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Technologies of Recruitment
and Mobilization

Edited by Melody Devries,
Judith Bessant and Rob Watts

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Chapter 11

Moments of Political Gameplay: Game Design as a Mobilization Tool for Far-Right Action

Noel Brett

STUDYING GAMES RELATIONALLY

‘Do video games cause violence?’ This famous and hotly debated question is notoriously difficult to answer given that it assumes a dualist framework in which individuals and bits of culture exist as *separate, discrete objects* that interact separately from each other (Elias 1978; Dépelteau 2013; Powell 2013). Thinking about the interactions between humans, technology and culture in a way that discusses what effects consuming a specific form of culture has on individual behaviour sees pieces of technology as stubborn, impervious to changing. In other words, the debate implied by this question assumes that technology unilaterally affects the human, or vice versa.

Proponents of relational theory claim that using relational theory offers several advantages over more dualist approaches where we see the *connections* rather than the *separations* between humans, culture and technology, where they are constantly acting, interacting and affecting each other (Latour 1992; Barad 2007). Building on this, radical relationalism says that all objects, even humans themselves, are made up of relations and all action takes place through relations (Powell 2013, 191). Importantly, in this model, relations become not only our basic unit of social analysis but also a process or transformation (194). In this chapter, I propose that we shift gears into radical relationalist thought, so that we can frame the interaction between players, games and political artefacts as a relational process of exchange (188–9). In this way, our question about technology and humans interacting is no longer ‘how does technology affect the human?’, but rather ‘what are the effects or exchanges that occur when humans and technology come together?’ In the case of people playing political games, ‘what political outcomes arise from the figuration created between human, political and game?’

In this chapter, I define ‘moment of gameplay’ as the moment when the effects of the human-game relation take shape.¹ In political gameplay, it is at the ‘moment of political gameplay’ where the political effects of the relation surface within the human-game-political relation. Directing our attention in this way, I argue that we can investigate the agency or efficacy of moments of political gameplay as these moments appear in and circulate through their relational network (Latour 1992). I develop this concept using an approach informed by radical relationism, microethnography and performativity, in order to produce detailed readings of how video games and their players reproduce (far-right) political action. This concept does not consider video games as technologies that produce *new violence* on its players. Rather, this framework argues that in order to map the stages of gameplay that affect players, we must see political gameplay as made up of the coming together of multiple ingredients: the human, the technological and the political. Each ingredient is fundamental in creating a final output: a racist, misogynist or anti-progressive moment of gameplay. Hence, the object of study here is the *processes* by which players *reproduce a political worldview* from their involvement in gameplay. In doing so, I outline how spotting moments of political gameplay allows us to trace the processes which produce political features of play, mobilize the player to digitally enact and perform far-right play, reconfigure the political identities of its player and outline the bread-crumbs that lead the player towards far-right recruitment.

For the purposes of this chapter, I define ‘political practice’ as practices that forward the beliefs and values which are undeniably political, dealing with markers of political rhetoric or engaging with political themes (feminism, racial terrorism, inequality, etc.). Further, I define far-right practices as actions which cultivate and forward three general characteristics: racial and gender essentialism, racialized nationalist protectionism, and traditionalist, anti-progressive values. Additionally, I propose that, for the purposes of this study, we consider political mobilization in video games as a *process of political gameplay*. When either games or players bring in (right-wing) political elements into their relationship, the participants within the relationship end up leaving in altered states (Powell 2013) by performing (Butler 1993, 1998) the politics at play. More specifically, through each instance of gameplay, there is a transaction between the actants of the relation which reconfigures each other if ever so slightly (Powell 2013, 196–7; see also Devries in this volume). While these games don’t *explicitly* act as a recruitment mechanism, conceptualizing political practice as the coming together of political elements with game and human elements implies that playing these games acts as a form of *digital mobilization*, where players enact or perform far-right politics regardless of their intent.

I form the concept of *moments of political gameplay* through two qualitative case studies from two seemingly different games: *Angry Goy II* (AG2; Wheel

Maker Studios 2018), a game developed with politics at its forefront; and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (RDR2; Rockstar Games 2018), an open world game which allows its players to approach objectives freely. I uncover moments of political gameplay for AG2 via an auto-ethnographical and personal research interactions with the game. Whereas, for RDR2, I use moments of political gameplay to extract detailed readings out of YouTube videos where players of RDR2 influence the game to react politically. Moments of political gameplay of AG2 showcase how the game and its technological and design affordances have more pull to influence the player to play politically. While an analysis of RDR2 shows the reciprocal relational processes of how the social and political elements of the player shape the gameplay relationship. Combining analysis of AG2 with that of RDR2 helps showcase the potentiality of political gameplay within varying gameworlds, whether intended to be spaces of far-right gameplay or not.

