that, while being independent from cartel operations, are heavily influenced by the financial bribes and support offered by the cartel. The player must avoid confrontation with the Unidad while working to disrupt the cartel through a series of missions and objectives. Once the player has completed enough objectives, they have the option to begin the end-game scenario in which Pac Katari kidnaps Bowman, to avoid being puppets of the United States' government. Unfortunately for him, he is captured by El Sueño and beheaded, thus saving Bowman. Whether the player has cleared out the rest of the Santa Blanca cartel determines which scenario the player experiences.

If the player has eliminated the Santa Blanca threat, other than El Sueño, the player, the other Ghosts, and Bowman take El Sueño into protective custody because of a deal that was made with the United States' government for immunity in exchange for information about other cartels and terrorist activity. In this storyline, Bowman is exceedingly hesitant and claims that it is only a matter of time before El Sueño is able to escape his custody and start a new cartel. In the alternative story, if the player has not yet eradicated the cartel threat, Bowman executes El Sueño, defying the orders of her superiors and thus getting fired from the CIA and placed in prison for her crimes. The narrative of *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, by itself, is a rather shallow and predictable experience. What makes the story compelling, however, is the level of world building that went in to creating this game, both through the artistic representation of Bolivia, but also through the developed personalities of each of the cartel members that the player encounters throughout the game. *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* stands out among the often overcrowded shooter genre with its compelling, realistic world, meticulously crafted to resemble real-world Bolivia.

The world created in *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* is spectacular. As far as video games go, the playing environment in *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* is one of the biggest, continuous containers in the history of video games, matched only by a few titles in recent years. While the “map” is technically bigger in *Just Cause 3*, the playable area (land) in *Wildlands* is nearly double the overall area. The *Wildlands*’ world is not just large, though, it is also very well filled-in, creating a feel as though the world is lived in and that if the player was not present, the world would continue anyway. Very few games create this experience, because it takes an enormous amount of time and a meticulous amount of detail to make even a small section of forest seem realistic, placing each tree, bush, and blade of grass until it resembles the real life environment. Thus, not only is the scale of *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* impressive, but the developers’ ability to create a believable world should be commended on both the macro and the micro levels.

The world feels realistic because of the building blocks it is made from. Representing the topography and climate of Bolivia, *Wildlands* delivers renditions of real world spaces that capture the natural beauty of Bolivian landmarks. Players can head to the salt flats, they can fly a helicopter hovering over a lake filled with flamingos, and they can explore the natural biomes of Bolivia, from the snowy tundra and mountain tops, the swampy forests and riverfronts, and the arid desert landscapes, each iconic elements of the Bolivian landscape. The climate is just as diverse, to match the biomes, but there is also additional content (available as DLC – downloadable content) that changes the climate and weather to have much more rain and wind. This change shows the natural diversity of weather that is possible, and while *Wildlands* does not have as dynamic weather as some other video games, it certainly has enough topographic and climate diversity to resemble that of real life experiences.

A second feature of the realism of *Wildlands* is that from the very beginning of the game, there are very few limits to the player's ability to explore the entirety of the map. While most games increment the playable area as a mechanism to keep the player interested, *Wildlands* invites the player to complete the game however they want from the beginning. Certain environments such as the insides of houses of high-level cartel members are off-limits for narrative reasons, but the rest of the world is open and full of detail and life. The player can explore the world on foot to get up close to the horticultural recreations, or the player can instead choose to fly a helicopter over the vast terrain to the edges of the playable area. Whereas in most games the edges of the play area are designated by water, in *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* they chose to create an accurate depiction of land-locked Bolivia, and the player is simply instructed that they have left the play area when they venture too far. The developers of *Wildlands* have created a very compelling representation of Bolivia, specifically aided by the open world that is available to the player immediately upon entering the game.

*Ghost Recon: Wildlands* does a good job at making the player feel involved in the environment around them. As the player walks, runs, drives, or flies through the environment, the environment moves too. For example, if the player is driving a military jeep through a shallow body of water full of flamingos, the flamingos will take flight before the jeep gets to them, encircling the jeep as they fly in a burst of color. When the player is flying in a helicopter over trees, the trees and nearby plants will move as if they were really under the effect of the downforce of a helicopter. While these examples are simulated events that have been intentionally programmed into the game, they go a long way to making the environment feel like an interactive experience. Interactivity in video games ultimately creates a more compelling

experience for the player, both in terms of their perceptions of in-game space but also in their enjoyment of testing the limits presented to them by the developers.

One of the clearest examples of how realistic *Wildlands* feels is through its use of the humans that inhabit the spaces of the game. There are very few places that the player can go in *Wildlands* that he/she will not find other non-player characters (NPCs). These NPCs, from cartel members, resistance fighters in the Kataris 26, the Unidad military police, and the native residents of Bolivia, each contribute to the overall feel provided by the game. While there are some characters that will be mentioned briefly below, the interactions between world and people in the world create a compelling experience for the player. On one hand, all of the cartel leaders have different personalities, and they are represented via different in-game mechanisms. Some drive fancy cars, some are incredibly paranoid and hire massive security forces, and some lead such a normal day-to-day life that they evade suspicion. On the other, the people of Bolivia are seen everywhere as being downtrodden by the weight of the cartel. Many of them work in the various coca farms spread across the game world, but others are still shown as trying to get by, whether planting their own gardens, working in various trades, or engaging in less illicit cartel activities, such as in the fictional resort and casino (of which the cartel has power over).

Ultimately, the Bolivian people look oppressed, and while they are occasionally seen celebrating certain actions of the player and his/her team, most often they are slowly walking down streets in the middle of nowhere with their heads held low. The player is continually sent the message that they are meant to be the savior of Bolivia. The people of *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, in addition to the other ludic elements, certainly help to make the game world and gameplay experience more compelling for the player.

There are few highly developed characters in *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*. Aside from Karen Bowman, Pac Katari, and El Sueño, each of the other characters, including the player's character (the player designs his/her own avatar), are prototypical stand-ins (with the team of Ghosts) or personalities outside of gameplay (as seen most with the various cartel leaders that the player must confront, showed to the player by a cut-scene). In fact, the characters in *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* are the least interesting ludic element of the game. While they do not take away from the gameplay experience, they add little to the overall environment of the game. The relationship between Bowman, Katari, and El Sueño certainly creates some interesting, layered interactions (specifically towards the end of the game, but each one has their own motivations and those stay clear and consistent throughout the game. Bowman is continually trying to push for success so that she can be promoted with her career. Katari will do anything required to free his country from the tight control and rule of the Santa Blanca Cartel. El Sueño is the most interesting, and most mysterious, character by far. He wrote his own bible for a religion for his followers, the story of Santa Blanca. He builds schools and churches for the people of Bolivia, both to raise their support and to indoctrinate them into his worldview. In many significant ways, El Sueño mirrors real life Pablo Escobar, a Columbia drug lord who also did much charity work for his country. In terms of the minor cartel characters, they appear as shallow characters, where each has their own reason for engaging in cartel activities (such as wealth, power, or through threat). One clear exception to this rule is DJ Perico, the voice of the Santa Blanca radio network. In one scene of the game, DJ Perico's microphone was not turned off during a break, and the player (and the rest of the country) hear his rant about how dissatisfied he is with the dictatorial rule of the cartel. While many characters have interesting personalities, stories, and motives, *Ghost*

*Recon: Wildlands* thrives on the other ludic elements, specifically in the picture of a world it creates.

### *Key Highlight – Game World*

The main reason for *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*' inclusion in this project's investigation is because of the world that the developers have created within the game. Through the elements of topography, climate, flora, fauna, and the human inhabitants, the developers have created a compelling world for the player to explore. Made to look like real-world Bolivia, there are many scenes in the game that mirror real-life places, including but certainly not limited to the famous death road (Yungas Road), a narrow, serpentine road up the face of a mountain that has generated a great deal of real world attention, the salt flats (Salar de Uyuni), and the flamingo lake (Laguna Colorada). While the developers have spent little expense recreating a believable container for the game, even spending over two weeks in the country with their art team making sure their plans and details were accurate, when it comes to the people they have programmed into the game, it creates a much less accurate depiction of real-world Bolivia. By making the game world mirror reality so closely, it makes the player think that other ludic elements also mirror reality, such as the ubiquity of the drug cartel and the plight of the natives. Ultimately, as will be shown below, while the developers have created a compelling container for *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, certain aspects of the games' content are troubling in the consideration of covert persuasion.

### *Covert Persuasion in Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

To explore the covert persuasion in *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* means to delve into the world that the developers have created within the game. As opposed to the fictional island of Medici in *Just Cause 3*, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* is set in a real world location: Bolivia. While



the game only attempts to replicate a certain part of Bolivia's natural topography, it does so with a significant attention to detail. Major Bolivian cities do not exist in the game, but many fictional villages and towns are made to directly resemble locations in reality. The Bolivian people, however, do not receive the same attention, neither from the developers working to create the environment, nor from the players who rarely interact with the Bolivian people other than trying to not run them over as they race down narrow streets or bumpy dirt roads. Because of the overly simplistic depictions of Bolivians and life in the game's version of Bolivia, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* is capable of fostering and spreading stereotypical attitudes through the mechanisms of covert persuasion.

*Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, despite recreating a very compelling landscape and environment to explore throughout the game, has failed to capture the personal and cultural identities of Bolivians. One of the primary ways that plays out is through the conflation of Mexican and Bolivian culture, language, and representations. Despite being natives of Bolivia, many of the local NPCs actually have Mexican accents. A much more consistently accurate Bolivian accent is found in the Unidad, the military police, but the common dialect of the people is not well represented. Furthermore, while Bolivians certainly speak Spanish, they more frequently, at least in the rural areas depicted by the game, speak their more traditional, native languages of Quechua and Aymara. The language issues are not the only conflation between Bolivian and Mexican culture, but they do reveal a significant oversight of the developers. Even if, in the fictional Bolivia offered in the game, the Mexican Santa Blanca cartel has such dictatorial power, people do not instantly forget their language and culture, and dialects change very slowly even in extreme situations. The conflation between Mexican and Bolivian culture creates an avenue for covert persuasion by reducing diverse groups of "other" into one category.

*Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, in the attempt to recreate an alternative Bolivia, does, however, manage to capture some of the realities of the country. Many of the cultural elements that the game gets right are visual, including the hats that the residents wear (called chulos) and many instances of village life, such as the colorful flags that hang in many places, buildings (such as houses with stairs built on the outside), and occupations (many rural Bolivians are farmers). It is important to note that as with all video game depictions of real life, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* fails to capture the diversity of the people who live in Bolivia. The NPCs in the video game are overwhelmingly unidimensional, being reducible to a few key characteristics, whereas in reality there is much cultural diversity and tension that exists in Bolivia.

Perhaps the biggest split between real world Bolivia and the Bolivia in *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* is in terms of the drug trade and cartel influence. It is no secret that there is significant drug and cartel activity in Bolivia. Bolivia, in the real world, is the world's number three source of the coca plant, used to make cocaine. In reality, the cartel, as opposed to their omnipresence in the game, function mainly in the shadows, working under the detection of the government to produce and export the coca plant and cocaine. Likewise, in the game nearly every politician is understood as corrupt, and while there is certainly scandal and corruption in the Bolivian government, it is not nearly as widespread as portrayed by the game. While the cartel exists, the game depiction of their violent, terrorizing posture towards the locals does not mirror reality in the slightest. Bolivia is safer than other countries having significant cartel involvement. Through the ideas presented above, it is clear that not only is *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* filled with aspects of covert persuasion, but that the game also has serious issues in the depiction of its own, fictional Bolivia.

This project is not the first critique that the game has received. Rather, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* was directly called out by the Bolivian government for its inappropriate portrayal of crime and culture in Bolivia. The Bolivian government, in March of 2017, filed a formal complaint with the French Embassy in La Paz (Ramos, *Reuters*, March 2, 2017). While the complaint, filed by Carlos Romero (the Interior Minister), did not make any requests of the French government or Ubisoft (the game developer), it did mention the possibility of legal action due to the depiction of rampant abuse from the cartels and blatant corruption of political officials. While the fictional depiction of Bolivia is well within Ubisoft's as a game development company, the response by the Bolivian government lends some amount of credibility to the awareness that the game's depictions and choices can directly impact the player's perceptions on the country of Bolivia.

Ubisoft, in *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, makes the explicit claim that the game is completely fictional. During the opening sequence, the game tells the player that "This game is a work of fiction and is not a representation of the reality of Bolivia. Any resemblance to actual events or any real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental" (Ubisoft, 2017). In response to the Bolivian government's formal complaint, Ubisoft representatives claimed: "While the game's premise imagines a different reality than the one that exists in Bolivia today, we do hope that the in-game world comes close to representing the country's beautiful topography" and that they chose Bolivia for its "magnificent landscapes and rich culture" (Ramos, *Reuters*). The warranted concern of the Bolivian government is that a fictional depiction of Bolivia could create negative attitudes about the country and the people. Ubisoft, despite their intention to create a meaningful Bolivian environment, struggled to accurately depict Bolivian people and culture.

Ubisoft also chose to take a nearly unprecedented approach to the game's release by also releasing a thirty-minute documentary/film called "*Wildlands*" as a companion to the game. The documentary depicts the scenes leading up to the game itself, with the conflict between Sandoval and El Sueño, as well as the ambitious Bowman. Bolivia, in the documentary, is said to have been a paradise, but that it has now fallen into the clutches of the Santa Blanca drug cartel. The cartel, in the documentary, have created a narco state, a safe haven for the drug cartel to work and maintain power. While the documentary is well made and highlights even further some of the strongest personalities in the game, it does little to deviate from the norms established by the game. The biggest difference is seen in Sandoval's wife, a native Bolivian, who ultimately escapes the country as Sandoval sacrifices himself to save her. She is seen as a complex character who is torn in knowing the right thing to do. Her character is compelling, and ultimately gives some credibility to the work that Ubisoft did in trying to create meaningful relationships between the player and native Bolivians. Unfortunately, however, these relationships have no inclusion in the game. If anything, the documentary reinforces the final example of covert persuasion that the game struggles with, the idea of the United States as global police.

The narrative of the United States entering into poor, violent nations, saving the people, and maintaining the peace is well represented in popular culture. Video games, at least for this particular storyline, are perhaps the worst culprit of propagating this attitude. *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, despite being developed by the French division of Ubisoft, encourages the idea that it is the responsibility of the United States to right all of the wrongs of the world, and that other countries are incapable of solving their own problems. One of the clearest examples of this in the game is that other than the four Ghosts (including the player's character), all of the other work is

being done by the rebels, the Kataris 26. In fact, the player and his/her team is not even supposed to be in Bolivia, hence the name Ghosts. They are told again and again that they are supposed to destroy the cartel without bringing attention to their existence, and every action they do is contributed to the Bolivian rebels. While this is a popular narrative in United States' media, it implicitly promotes attitudes of ethnocentrism and prejudice through covert mechanisms.

There are significant issues raised in the investigation of covert persuasion in the video game, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*. The developers of the game have created a vast, compelling environment for the player to explore, but they have failed to accurately depict Bolivian people and culture. This omission transmits stereotypical attitudes of Bolivian people as poor, lazy, incompetent, and ultimately impotent. The realism of the topography and climate of Bolivia created in the game should be commended, but the concerns voiced by the Bolivian government are certainly warranted. The conclusions drawn from this investigation of covert persuasion in *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* are troubling; there are clear indications of stereotypical and racially prejudicial attitudes being spread by this game through the world they have created.