IT'S ALL RELATIONS

Taking up this radical relationalism has implications for our qualitative methodologies, since our new object of study is not objects themselves, but the relations (or figuration [Elias 1976]) between human and non-human actors (Latour 1992; Bennett 2010; McFarlane 2013) that produce objects or entities as such. Microethnography provides a methodology that aligns with this theoretical approach.

Giddings describes gameplay as a phenomenon which brings together multiple human and non-human actors (Giddings 2009). Adams’s diagram of a gameplay mode in figure 11.1 (Adams 2013) speaks to this coming together of human and non-human actors² that make up a moment of gameplay, that is, the relational meaning-making that occurs through the reciprocal interaction

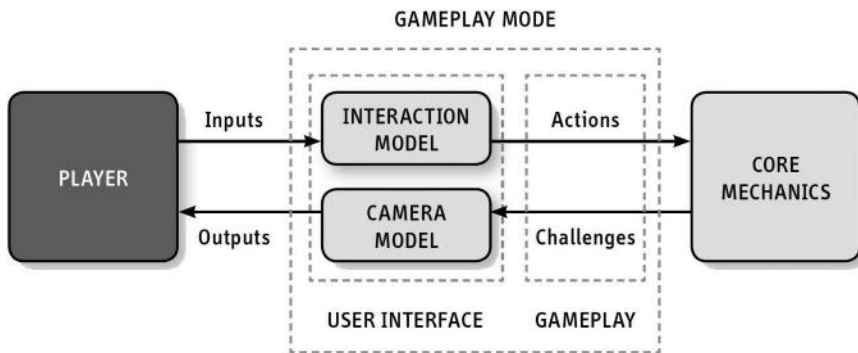


Figure 11.1. Adams’s Model of Gameplay.

Source: (Adams 2013).

between human and machine (Haraway 2006, Giddings 2009). Players participate in gameplay with input technologies (often a keyboard and mouse, or game controller). The user interface links the input devices from the world of the player to actions that take place within the gameworld. As Adams notes, ‘Actions refer to events in the gameworld directly caused by the user interface interpreting a player input’ (276). The game answers the player’s actions by providing the player with *game challenges* – non-trivial tasks the player must perform in order to progress in the game, which often require either some mental or physical effort (10). The player must understand (or *learn to understand*) the game challenges provided so they can act accordingly and satisfy the game’s goals. Game challenges often restrict the player such that there are only certain possible actions for the player to do, thereby directing the player to complete the game. These challenges, by design, guide the player experience onto the next step in the game. The interface translates the game challenges for the player by showing the feedback of the communication on screen.

For example, the game Super Mario Bros. (see figure 11.2) presents a set of platforms and enemies, and the player must get to the end of the level without losing a life. Here, the game challenge is to not get hit by enemies and jumping over the holes formed by the platforms without falling. Simultaneously, the player actions are moving and jumping (and subsequently jumping on enemies or over the holes).

In this (apolitical) moment of gameplay, a cyclic exchange occurs between player, technologies and game from player actions and game challenges. This exchange is spurred by both player actions and game challenges occurring together near instantaneously. This results in a near-conversational interactive moment between the game and the player, where both affect or have agency upon each other and shape the output: gameplay. This considered, we can resist conceiving of video games as discrete or ‘whole’ objects. Games are not only used for play; we play *with* games, in a mutual and cyclic interaction. The games’ constituent parts are constantly configuring the player’s experience, responding to and changing from the player’s actions and inputs (Giddings 2009; McArthur 2019).

For example, the player may have learned how to manoeuvre their game character, learned the mechanics of the game or even learned about the game’s lore. Meanwhile, the game may have obtained a new safe state or high score, or perhaps unlocked new playable character for consecutive playthroughs. In other words, a transformation of both parties’ states has taken place via their relational interaction with each other, where parts of the game entangle themselves with parts of the player, and visa-versa. This perspective aligns with a radically relational approach; describing radical relationalism, Powell notes that ‘one might say [one] makes [oneself], but



Figure 11.2. Gameplay of Super Mario.