#### *Battlefield: Hardline*: Toeing the Stereotypical Line

The final case in this project's investigation and analysis is *Battlefield: Hardline*. The game shares much in common with the previous games discussed. Much like *Just Cause 3*, the protagonist (and player's character) falls under the category of Latino, but unlike Rico (*Just Cause 3*), Nick Mendoza is much more complex and compelling in terms of his heritage and culture. Similar to *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, *Battlefield: Hardline* also depicts the struggle of corruption in an environment of drug trade and smuggling, but ultimately differs in the scale and scope of the player's ultimate victory. While not without its faults, *Battlefield: Hardline* is an

important video game, and it is extremely relevant to pursue with the questions raised by this project.

*Battlefield: Hardline*, released by Electronic Arts and DICE in March of 2015, continues the trend first-person shooter games in the Battlefield series. Unfortunately, compared to the other Battlefield games released in the last few years, it sold the least since 2009's Battlefield 1943. That said, at over 4 million units sold across console and PC platforms, the game garnered some success in the series. Perhaps the reason for its underwhelming sales compared to other titles in the series is in some of the decisions that the developers made while creating the game. The Battlefield series is well known for its strategic and energetic depictions of warfare, on foot, by land, and in the air. *Battlefield: Hardline*, however, is centered on the idea of cops and robbers, and while the gameplay is consistent with the rest of the series, *Hardline*'s emphasis on crime and justice seems less appealing to players compared to the other games available. With that consideration functioning as an initial entrance point into the game, it is necessary to further unpack the game according to its own ludic elements.

#### *Ludic Overview of Battlefield: Hardline*

Out of the four major ludic elements (gameplay, narrative, world, and characters), the gameplay is often the first element used to directly compare one game to another. In many ways, *Battlefield: Hardline* continues on the success of the rest of the Battlefield series, with crisp, clean gunplay, epic battle sequences, the inclusion of vehicles, and its more realistic feel than some of the other popular, more "arcade-y" shooter games in popular culture. There are two key distinctions between *Hardline* and the rest of the series: An emphasis on close-quarter combat and in the promotion of arresting enemies over killing them. While other Battlefield games have close-quarter instances, the bulk of *Hardline* is built around singular buildings or small

neighborhoods. Even some of the bigger areas, at least in the single-player campaign as seen in the swamp sequence, pale in comparison to some of the maps and environments in the mainline Battlefield games. Of more import for the single-player gameplay, however, is the player's ability to arrest enemies instead of kill them. Not only does the game reward the player for doing that, giving them access to new and better weapons and equipment, but the player earns extra experience points for not killing the enemies, a rare feat in the popular shooter genre. This change, at least in the single-player campaign, allows the player to go through most of the game without firing a single shot and being commended for doing so, which exemplifies one of the overt persuasive goals of the game and its developers.

*Battlefield: Hardline* certainly took some chances in terms of gameplay with the Battlefield series, but what sets it apart from the rest of the games is found in the single-player campaign. Comprised as a series of episodes, the single-player story of *Battlefield: Hardline* places the player in the role of Nick Mendoza, a detective from Miami who is described in the opening scenes as a "dirty cop." Other key characters in the narrative, some of who will also be discussed later, are Nick's partner, detective Khai Minh Dao, Nick's boss Captain Julian Dawes, a corrupt cop (and Nick's previous partner) detective Carl Stoddard, and a small collection of minor characters and criminals, including but not limited to Tap, Tyson, Boomer, and Dune. Nick Mendoza, as the game repeatedly brings up, is of Cuban descent. As opposed to the other two games that are analyzed in this chapter, *Battlefield: Hardline* depicts a much more usual narrative arch that forces the player to play along with the story, rather than to create their own story from an open world. A brief overview of the plot of the story will set the stage for the following analysis.

*Battlefield: Hardline* does most of its story telling through cut-scenes, interspersed throughout the gameplay stretching across 11 episodes. The prologue of the game offers Nick Mendoza as a criminal, being transported on a prison bus. This scene, which foreshadows some of the events to come, slowly fades to the beginning of the story. The prologue concludes with a drug bust, involving Nick and Stoddard, complete with a car chase. Following Nick's actions, his boss, Captain Dawes, reassigns him to a different partner, detective Dao.

Dao leads the player through a tour of the "projects," and while they begin to get to know one another, the conversation is mostly one-sided, where Nick talks a bit about his upbringing and past, and very little is revealed about Dao. After meeting up with Tap, a lower member in Tyson's drug ring, Nick and Dao get involved in a micro gang/drug war. They head to Tyson's house, and Dao gets shot trying to defend Tyson (who is also an informant for the "feds"). Nick defends her until help arrives. In the next episode, Dao is ready to go again, despite having some lingering pain. She has lost some of her initial restraint and is shown violently interrogating a criminal and becoming somewhat reckless and aggressive.

The next portion of the storyline does some character building work, expanding the complex relationship between Nick and Dao, as well as the power hierarchy between the detectives and captain Dawes. Nick and Dao head to the swamp to track some drugs that have been airdropped. Nick and Dao find evidence of a drug ring importing cocaine from Columbia, and pinpoint a location of the ring's members back in Miami proper. While there is a tactical insertion team ready at the warehouse where the meeting is, Dao and Nick storm the location without permission before the team is ready. After the raid, detective Stoddard enters and murders the criminals, sharing money with Nick and Dao "before evidence comes." Nick refuses to take the money.



The player is led to believe, through a cut-scene involving Nick, Dao, and Dawes, that the dirty money was just a test, to see if Nick could be trusted. These three want to find incriminating evidence against the corrupt Stoddard, and Nick finds a voice recorder of Stoddard involved in the drug trade. Nick is called to a nearby warehouse and finds Stoddard in a heavily guarded “grow house,” or a place where marijuana is grown. Nick wants to arrest him, but Dao, who was sent to a mall to handle a disturbance reported there, requests help. Nick and Stoddard head to the mall, during a hurricane, to help Dao. Successfully saving Dao for the second time, Nick presents the evidence against Stoddard, the voice recorder, to Dawes. Dawes smashes it, everyone, including Dao, turns against Nick, and Nick is arrested due to some evidence found in his apartment planted by Dawes and Stoddard.

Nick, pointing back to the prologue, is back on the prison bus, but soon escapes in an action-packed sequence where Tyson explosively breaks Nick out. Nick dodges recapture and ultimately meets up with Dao, who participated in helping Nick escape so that they could work together to stop Dawes, who has now become the self-proclaimed “America’s Police Chief” bent on privatizing the police force. Travelling to Los Angeles and meeting Boomer, a wiz at technology, Dao and Nick set out to find incriminating evidence against Dawes, along the way also bringing vengeance against Stoddard as well. They break into the house of a drug kingpin, Roark, and discover where the evidence against Dawes can be found, in his penthouse apartment at the top of his privatized security force headquarters building. In the desert outside LA, Nick and Boomer attempt to find a safe-cracker in order to obtain the evidence they need against Dawes, but are kidnapped due to a bounty placed on their heads by Stoddard.

Nick and Boomer manage to escape, procure the safe-cracker, and steal an airplane for their escape. Before Nick, Dao, Tyson and Boomer can go back to Miami to steal the evidence

against Dawes, they are confronted by Stoddard. Together, goaded by the wishes of Dao, they kill him and send a threatening message to Dawes. Back in Miami, they storm Dawes' tower and suite, but it was a trap. Tyson is severely wounded by an explosion, but Dawes informs Nick where he is hiding, on a private island with a mansion just off the coast. Nick, ignoring Tyson's need for medical attention, takes them all to the island, but sends Dao, Boomer, and Tyson away when they arrive. Nick, now alone, storms Dawes' private island, ultimately murdering him. Dawes, hoping he could have changed Nick's mind and corrupted him anyway, left him instructions to his drug/industry fortune. The game ends as Nick finds the secret vault, leaving the player to question what kinds of decisions Nick would continue to make, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

The world of *Battlefield: Hardline* is one of cops, robbers, drugs, and corruption. From the earliest scenes of single player to the last, as well as the competitive online gameplay, the world consistently shows a struggle between the ideas of good and evil, forcing the player to continually question motives of other characters (in single-player) and abilities of other players (in multi-player). In terms of the world the game creates, while the online aspects of this game are perhaps the reason why it sold so well, the single-player campaign is the primary focus of this analysis due to its more controlled and coherent nature. As mentioned previously, one of the greatest challenges for developers when making a game is to make it believable and compelling to the audience, and one of the primary factors in fulfilling that need is the game world.

While the storyline mainly takes place in and around Miami, Florida, and Los Angeles, California, the worlds created in *Battlefield: Hardline* shine on a micro level. The individual levels are filled with small and seemingly inconsequential details, from rubble and garbage near an abandoned school building in a rough neighborhood to the immaculate perfection of a

penthouse apartment or mansion on a private island. All of these details combine together to make the player see a lived-in world. Because of the linear progression of the narrative, the player is never able to explore too far on their own, a deliberate choice made by the developers. As opposed to the other games mentioned above, *Battlefield: Hardline* does not have an expansive world to explore, but on the micro level it creates a compelling experience for the players. One of the most compelling scenes in the game is when Nick and Stoddard go to the mall to save Dao from some criminals during a hurricane. The atmosphere is chaotic as windows break and significant damage is done to the facades of stores at the mall, causing the player to dodge out of the way of debris cascading down corridors. Having a smaller container for the game to take place in also allows the developers to spend more time on other assets, such as the character models, in-game footage and cut scenes, and other artistic elements that compare favorably to other games, one instance to note being a seemingly photorealistic sky. *Battlefield: Hardline* builds a compact world for the player to experience, and they fill that world with fleshed out, albeit somewhat tropic in their portrayals, characters.

The most important character in *Battlefield: Hardline* is Nick Mendoza, the Miami detective who always seems to wind up in the middle of trouble despite good intentions, at least earlier on in the story. Much of what is known about Nick is revealed through the various cut scenes littered throughout the single-player campaign, but some holes in his character are left for the player to fill in according to their read of the situation. Because of the linear narrative, the player has no actual control over what happens to Nick, but can control, through various gameplay mechanisms, what kind of cop Nick becomes. The player can choose to be a good cop, and is rewarded for doing it, by handcuffing criminals rather than killing them. This certainly

portrays Nick in a different light in the player's eyes, but there is no scenario where Nick comes out of the game's story as not a killer.

Nick's ethnicity, while insignificant to the plot overall, plays a key role in moving the story along. Even though the player's first encounter with Nick has him as a prisoner and labeled a "dirty cop," the player soon begins to learn about Nick's troubled backstory but honorable intentions. While it is revealed that Nick is Cuban in the prologue through a joke about good food, the player begins to see deeper into Nick when he goes on his first mission with Dao, his new partner. In this conversation, Nick does the bulk of the talking, claiming that he is one to "follow orders," that he loves being a cop, and while he grew up in a bad Miami neighborhood, he was born in Havana Cuba. He reveals also that his father, who was never involved in his life, is probably dead. The fact that Nick has Cuban roots comes up continually throughout the game, most often used as some sort of humor mechanism, but sometimes in very serious ways. One of the "good-guy" criminals, Tap, makes a joke calling Nick "Fidel." Much later in the game, the drug pin Roark claims "You look Mexican, so I'll assume you're a burglar." More importantly, earlier in the game when the player is still coming to terms with who Nick is, finds that Nick, when speaking to Dawes, is said to have "a lot of background to check" as if a threat, and Dawes also referenced his mom having to work hard to keep Nick out of bad things. Additionally, later on in the game it is revealed that Nick's father was part of the Cuban secret police, who was known for torturing prisoners and who often "brought his work home." Nick's Cuban roots play a key role in how the story is told to the player.

The most impactful narrative arc involving Nick and his Cuban roots comes shortly after Nick is offered drug money from Stoddard, his ex-partner, and confronted by Dawes and Dao, but does not play out fully until the final scene of the game. While the player can choose Nick's

behavior in battle, the player has no say over the increasing illegality of Nick's actions through the story, whether as seen in a cut-scene or if the player is forced to participate in illegal behavior by the game itself. Thus, even though Nick does not take the initial money from Stoddard, and Dawes and Dao claim they were using that as a test to see if he could be trusted, the player soon finds out that not only did they find that Nick could not be trusted (in that they wanted him to take the money), but that because of his troubled past they could pin the whole thing on Nick, planting evidence in his apartment to frame him. The game does not make an explicit reference to the fact that Nick is Cuban in this scene, but based on all previous dialogue (and the dialogue still to come), it is clear that it plays a role in portraying Nick to be a corrupt police officer, making the crime believable.

Ultimately, while the player was once convinced about Nick's altruistic nature, they are left questioning Nick's motives as the game ends. Nick, confronting Dawes at the end of the game, after Dawes mentions his upstanding policing record (before being framed), claims "that was the old Nick" and is willing to consider Dawes' illegal offer. Nick murders Dawes after Dawes says "you're just like me, more criminal than cop," and then informing him of a letter he wrote for Nick on the desk. The final phrase that Dawes utters is: "How's your mother, Nick?" Nick's mother died while he was in prison, framed by Dawes. Nick, reading the letter left to him by Dawes, discovers that Dawes has given him the proverbial keys to the kingdom – his wealth, his power, his military/police private defense company. The letter also claims how easy it is to corrupt most cops, but Nick was never willing to look the other way. Nick, in the letter, is also left with a warning to enjoy it while it lasts, because someone else, like Nick in his striving to be good, will be inevitably be coming soon to stop him. After reading the letter, Nick enters the vault and encounters his new wealth and power, but there is a sinking suspicion left within the

player that Nick, in his own works, has gone too far and that “there’s no walking away after what we’ve done.” Nick, incorruptible throughout the entire game despite being more and more involved in illegal activity, is left at the end of the game with an air of uncertainty.

While Nick is the main focus of this analysis, the other two characters worth highlighting in this section are Nick’s partner, detective Khai Minh Dao, and boss, Captain Julian Dawes. Dawes, as a character, is mostly absent from on-screen interactions in the middle of the game as he creates his privatized security network, Preferred Outcomes. Dawes rises through the ranks, albeit nefariously, to come to the final scenes of the game as the head of a massive empire, but he did so through bribery, threats, and corruption. Dawes, often mentioning Nick’s Cuban roots and upbringing, never does so in a joking manner; rather, Dawes’ remarks are almost always given as threats in a very serious tone, waiting for Nick to react violently or illegally as Dawes expects him to do based on his past. Dawes is certainly a voice of racism and stereotyping within *Battlefield: Hardline*.

Dao, on the other hand, is sent on a similar journey as Nick. Whereas Nick’s ancestry and ethnicity is often mentioned, Dao’s own upbringing, who is Asian, is never mentioned. The game does, however, fulfil many of the common stereotypes for Asians, with her being crafty and manipulative. Her selfishness, though not explicitly tied to her race by the game, is certainly not an isolated instance of that trope being used in popular culture. Even though she initially looks the other way when Nick is being framed and sides with Dawes, taking the money and accompanying consequences, she is eventually double-crossed by Dawes and Stoddard, and she rejoins forces with Nick. Dao is shown as competent from the earliest scenes, but very early on she also is shown to be deceptive, manipulative, and a bit of a renegade. She asks Nick, accusatorily, “You’re not going to tell anyone we’re doing this, right *partner*?” Dao, after getting

shot, becomes somewhat reckless. She is shown getting too aggressive with a criminal in an attempt to extract information out of him (ultimately this person ends up dead). She mentions that Nick would “be a better cop” if he “took the gloves off.” She is fueled by revenge, but while her and Nick both want the same thing, there are times in which she breaks off from the main objective to satiate her need for vengeance. While Dao clearly cares for Nick towards the end of the game, she plays no role after Nick goes to Dawes’ private island mansion. There is no on-screen resolution for her character.