Source: Google images, original author unknown. Image of Super Mario (Nintendo, 1985), publicly available game.

under conditions not of [one's] own choosing, through relationships [one] can influence but not control' (Powell 2013, 193). These actions and interactions work to 'produce differences'; human and non-human actors within the relation experience *change*, even if that change is minimal or maintaining an equilibrium (196–7). In other words, a radically relational approach proposes that relations between objects compose the very qualities of the objects, as opposed to a traditional relationalism, which proposes networked interaction between whole entities (187–8).

MOMENTS OF POLITICAL GAMEPLAY

Building from these perspectives, I propose the concept of *moments of political gameplay* as a means of highlighting how games and users come together,

transforming each other in ways that produce political outcomes. I argue that when adding political elements to the gameplay relation, other actants in the relation are *mobilized* to practise the political actions encoded by the game's political design. Political elements are able to participate in the relation by either game design (*politically encoded game challenges*) or by the player (*politically charged actions*) via the political positionality of the player. This means that the actants participate in arranged ways set by the game's design. In this way, the amalgamation of player elements, game elements and political elements form moments of political gameplay. In other words, when we spot a moment of political gameplay, we are spotting the *coagulation* of the *relations between game, player, and political*.

I use the expression 'moment'³ because it allows us to tag the (micro-) temporal periods when the human-game-political relation happens, enabling us to label the exchange or transformation between all actants. In moments of political gameplay, the recreation of violent, racist, misogynist or otherwise anti-progressive gameplay practices emerges from the involvement of both game and player. The process of participating in moments of political gameplay is a performative *way of doing* far-right politics (Butler 1988, 1993; Devries, this volume), where the political practice (i.e. the moment of political gameplay) is *dependent* on the product of the relation.

By using the concept of moments of political gameplay to focus on these co-constitutive relations between human and non-human actors like games, we can bypass individualistic perspectives that reduce analysis of human actions to *intentions*.⁴ Rather than concerning ourselves entirely with whether a gamer or designer is actually racist, misogynist and so on, we can focus instead on what individuals *contribute to an outcome* which is political, whether they *intended* to or not. Shifting our focus this way becomes especially important when considering the racist or violent actions that happen in open-world games that aren't necessarily political, but that carry the affordances for political play.

In what follows, I use this relational framework to spot the moments of political gameplay in the game *Angry Goy II*, and following this, *Red Dead Redemption 2*. This provides two opposite examples where we can consider relational moments of political gameplay at work. In the first, the game asserts more political action onto the player, while in the second, the player is able to assert more political force on the gameworld.

ANGRY GOY II AND ENCODING POLITICAL VIOLENCE

A voice clip of PewDiePie⁵ plays the following message: 'You know, Hitler was right. I really opened my eyes to White power. And it's about time we did something about it'. I click on the glowing red 'Start' button to attempt

another playthrough of the video game *Angry Goy II* (Wheel Maker Studios 2018). The game prompts me with a character select screen titled: ‘The Right-Wing Death Squad’. This screen is reminiscent of classic arcade video game aesthetics and paired with a synth track. I elect to play as Christopher Cantwell, a self-described White nationalist who took part in the Charlottesville ‘Unite the Right’ rally in 2017, and click ‘continue’ to begin the game. My character spawns on a street near a familiar park. I follow a pixel walkway to the centre of the park where I find a statue of a man riding a horse with a plaque that reads ‘Robert E. Lee’, surrounded by purple pixel flowers (see figure 11.3). No doubt this resembles the park where the bronze equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee sits, located in Charlottesville’s Market Street Park, formerly known as Lee Park.⁶

Shortly after arriving at the foot of the statue, a horde of digitized people rush towards my character. Among these people are characters marked as ‘Black Lives Matter’ supporters, people from the LGBTQ+ community, Jewish people, Muslim people ‘Social Justice Warriors’, as well as other minority and left-wing activist groups. As the hordes of non-player characters get closer, they start to throw various objects intended to hurt my character. My character is holding a weapon, and a target cross hairs follow my mouse position, the game invites me to shoot and kill the incoming attackers in order to protect my character. After several rounds of ammunition are used up, my character dies amongst a pile of digital corpses and the game transfers me to the title screen, where the game replays the PewDiePie voice clip and prompts me to replay the game once again.