#### *Key Highlight – Narrative*

The main reason for *Battlefield: Hardline*’s inclusion in this project is the characters of the single-player campaign. The characters, developed through the cut-scenes and player sequences of the single-player campaign, are an interesting mix of shallow, one-sided characters on one side, and exceptionally complex and compelling characters on the other. As opposed to most of the characters in the game, both Nick and Dao stand out for their characterization and development throughout the narrative. Because of the specific focus of this case study, Nick will play a central role in the analysis below, but just as much can be said about Dao and her fitting into certain stereotypical models. In *Battlefield: Hardline*, there are both positive and negative conclusions to be drawn from this game in terms of racial prejudice through the principles of covert persuasion.

#### *Covert Persuasion in Battlefield: Hardline*

Race and stereotyping play a significant part in *Battlefield: Hardline*’s single-player campaign. At the center of this discussion is the player’s character and protagonist, Nick Mendoza, a Miami detective from Cuba. Throughout the game there are many explicit examples of references to Nick’s race and culture. While that may be the intention of the developers in

some cases, particularly with the Roark comment from above, it does not change the fact that the developers have intentionally made the main character in this game of Latino descent. Thus, the first question that must be asked is whether or not Nick's role of Cuban ancestry gives anything to the game aside from its sporadic inclusion in dialogue. Does the protagonist in *Battlefield: Hardline* need to be Cuban? The ultimate answer is no, but some of the covert elements will reveal that Nick being Cuban does drive some of the narrative arch of the story that perhaps evades attention, but nevertheless plays a role in the events that transpire as the player works through the single-player campaign.

The fact that Nick is Cuban is pronounced very clearly by the game. On the fringes of overt persuasive messages, the player encounters a character in Nick who is struggling with integrity, corruption, and making the world a better place. Nick's character, throughout most of the story, is upstanding, continuing to work within the constraints of the law even after he is framed for corruption and put in prison for three years. While escaping from the police and prison guards, Nick does not harm anyone. While trying to stop Dawes' plan to privatize the police force, Nick does so first by attempting to find enough evidence to incriminate Dawes in his own corruption scandal. Rather than confront Dawes and Stoddard as soon as possible in a high intensity shootout, Nick waits patiently until the right moment to make his move. Until the very end of the game, Nick, driven by the desires of the player controlling him, does not have to injure or kill innocent people. Nick, however, at the end of the story, despite having enough evidence to incriminate Dawes, admits to being "more criminal than cop" and murders Dawes in cold blood. While the game portrays Nick outside of the traditional stereotypes found in many forms of popular culture toward Latino people, ultimately he succumbs to common violent and greedy tropes. Even though the narrative leaves Nick's final decision, whether to use his new



wealth and power for good or for evil, open, and even if the player had high hopes for Nick and his quest to stop corruption in the police force, they are left with doubt. Thus, how Nick is perceived at the end of the game is largely in the eyes of the player, despite maintaining a good image throughout the game. In many ways, the game forces this doubt upon the player. While Nick's Cuban background cannot be explicitly tied to his ultimate actions, there are hints along the way that plant seeds of prejudice in the unconscious of the player.

The game continually alludes to both Nick's ethnicity and traditional stereotypes of Latinos. Within the story of the game, Latinos are labelled as criminal, violent, and corrupt (or easily corruptible). Many of these comments are directed toward Nick himself, exemplifying some elements of direct racism through the game itself. On the other hand, much of the racism and stereotyping that happens in this game is either implicit within the story itself or referentially related via the overarching storyline. The translation from this game to real life pinpoints the specific, common stereotypes that Latinos face from day to day. These messages are sent, often to Nick, through the other characters of the game. Most specifically exemplified through the relationship between Dawes and Nick, Dawes doesn't use Nick's Latino heritage as a joke, but rather first as an assumption that he will be easy to corrupt, and then second (when the attempts and corruption fall apart) as a threat. Dawes keeps trying to find ways to corrupt Nick throughout the story, but ultimately does not succeed until the final scene in which Nick murders him and takes his wealth and power. A key reference in this scene is with Nick's mom, who Dawes used previously as a threat to get Nick to stay on his side and to look the other way at possible corruption. While the game does not explicitly lay out what Nick plans to do with his new wealth and power, his admittance of corruption at the end is clear. Thus, while Nick has been an

upstanding police officer (and ex-police officer) for much of the game, the end of the game points, covertly, to his falling in line with traditional stereotyping.

The conclusion that Nick eventually turns corrupt is unsatisfying to the player if they are cognizant of the ways that racial prejudice is being both used and exploited in the game. The developers of this game created a compelling, fleshed-out character in Nick Mendoza. The player identifies with Nick as he moves through complex situations with the right intentions. While Nick did not have to be Cuban for this game to work, for it to tell a compelling story or for the game to be fun, the developers chose for Nick to be Cuban. This choice, certainly intentional, can be seen as a step in the right direction for the video game industry, which for decades has failed to accurately or meaningfully capture the complex issues with race. Unfortunately, however, due to the ending sequence of the game, *Battlefield: Hardline* falls into the common trap of relying on popular stereotyping Latinos as untrustworthy, corruptible, and immoral, and by doing so, reinforces those ideas and attitudes into the player.

There is much to commend about the game, *Battlefield: Hardline*. While not as successful as some of the other titles in the series, it is a fun game that has been enjoyed by millions of people, spurred on by the decisions of the developers. The developers also did an excellent job creating a compelling character, Nick Mendoza, through the single-player campaign. Nick, who is a detective of Cuban descent, in many ways breaks the common stereotypes seen in popular depictions of Latinos. Through the elements of covert persuasion in the game, however, Nick is seen as ultimately fulfilling the stereotype of a violent, corrupt criminal. Hopefully the developers did not intend for this conclusion to be programmed into their game, but in the end their work at making a compelling character that defies conventional stereotypes results in a confusing failure. That said, however, *Battlefield: Hardline* offers one of

the best avenues to consider the ways in which the video game industry can adjust itself toward diminishing racist attitudes in the modern world – close, but not quite there yet.

The three games presented here, *Just Cause 3*, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, and *Battlefield: Hardline*, each function as exemplary games in the pursuit of covert persuasion in video games. Specifically in terms of their portrayal of Latino and Hispanic people and culture, these games have been shown to have the potential to impact the attitudes of players in terms of racial prejudice. While they share many characteristics, including their genre, release date, ESRB rating, and market success, the games diverge significantly on the covert persuasion that happens through them. Whether it is through the gameplay, characters, story, or world, the ludic elements of video games persuade covertly. The final section of this chapter will weave the above conclusions together in the attempt to show how the video game industry as a whole, rather than individual games themselves, can permeate prejudice and racial attitudes through covert persuasion.

## **Conclusion**

Covert persuasion is prevalent in the modern video game industry. In many significant ways the video game industry mirrors many of the same issues as all forms of popular media, but because video games have a much higher propensity of covert persuasion because of the necessary interactivity, they can have much more direct and covert impact on the player. To begin to question the breadth and depth of covert persuasion in video games seemingly opens the way to nearly unlimited analysis, critique, and potential. While there is still much debate over many aspects of the ways human beings interact with video games, such as in terms of violence

and addiction, the connections, both theoretical and practical, between video games and covert persuasion are clear.

Covert persuasion is not only prevalent, but it is ubiquitous in modern video games. Video games are continually sending messages to their players. While many of these messages are overt and intentional, exemplified best through the genre of “advergames,” there also exist unintentional, covert messages that influence players just as much. There are many avenues for exploration of covert persuasion in video games, but along with better understanding the impact that video games have on the player, this project also seeks to respond to some of the growing tension that plays out on a national scale in the United States. As such, the impact of covert persuasion on racial and prejudicial attitudes, specifically in terms of Latino and Hispanic culture and people, has led to a focus on three select games. Through *Just Cause 3*, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, and *Battlefield: Hardline*, it is possible to see some of the industry trends and conclusions that can be drawn through an investigation of covert persuasion.

Each of these three games offers a unique finding to this study. In *Just Cause 3*, Rico Rodriguez is the main character and who the player controls as he attempts to free his homeland, Medici, from the dictatorial reign of General Di Ravello. Rico is portrayed according to many of the stereotypical tropes seen in much of popular culture of someone of Hispanic descent. His character is overall shallow and ambiguous, and epitomizes machismo and brawn over brains. *Just Cause 3*, thus, functions as a representative anecdote for the common portrayals of many minorities, not just in video games, but in all of popular culture.

The world created by *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* is stunning. It depicts a fictionalized Bolivia in such detail that feels as though they are getting an authentic look at what life might be like in a Bolivia run by a drug cartel. Realism in video games, however, is not the same as

reality, and the detail offered in some aspects of *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* does not span across the entirety of the game. While the world that the player explores in the game is compelling and representative of reality, there is a significant level of inauthenticity when it comes to the way in which the culture and people of Bolivia are depicted by the game. Not only that, but the game was also heavily criticized by the Bolivian government for misrepresenting its country in terms of the people, corruption, and power of the drug cartels. Nobody playing *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* would claim that they have been to Bolivia, but the disparity between the care that was given to the geography and topography of the game-world does not mirror the care given to accurately representing the people and their culture.

Finally, *Battlefield: Hardline* presents the most confusing case of covert persuasion in this analysis. The main character, Nick Mendoza, is shown throughout much of the storyline as being a truly good person, trying to live up to his role as a law-abiding detective as he disrupts a drug ring. While Nick is compared to many of the popular stereotypes for Latino people throughout the game, each time he is seen breaking them down and showing that while his background and upbringing have made him who he is, that does not mean that all people who share a similar background are criminal. Nick defies these common stereotypes, at least until the end of the game. After confronting the main enemy in the game, Nick murders him in cold blood and inherits his great wealth and power. The final scene ends with great ambiguity, and the player is left questioning whether Nick was ever, really, a good person. *Battlefield: Hardline*, in the end, is both the most hopeful *and* most troubling game in this analysis.

It is important to consider the picture that comes together by assembling the conclusions and implications offered by each of these games. Much of covert persuasion, as argued in Ellul (1973), comes from cultural and industry standards. Thus, an analysis of one game in isolation

can never completely capture the significance and scope of covert persuasion in video games. To put these three games into conversation with one another is not difficult, they all have significant depictions of Latino or Hispanic people and culture, and in each of these three narratives those portrayals are quite significant to the overarching plot and game world. While each game offers a different contribution to the investigation of covert persuasion in video games, together they create a case for the presence of covert persuasion and, ultimately, that video games are contributing to prejudicial and racial stereotyping in the modern world.

This analysis has shown that the video game industry mirrors the rest of popular media, but due to the persuasive power of video games, the existence of covert persuasion in video games stands out among the rest. The conflation of Latino, Hispanic, and Mexican people prevalent in broad cultural strokes is perhaps most relevant for the questioning of covert persuasion in general, but in video games there are slightly different conclusions that can be drawn. One of the best examples of this is Rico Rodriguez, the hero of the Just Cause franchise who fits in to the widespread stereotypical understandings of Hispanic and Latino people. Avoiding cultural conflation may be a difficult concept to perfect, but very few steps seem to have been taken in each of the games presented in this analysis.

Whereas everything in a video game must be chosen or programmed by a developer, in many other forms of popular media the people in charge can only use what they are given in real life situations. What this means for video games is that even though certain parts of video games might be more important in the eyes of a developer, to create shortcuts in the development process in some areas has the potential to create meaningful harm in the world. Given the amount of detail put into the world of *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, the lack of cultural accuracy is shocking. Not only is Bolivia conflated with Mexico and many other popular stereotypical ideas,

but more care was put into creating the buildings that the people live in than the people themselves. Additionally, while *Battlefield: Hardline* seems at first to breakdown traditional stereotypes with its main character, Nick Mendoza, when all things are said and done he falls under those same categories he had been working hard to avoid his whole life. Even though the ending is ambiguous, in that the player can perceive Nick's actions how he/she wants, the game makes it clear that his character should be questioned, despite being the hero that "saves" the day.

Ultimately, the video game industry at large cannot be said to be helping slow or counteract the spread of racial prejudice through covert persuasion. Rather, in some ways the industry, through its culture and popular games, may very well be an exacerbating force. It is important to not overlook the strides that have taken place in the video game industry over the last 40 years. Mere decades ago video game characters were entirely based on stereotypes and common tropes, as seen with Pablo Sanchez in *Backyard Baseball*. Comparing Pablo to Nick Mendoza seems silly, because whereas Pablo was a simple token character, Nick means something special to the audience on many levels. The levels of personality, growth, and pathos seen in modern video games is unmatched through history. It is clear, through this analysis, that video games can do great things to counteract negative stereotypes, but aside from a few minor examples, the video game industry as a whole is certainly not doing that yet.

It is of vital importance to recognize that racial prejudice is only one aspect of the potential and power of covert persuasion in video games. Other issues have been alluded to throughout, such as the glorification of war and the dominance of the United States seen in many of the most popular games each and every year. To get a complete understanding of all of the ways that covert persuasion permeates video games is beyond the scope of this project, but it is

clear that (1) covert persuasion exists in the video game medium, (2) covert persuasion directly effects the player, whether or not it leads to a change in overt behavior or attitude, and (3) the video game industry not only is not actively working to counteract the spread of racial prejudice through covert persuasion, but in many ways can be seen as strengthening common, negative assumptions. It is unquestionable that the video game industry has a great deal of power in the modern world, but the jury is still out on how developers will choose to use their cultural sway in the coming years.

Video games do not make people into racists, bigots, misogynists, or killers. That does not mean, however, that they are not contributing to these cultural ideals at least in part. Unfortunately, the video game industry is doing little to counteract these harmful ideologies. Just as it is possible to see the ways in which covert persuasion can lead to these conclusions, there is also hope that one day video games can be used constructively, to correct the wrongs of the past and the injustices prevalent in the modern world. To understand how covert persuasion can function in a positive way through video games requires a return to the rhetorical theory of Burke, specifically in his understanding of the role of the unconscious in persuasion.

As a quick recap, Burke's understanding of the unconscious is that which has not yet been made verbally explicit. The unconscious is a container from where language, attitude, and action come from, at least in part. As such, it is crucial to identification, and thus central to rhetoric itself. The unconscious is categorical in that relationships are made among unconscious things that have the potential to translate into action and thought. Overall, the unconscious in Burke is unknown until it is known, unnamed until it is drawn out, and hidden until it is revealed. The unconscious is a fundamental element in the process of covert persuasion.



Two areas of hope are in the changes that are already taking place within the video game industry as well as the way in which the unconscious, in the Burkean rhetorical system, has the potential to become conscious, thus becoming clearer and changeable. The first, that the video game industry has already come a long way, has been mentioned previously. Using the examples of Backyard Baseball's Pablo Sanchez and *Battlefield: Hardline*'s Nick Mendoza, it is clear that the video game industry is taking race much more seriously than it has ever before. While there are technological advancements that have allowed this to happen, it also represents a cultural shift within the video game industry. People who play video games from diverse backgrounds or identities, be it racial, gender, sexual orientation, or otherwise, can find consubstantiality with characters in popular video games. That said, however, there are still incredibly serious issues that plague the video game industry, seen most pronounced in the Gamergate controversy mentioned in Chapter Two. The video game industry has come a long way, but there is still much room to grow.