Figure 11.3. A Christopher Cantwell Character in a Level Resembling Lee’s Park.

Source: Screenshot from publicly available /pol/ archives game *Angry Goy 2*. Collected by author.

I try instead to explore the gameworld with my avatar. I bring my character towards the pixel flora hoping to interact with these instead of the minorities programmed to be aggressive. However, another ambush of protesters surround my character and I lose once more. Determined to explore the rest of the gameworld, I move my character away from the centre of the park. In no time, I reach impassable barriers and walls where protester hordes spawn. If I don't move quickly, they will steer towards my character to kill me. With impossible interaction between other mundane digital objects and restricted access outside of the digital park, the game tells me that my only possible action is to participate in shooting people that compose the political groups that are out to kill me. Or, if choosing to resist and play another type of politics, such as joining the digital activists, I must lose, over and over again.

At this moment, I think about how the game and me are working with each other, or rather, against one another. We, digital program and human, are locked together in a feedback loop of player actions and game challenges to see who has the most influence within the moment of gameplay. The game has provided a particular trajectory for me to take, and the many game challenges it introduces when I attempt to stray from this trajectory make it nearly impossible to pursue other options of my choosing. In this gameplay moment, the game has a higher influence on me than I can have on the game.

Games like *Angry Goy II* show how games and their affordances can affect or sculpt the actions and logics of the player: the two enter a relationship in which both the game and the player affect each other. The game affects the player by limiting the player's in-game possibilities in order to coax the player to digitally perform the political narratives of the game. And, the player reconfigures the game by playing and progressing through the game's story, in turn changing the game's internal state.

Political elements find themselves in game either by the encoding of (far-right) politics as a means for playing the game, or through the player's realization of political affordances in a game. In the former, the player must be able to read and understand the politically encoded *game challenges* in order to learn from them. In other words, they must not only learn how to play the game, but also learn what political practices are playable from the game – for the latter, the player's social relationships with right-wing politics visualize the *possibilities* or *experimentations* for political play. And, if the game is able to react to the political inputs via its technological features, then the relationship between player and game is able to *produce a moment of political gameplay*. In both of these instances, each playthrough reformulates the political worldview of the player from their *participation* with the game and the political features of the gameplay moment. In what follows, I dive into the design details of *AG2*. As these will show how the political elements participate in the gameplay relationship *by design* of far-right game developers.



Figure 11.4. One of *Angry Goy II*'s Title Screen.

Source: Screenshot from publicly available game *Angry Goy 2*. Collected by author.

Wheel Maker Studios produced the games *Angry Goy* (2017) and *Angry Goy II* (2018) (see figure 11.4), which were designed to include far-right elements as a means of game progression. In both games, the player must fight journalists, racial minorities, communists, Jewish people, queer people and other political minority groups in order to move through the game. The titles of the games refer to the word *Goy*, 'a term in modern Hebrew and Yiddish to refer to a gentile or a non-Jewish person now part of white nationalists' antisemitic discourse' (Verhoef 2019). In other words, the games' far-right coding is explicit; if a player who is anything less than an avowed white supremacist stumbles across these games, it will inevitably carry a heavier far-right influence on gameplay than the player themselves.

The real Christopher Cantwell, pictured here as a playable character, promoted AG2 on his website and podcast *Radical Agenda*. Here, Cantwell describes it as 'the season's hit game for White males who have had it with Jewish bullshit' where 'instead of taking out your frustrations on actual human beings, you can fight the mongrels and degenerates on your computer!' (Verhoef 2019). Aside from playing as Christopher Cantwell, the players of AG2 have the option of choosing to play as other right-wing political figures such as 'The Golden One' (a Swedish white nationalist YouTuber), 'Moon Man' (a far-right meme figure), TayAI⁷ and Hitler (see figure 11.5).

Before arriving to the start screen, the player must agree to the license agreement, which states that 'by playing this game you agree not to hold the creators of this game responsible for any harm or injury that could possibly



Figure 11.5. 'Right Wing Death Squad'.