A second avenue of hope stems directly from the way Burke uses the unconscious in his rhetorical theory. As that which has yet to be made conscious, the unconscious represents that which lies under the surface; but once it has been named, it can be dealt with. By making known the effect and power of covert persuasion in video games, it is possible to explore the ways in which it is permeating negative attitudes through a large player base, but it also reveals some of the steps that can be taken to counteract the problems that existed in the past and continue into the present. The role of the unconscious is important in rhetorical processes, but it also can give insight into revealing problems that should be addressed and potential solutions.

This chapter employed the theory of covert persuasion to investigate the issue of racial prejudice in the video game medium. Through the three games analyzed, it is clear that video

games are not counteracting racism in the modern world, but can be seen to be contributing to the expansion of prejudice on a wide scale. There is, however, hope, both from within the video game industry as it grows more diverse and also through identifying of covert persuasion to better understand how it works and what can be done to move forward. The final chapter of this project takes these conclusions and implications and directs them at three different audiences, the academy, the video game industry, and the players, Highlighting the existence of covert persuasion in video games is the important first step, but each group must respond to that revelation in their own manner.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion

The video game industry thrives on the interactivity between players, developers, and the games they both love. The interactivity inherent within the video game medium, among other characteristics, sets apart video games as an incredibly persuasive medium. While rhetorical scholarship has not been absent from the discussion about video games, there are many significant issues that have yet to be explored through rhetorical theory and the communication discipline. Many have sought after the ways in which video games can and have been used as direct, overt persuasive tools, but covert persuasion in video games has received little scholarly attention, despite its ability to complicate some of the most common critiques of video games in the mainstream media: Violence, addiction, gender, and race. This project has established a theory of covert persuasion that can be used to explore, uncover, and critique individual games, the video game industry, and the medium as a whole. Covert persuasion is prevalent and pervasive in the video game medium.

This project began, in Chapter One, with an overview of video game theory, clarifying the essential characteristics of the medium as well as discussing many of the key scholarly conversations currently happening in the modern world. Chapters Two and Three each highlighted a particular theoretical or philosophical frame from which to begin to construct the theory of covert persuasion. Chapter Two explored Jacques Ellul's philosophy of sociological propaganda, finding that popular media outlets play an important role in cultural creation, maintenance, and change. Chapter Three inquired into Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory, locating the groundwork for understanding how persuasion, through identification, can become a

powerful force, specifically in the video game context. Chapter Four constructed the theory of covert persuasion, showing not only that covert persuasion is rampant in video games, but also how it works between the developers and the players through the video game medium. Chapter Five employed the theory built in the previous chapter to explore prejudicial attitudes toward Hispanic and Latino people and culture within three video games. Ultimately, the theory of covert persuasion has effect in identifying and critiquing problematic attitudes and ideas that can be spread through many communicative mediums, but is acutely connected to the persuasive power of the video game medium.

This chapter aims to conclude this project by first offering a brief summation of the philosophical and theoretical groundwork as well as the creation of the theory of covert persuasion. Until this point, this project has offered an overview of video games and persuasion, the creation of a theory of covert persuasion, and an investigation into the prejudicial potential of covert persuasion in video games, but has not yet made any recommendations. By targeting three groups of people – players, developers, and scholars – this project hopes to be an impetus for necessary change. While each group has something important to gain by understanding the role of covert persuasion in the video game medium, each must also have a different reaction to the problems inherent in the system. It is evident, however, that it is only when all three groups can work in conversation with one another that problematic covert persuasion in video games can be diminished.

Covert persuasion is prevalent in the video game medium, and it has the potential to create and reinforce problematic attitudes and ideas in players. While video games do not act alone in the widespread existence of covert persuasion in modern life, they have the greatest potential to spread covert messages that take root in the player's life due to the necessary

interactive nature of the medium itself. This project sought to construct a theory of covert persuasion that can be used to investigate, analyze, and critique examples found in popular culture and the possible results of these covert persuasive messages. Through the theoretical and philosophical perspectives of game studies, Jacques Ellul, and Kenneth Burke, the power of covert persuasion in video games has been explored. Through a case study highlighting depictions of Latino and Hispanic people and culture, it is clear that covert persuasion exists in video games and that it can have significant power over the player. While covert persuasion is ultimately unavoidable, attempts can be made to lessen its effects. This section offers a brief summary of the topics discussed and arguments made throughout this project.

Video games are a communication medium rich with persuasive power. Through the long history of ludology and the somewhat brief history of modern game studies, it is found that the interactivity involved in games, whether analog or digital, makes games of all kinds particularly persuasive. Games have been used persuasively since the ancient world, but it was only recently that video games have been incorporated in educational systems, allowing students to learn important lessons, skills, and knowledge at their own pace. Given the potential of video games to pair fulfilling gameplay with a wealth of narrative and messaging elements, video games stand out in the modern world as an immensely persuasive medium. One of the best explanations for the persuasiveness of video games is through Ian Bogost's procedural rhetoric. In procedural rhetoric, Bogost (2007) makes the argument that, along with the interactivity of the medium, it is the programmed nature of video games that makes them so persuasive. This theory highlights the role of the developers, pointing to their efforts to create meaningful experiences out of computer code as they intentionally attempt to create effects within their audience. Bogost's work is foundational to game studies as a whole, and his rhetorical contributions must be considered in

any investigation into video games and persuasion. His theory of procedural rhetoric opens a door to further exploring persuasion in video games, particularly the potential for covert persuasion. However, to more fully explore covert persuasion, the unintentional persuasive effects of video game narratives, messages and design must be taken into account.

Jacques Ellul offers an initial outlet for considering covert persuasion through his philosophy of propaganda. Propaganda, for Ellul (1973; 1964), is ubiquitous in the modern world. His philosophy creates a propaganda that is multifaceted, which permits a fuller understanding of the role that media plays on the lives of the masses and individuals alike. Through his unique perspective of propaganda, Ellul introduces the concept of sociological propaganda, which begins to unpack the covert nature of some persuasive messages. Sociological propaganda functions by showing a particular audience how to live in a given society. Thus, through sociological propaganda, many forms of popular media are creating conformity and limiting critical thinking. This persuasion can be used for constructive or destructive ends, but Ellul's primary concern, and this project's as well, is in how sociological propaganda can be used for ill-effect. Ellul's philosophy works as a starting point for the creation of a theory of covert persuasion.

Kenneth Burke, through his rhetorical theory, unpacks the power of persuasion by emphasizing the role of identification and perception in the rhetorical process. Many aspects of Burke's thinking have influenced this project in significant ways, but of greatest import is his prioritizing of identification and, with it, the role of the unconscious in persuasion. While Burke's understanding of the unconscious varies greatly from more psychological uses of the term, the unconscious plays a key role in his rhetorical theory by functioning as an unseen receptacle that takes in attitudes and ideas. Eventually, once those attitudes and ideals take root,

it can influence a person's actions without their overt awareness. Thus, while expanding his rhetorical theory, Burke sheds light on the possibility and power of covert persuasion.

Based on the contributions of game studies' scholarship, the philosophy of Jacques Ellul, and the rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke, it has been possible to create a theory of covert persuasion that, while having wider possible applications, can be used to directly consider the implications of covert persuasion in video games. Based on four key principles, the theory of covert persuasion allows for the investigation and analysis of hidden and/or unintentional messages being spread through the video game medium. One of the biggest instances of covert persuasion in video games comes from the glorification of war and violence, as exemplified by many of the most popular video games that exist today. The theory of covert persuasion can be used to investigate any matter of video game content and gameplay, as well as having utility in mediums outside of video games.

This project employed the theory of covert persuasion to explore, through a case study, the implications arising from the depictions of Hispanic and Latino people and culture in popular video games. While many conclusions were drawn on this subject in the previous chapter, it is important to highlight that overwhelmingly the depictions of Hispanic and Latino people within the video game medium are stereotypical, and that those depictions contribute to the overall systemic issues that currently plague the modern world. Even when Hispanic or Latino characters are the hero, or depicted honorifically throughout the game, they still fall into classic racial stereotypes, often through crime or other illegal activity. Ultimately, while this case study is just one avenue for utilizing the theory of covert persuasion in video games, it is clear on a larger scale that (1) covert persuasion exists in the video game medium, (2) covert persuasion directly effects the player, whether or not it leads to a change in overt behavior or attitude, and

(3) the video game industry is not actively working to counteract the spread of racial prejudice through covert persuasion.

There are many other ways that the theory of covert persuasion can, and should, be used. Falling in line with many popular scholarly conversations in game studies in recent years, the theory of covert persuasion can be used effectively to highlight many problems with the video game industry, including racism and prejudice, but also in many other social issues, from gender and sexuality to religion, politics, and global relations. The main conclusion is that video games are in fact having significant persuasive power over players, and that the majority of players receive these messages unknowingly. Identifying this problem does not directly point to a way to solve it, although the following section will begin to address this issue, but it is important to recognize that if significant changes are not made, video games will continue to covertly persuade players.

Additionally, the theory of covert persuasion can function effectively with other mediums, but it is most advantageous to use with studies into video games. Similar issues that exist within the video game medium are also mirrored by other popular communication mediums in the modern world. While covert persuasion is largely a modern issue, due to technological advancement and the consequences of new technological communication mediums, the underlying issues are all strictly rhetorical. As such, despite the current need for further investigations into covert persuasion in the modern world, it follows that the roots of covert persuasion are just as old as persuasion itself. Much work is still left to be done in further unpacking the scope of covert persuasion, but it is also clear that one of the most important applications of the theory is through the video game medium. With all of this in mind, there are ways in which players, developers, and scholars can approach these issues and, hopefully, find



ways to limit the power of negative covert persuasion as well as to utilize video games for the benefit of society, living up to their potential as significant persuasive tools.

### **So What?**

It is clear that something must be done, otherwise the problems revealed by this project will continue to fester in the public sphere. The theory of covert persuasion does not directly promote solutions to the issues found; however, there are suggestions that can be raised for three groups: players, developers, and scholars. Each group has a different role to play in unmasking covert persuasion and charting an alternative path with a fuller understanding of the ways in which covert persuasion works in the modern world. To see real, lasting change would require cooperation on all fronts, but these suggestions can also be effective if employed on an individual level.

#### **For Players**

Video game players need to be aware of the ubiquity and reach of covert persuasion in the games that they play. While not all instances of covert persuasion in video games are negative, many examples can be found of destructive attitudes being promoted by some of the most popular games each year. Kishonna Gray (2014) claims that “it is possible for dominate audiences who consume video game content to resist the stereotypical representations within the narrative,” and while that is true, it is also important for players to learn that the games they play are consistently working to persuade them toward any matter of conclusions (p. 77). Individual players can certainly work to resist the power of covert persuasion – because once the covert persuasion is brought into consciousness and critical thinking, it loses much, if not all, of its power. Thus, players must gain an awareness of how much covert persuasion is happening in

video games, and they must also begin to consider the implications of such persuasion on individual and community levels.

Players also need, in the hopefully near future, a readiness to adapt to changing tides within the video game industry and culture on a larger scale. This is, perhaps, more troubling of a suggestion. Given the events of the past few years, specifically in the Gamergate controversy, it has been revealed that many video game players are firmly opposed to diversity and inclusion, whether it be bullying against women or outright racism against entire groups of people. Dan Golding (2015) sums up the controversy well, claiming that “Gamergate was a semi-autonomous campaign that appeared online at the end of August 2014, giving a name and a brand to the ongoing harassment of women in games that has been growing louder in visibility and intensity for years” (p. 128). The Gamergate controversy has been labelled a “civil war,” but it also revealed a great tension that exists among players and highlighted the problematic, proverbial “boys club” (Goldberg and Larsson, 2015, p. 12). Thus, while changes certainly have been made in recent years, and the conversations that are happening around gender and race in video games are changing for the better, much work is still to be done in tearing down the old, reinforced walls that kept others from joining the ranks of people who play video games. Players have work to do, but without the help of video game developers, it seems as though any lasting change that happens will largely be done on an individual level.

#### For Developers

Video game developers are incredibly important in altering the use of covert persuasion in video games. It is easy to put all of the blame on the developers that, whether unintentionally or not, include aspects of covert persuasion in their games, but game developers are not found culpable in isolation. The first task for video game developers mirrors that of the players:

awareness. With an increased awareness of the potential for covert persuasion in the games that they make, developers have the power to not only try to resist problematic covert persuasion, but they also can work, through the very same mechanisms, to pivot from unintentional covert persuasion into intentional, constructive persuasive goals. While these corrective measures would certainly help the overall environment of the meshing between video games and culture, the first step for developers is an awareness of the existence and power of covert persuasion in the games that they create.

The second step for video game developers is to take action. While covert persuasion exists in all major forms of mass communication, it is prominent in the video game medium. Thus, the video game industry has the potential to be a leader of cultural change. According to Christopher Paul (2018), the video game industry has an obligation to do better. He writes: “The necessary step is to add more new, different types of games that offer an alternate kind of experience and, potentially, target a new kind of player” (p. 163). He further argues that “the beautiful thing about video games is that they can provide a direct experience for their players. The horrible thing is that they have primarily offered only a limited meritocratic experience” (p. 180). Paul’s words ring true; each year the best-selling video games are often sequels to successful games of the past, and the video game industry is rewarded financially for upholding the status quo. While there are examples of experimental games that reach high levels of success, they are few and far between. Awareness of covert persuasion in video games can help developers consider the implications of their work, but to change how games are developed, and the goals therein, could drastically curtail the negative implications of covert persuasion in the video game medium.

## For Scholars

Scholars, in game studies, rhetoric, and communication, can benefit greatly from greater understanding of the existence and mechanisms of covert persuasion in the modern world. Like players and developers, the impetus for changing the outcome of covert persuasion is in the initial awareness of its scope. For many years scholars, particularly in game studies, have been discussing great cultural and social issues that exist within video games, such as those mentioned before of violence, gender, and race. Through the theory of covert persuasion, those ideas come to the fore as not just symptoms of the greater culture, but as consequences that are being brought about by the medium itself. Many have been making these arguments, but through a new understanding brought about by covert persuasion, it is possible that these issues can be brought into new light. Awareness, at least for the academy, invites further exploration into these complex issues.

Scholars must take action and begin to explore how widespread the problems of covert persuasion in video games has, and can, become. There are many avenues of exploration through the theory of covert persuasion, and the case study presented in this project represents only a sliver of the power of covert persuasion in video games. It is important that scholars and experts in the field consider the implications of covert persuasion in their individual lines of work, both strengthening their own arguments and offering further explanation of covert persuasion in general. It is also the responsibility of scholars in the field to raise up an outcry when and where issues are found, encouraging others to do the same.

It is only with these three groups working together, players, developers, and scholars, that it is possible to confront the consequences of covert persuasion in video games. While each group must start with an awareness of the existence and reach of covert persuasion, each group

must also confront the issue in their own way. It is the hope of this project to raise awareness of covert persuasion in video games and to initiate a conversation in the academy, the industry, and among video game players.

### **Closing Thoughts**

Video games are a persuasive medium that is here to stay. While games can be used to teach valuable lessons and stir up healthy dialogue, this project has also shown their potential to create negative outcomes through covert persuasive messages that are widely spread, but rarely acknowledged or understood. It is important to consider the implications of covert persuasion in video games, because they have an effect on the attitudes, beliefs, and, ultimately, the actions, of the player. This project aims at raising awareness and understanding about covert persuasion in video games, in order that the problems found here, and future problems that will inevitably occur, can be addressed and corrected. Even though covert persuasion in video games is undeniable, with attention and great care it is possible to bring what is covert into the light.

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