Source: Verhoef 2019.

result from the use of this game. . . . All violence is meant for entertainment purposes only. These are merely exciting plot elements'. The gameplay of AG2 heavily borrows from the top-down shooter (or shoot-em-up) genre popularized in 1980s arcade games (Verhoef 2019). All NPCs (non-player characters) in AG2 have distinct themes and differ only in terms of visual design, mechanics and verbal expression. As Verhoef (2019) notes, 'From being labelled a piece of "cisgender heterosexual scum" by rainbow flag waving LGBTQ activists, to being called a "white male" by a group of feminists the next – the enemies encountered throughout the game consistently ascribe amoral qualities to the player's character'.

The game consists of two different game modes. In the campaign mode, the player must save President Donald Trump who has been kidnapped by left-wing terrorists (Palmer 2018). The second mode is the *Survival* mode, which the game describes as 'Defend your Right to Free Speech and Fight off Hordes of Leftists'. Aesthetically, this mode functions as a recount of the Unity the Right rally in Charlottesville. In campaign mode, the player must go through several levels, each consisting of multiple stages, leading up to a mini-boss. The player completes each stage once they kill multiple waves of enemies. The win condition for each level is met once the player defeats the mini-boss. This formula repeats until the player reaches the final boss, with each level having distinct thematic design and narratives.

The first level is situated within ‘The Communist Headquarters’. The enemy hordes are comprised of Antifa, feminists and Black Lives Matter characters. The first mini-boss fight of the game is with ‘The Red Terror’, stylized after the ‘Happy Merchant’ – a historic meme which portrays a caricature of a stereotypical Jewish man based on anti-Semitic views, characterizing the figure as greedy, manipulative and striving for world domination (see figure 11.6).

In the second level, the player must shoot people inside a gay club called ‘LGBTQP+ Agenda and HQ’⁸. A poster outside of the club reads ‘Children Welcome’ suggesting that gay clubs are nothing more than spaces for paedophiles, an established homophobic trope used historically by right-wing folks to resist civil rights advances for LGBTQ+ people. The level strongly resembles the 2016 Pulse Nightclub mass shooting in Orlando, Florida, during which the shooter killed forty-nine attendees. The player finds and rescues Mike Pence in this level, who was kidnapped and brought to the LGBTQP+ HQ. The mini-boss, ‘Progress Master’, resembles Canadian’s current prime minister Justin Trudeau; the mini-boss threatens to ‘make sweet love’ to the player since Trudeau is construed by the far-right as ‘weak’ for his neo-liberal progressive and multiculturalist policies. In this sense, even passive progressive politics are vilified as a threat to the white nationalist.

Level three takes the player to ‘The Diverse Urban Area’, where the player meets Officer Darren Wilson (Darren Wilson is the police officer who murdered Michael Brown, Jr., an eighteen-year-old African American, which prompted the Ferguson unrest of 2014). The digitized Wilson tells the player that ‘n**** brought crime and poverty’⁹ to America’s once-thriving white suburbs. Wilson then gives the player extra health before the player shoots Black, Mexican and Muslim Americans. Eventually, the player rescues

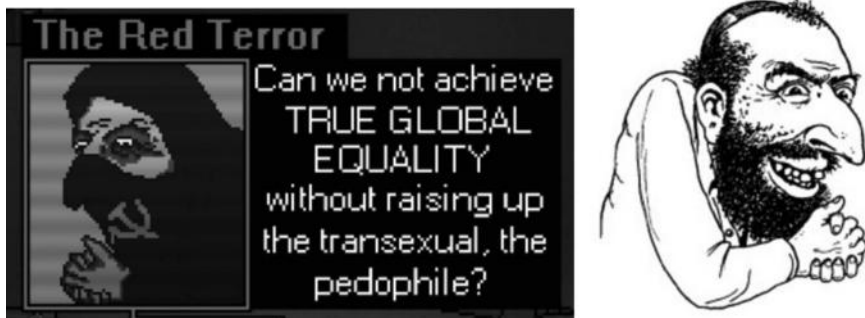


Figure 11.6. ‘The Red Terror’ Mini-Boss and ‘Happy Merchant’ Anti-Semitic Meme.

Source: Left: Screenshot from publicly available game Angry Goy 2; Right: Know Your Meme: Happy Merchant, original creator unknown. Both collected by author.



Figure 11.7. Nazi Speech Video between Levels.

Source: Screenshot from publicly available game Angry Goy 2. Collected by author.

PewDiePie in this level. The fourth and final level takes place in the ‘Fake News Network’ studio, tapping into ‘anti-mainstream media’ discourses prevalent in new right circles. AG2 perpetuates the myth that the media is not independent, but controlled by ‘the left’ and influenced by Jewish interests, which explains why the media censors right-wing commentary (Verhoef 2019). The player fights and kills a character resembling David Hogg (an American gun control student activist who survived the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in 2018) before moving onto the mini-boss of the level: ‘Media Boss Shill’. Finally, the player is presented with ‘Rootless Cosmopolitan’, the final boss resembling another caricature of the anti-Semitic image of the happy merchant.

Before each new level is loaded, the player is presented with a screen that plays videos of pro-Nazi Germany speeches, or of elderly people and veterans reminiscing about their lives in Nazi Germany (see figure 11.7). Whenever the player runs out of lives, a fail screen is loaded up which has the caption ‘You have failed to save the West’ This screen presents a random video to the player which underlines the threat that trans lives, multiculturalism and Jewish culture pose to Western civilization. As Verhoef (2019) notes in his analysis of AG2, ‘This communicates anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the cultural hegemony of Jewish people, popular in white nationalist’s discourses’. This fail-screen sequence also further communicates to players what exactly would happen if white Americans fail to maintain whiteness and ‘Western culture’. As such, in both the play and narrative elements of *Angry Goy II*, political violence is contextualized as necessary in order to win and complete the game (Verhoef 2019).

VIDEO GAMES AS A MOBILIZATION TOOL

Through these mechanics and qualities, the game pushes political content for the player to interact with by including *politically charged game challenges*. Undeniably, the player is changed by their interaction with the game, regardless of where they are on the political spectrum. If they were playing the game ‘just for a laugh’ for example, or because they were curious about the far right, after playing they would leave the interaction with a much more extensive knowledge of far-right ideology and symbolisms, who its enemies are and so on. When players recognize what the game asks them to do, that player is mobilized to perform digital political practices – they read and enact political narratives that make the game progression make sense. This contrasts my attempted play, described at the beginning of this section, where I attempt to engage with non-politicized elements of the game world, but am nevertheless forced to fight the leftist mobs.

After my own playthroughs, I did not instantly become violent, nor did I have the urge to bring these practices offline. In fact, I felt my own leftist politics concretizing. This is because of my own relational elements and political inclinations that I as a player bring to the game experience, and how those interact with the political elements of the game. After my many digital interactions with the game, I leave the interaction with new knowledges of right-wing figures, for example. However, playing the game by itself may not be enough to recruit someone who has leftist inclinations. If I was a centre-leaning player, with no inclinations towards the left or right or with no knowledge of recruitment or mobilization practices, it is likely I may be left changed in a rightward direction; having new knowledges of far-right ideologies and narratives, and who we (other players) consider violent enemies, online *and* offline. The extent of this always depends on all the micro-features the player brings to the game interaction.

In other words, playing the game works not only to re-establish the features of far-right political ideology but also to bring these features onto the player to the extent that their political worldview is mixed with the heavy messages of far-right ideology presented in these levels. As Giddings and Kennedy note:

Games configure their players, allowing progression through the game only if the players recognize what they are being prompted to do, and comply with these coded instructions. The analysis of the pleasures of gameplay must take [into consideration the work done by] the players and the game technologies as central, as well as those between players and the game. (Giddings & Kennedy 2008)

By participating in the politically encoded game challenges presented by the game, and by acting them out in embodied gameplay moments, players relationally *become* part of the type of politics that such involvement

implicates (Devries, this volume). In this sense, gameplay becomes a type of *transformative process* as spoken of by relational theorists. Through repeated interactions, playthroughs constitute a change in state for each of the actants (human or non-human) in the relation, even if slight or unnoticeable (Powell 2013, 196–7). Notably, as players learn the game system and achieve mastery over it, they experience mastery is the source of enjoyable gameplay (Giddings and Kennedy 2008). For AG2, the actions required by the player encodes the same right-wing ideologies that they may enact offline. In other words, playing AG2 reinforces players' political worldview in the same way that attending a rally like Unite the Right might, or as watching or reading white supremacist literature might. Here, media and the user enter an interactional relationship – with games like AG2, however, political narratives are enacted through digitalized actions and interactions with game parts, scripts and characters. By either re-enacting far-right mass shootings or murdering minority figures, the player's actions re-enact the material violent actions conducted by actual far-right mass shooters. In this interaction, since the game enforces stronger political influence than the player, the player's political self must come to terms with what this interaction means for them. Through mobilization then, pathways for recruitment are potentially made more accessible.

From my own playthroughs, the game pushed me towards one type of play: the practice of killing political targets. To achieve mastery of the game, I have to not only learn the game mechanics (i.e. *how* and *when* to shoot), but I must also understand why I must kill these politically charged digital targets in order for the game progression to make sense, to resonate with me, the player, and thus for the experience to be enjoyable (i.e. *what* and *why* to shoot). Otherwise, the gameplay is unenjoyable (which, it certainly was). In this moment of political gameplay, I am mobilized to learn, act and practice far-right politics. This echoes with Ian Bogost's work on *persuasive games*: 'video game players develop procedural literacy through interacting with the abstract models of specific real or imagined processes presented in the games they play. *Video games teach biased perspectives about how things work*' (Bogost 2007). Hence, games like these can serve as powerful mobilizing mediums (if not necessarily recruiting ones) where players learn or practice right-wing politics.

By looking for moments of political gameplay in games like AG2, we can see that players, including those that do not share the same political identities with the game and those who are 'apolitical', undergo the same relational process that outputs the following effect:

1. Participating and recreating far-right digital (game) action.
2. Entanglement of political elements with player elements.
3. The reformulation of political identity in relation to the interaction enabled both by the design of the game and the player's initial positionality.

Moments of political gameplay allows us to see how political elements find themselves within games from game design practices, which allow the player to participate in processes that mobilize them to reproduce far-right digital action. If it's the case that AG2 shows how politics have more pull than the player, can we find moments of political gameplay where the player has more political pull? From where do politics emerge in these interactions? To investigate this, I turn to the game *Red Dead Redemption 2* (RDR2), a game which, unlike AG2, has not been packaged or sold as a far-right game, but whose system has allowed the possibilities for players to find moments of right-wing political practice. I argue that this result is both the product of the game's affordances, and the player's own political features which, like the game, afford certain interaction.

RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2: GAMES AND THE POTENTIAL FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE

RDR2 is a video game set circa 1899 in a fictionalized representation of the Western, Midwestern and Southern United States. The game follows the protagonist and his position in a notorious gang. The protagonist must deal with the decline of the *Wild West* whilst attempting to survive against government forces, rival gangs and other enemies. RDR2 has been highly praised for its writing, themes, characterization and its high-fidelity graphics and physics. But, most importantly, the game is highly cherished as completely open-world, affording players the freedom to do nearly anything they want. This style of game contrasts sharply with the type of scripted gameplay dynamics that players experience in a game like AG2, where users cannot explore worlds and must follow the (political) objectives of the game. In RDR2, players can play poker, get a haircut, play in knee-deep snow, give money to homeless NPCs, visit the remains of a pagan ritual, kidnap civilian NPCs and admire digital miles of beautifully rendered landscapes. For many players, the pleasure of playing RDR2 'is to test the boundaries of what is possible within its elaborate simulation' (Hernandez 2019).

However, players have used this unboundedness to recreate racial and misogynist violence, inevitably bringing certain political practices into the game-world. For example, a series of YouTube videos of gameplay show a compilation of violence against an NPC suffragette. These videos are dedicated specifically to violence against the suffragette, and show her being punched, stamped on, tied up and shot (see figure 11.8), and even kidnapped, tied to a horse, dragged around the game world, and thrown to be devoured by an alligator. Whatever the real intent of those posting the videos, these videos frame the violence as political actions through their reactionary titles like: 'Annoying Feminist Fed to Alligator.'



Figure 11.8. Player Tying Up a Suffragette Right before Killing Her.

Source: Shirrako, YouTube video: "Red Dead Redemption 2 - Annoying Feminist Fed To Alligator", Posted 31 Oct. 2018. Screenshot by author.

The video depicts a broken and disjointed set of interactions, as the game struggles to keep up with the player's unanticipated political actions. In the video, the player makes many attempts to lasso the suffragette; the suffragette flees but then stops, almost as if she has forgotten why she was running in the first place. Meanwhile, the alligator's eating animation consists of the 3-D model lunging and clipping through the woman, but not actually eating her. Since this attempt at her demise did not work, at the end of the video, the player stomps on her head until she stops moving (Martin 2018). While the player intends to produce a certain political experience with the game, the game is complicit only to an extent; these particular actions have not been completely predicted by game designers.

Consider another interaction between player and game: another YouTube video depicts an RDR2 player searching for and kidnapping a Black man to bring to a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) meeting in the woods (see figure 11.9). The player tries to lasso a Black man driving a horse carriage. The player's character sends out a long lasso and wraps it around the driver's neck, and a forceful pull on the rope propels the driver out of his seat and onto the ground. The game calculates that this blow will kill the driver. So, the player is made to search for another Black person in the gameworld. The player finds another Black person at a farm, ties him up and brings him to the KKK gathering,



Figure 11.9. Player Bringing a Black Man to the KKK.

Source: Skirrako, YouTube Video: "Red Dead Redemption 2 - What Happens If You Bring Black Man To KKK?", Posted Nov 11, 2018. Screenshot by author.

where the player then lets him down and unties him. However, instead of running away, the now untied man tries to fight the player in front of the members of the KKK group, since the game tells the NPC that he has been captured and kidnapped. The KKK figures do not notice the brawl between the player and the man, as they are preoccupied by their robes caught aflame from burning the cross, a scene intentionally encoded by game designers. In other words, the game was unprepared to render the social and political ramifications of the player's intentionally inflammatory and undeniable political actions. In this case, the game has allowed players to exert some political symbology onto itself, but assumes a sort of apolitical passivity by attempting to create only a 'historically accurate online game world'.

However, in both of these moments of political gameplay, the player observes a potential for experimenting with political play, and in the end renders the game a space for excessively violent, digital action. The player inputs *politically charged actions* and it is up to the game to understand and reply. Even though the game often struggles to keep up with the far-right actions of the player (evident in 'unrealistic' moments such as when the suffragette acts as if she was never attacked), the player can still guide the game to political violence in other ways, such as via shooting or torturing of political targets like suffragettes or people of colour. In this case, the moment of political gameplay – the moment at which the player and game together produced a far-right action – is enabled by design affordances that allow for the game to adjust to player's inputs, and outputs new politically encoded game challenges back to the player.

Here, both technological and ideological political elements have considerable influence over the rest of the actants in the relation. The game plays extreme violent and graphic far-right practices via the influence of the ideological elements brought in by the player, and the player engages in the politically charged game challenges generated by the game's technological elements. This reveals a *reciprocal process* at work through moments of political gameplay, where the players influence the game to reply politically, and the game provides gameplay content for the player to continue re-producing their political actions. A moment of political gameplay in the case of RDR2 is thus the instance where the player asserts their political force, and to which the game abides. Together, the player and game create a reciprocal political conversation, composed of many moments of political gameplay.

In the case of RDR2's moments of political gameplay, the player seems to assert much more political force on the game than the game does upon them, especially compared to AG2, where the game asserts much more restrictive politics on the players. However, in both cases, interactive processes from both games and players mobilize the production of far-right digital action. Both player and game are transformed, if slightly, by this exchange in innumerable various ways. While we cannot necessarily yet track the extent of these transformations on players – humans who act in the physical world – it is important to note that the mobilization of far-right digital practice is *not neutral* or *benign*. Apart from the political affordances or features of games, the affordances of sharing platforms like YouTube provide further potential for these gameplay moments – like the violent scenes from RDR2 – to act amidst larger far-right networks, exacerbating their potential affect as political actions. Rebecca Lewis states that 'by connecting to and interacting with one another through YouTube videos, influencers with mainstream audiences lend their credibility to openly white nationalist and other extremist content creators' (Lewis 2018).

CONCLUSION

As Deleuze and Guattari say, bodies refer *not necessarily to human bodies* but to a multiple and diverse *series of connections* which *assemble* as a particular spatial and temporal moment (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Similarly, we can consider a moment of political gameplay to be like a Deleuzian body where and when the player, game and political or ideological elements assemble, intermingle and connect. Participating in gameplay is a way to *embody* and *feel the effects* of the *political (gameplay) body*.

In this chapter, I have defined 'moments of political gameplay' as the moment when the player, game and political relations coagulate into a solidified entity. I analysed the moments of political gameplay that arose from playing the

game *Angry Goy II*, a game whose design elements bring politically charged game challenges for the player. Following this, I examined RDR2, a game not designed with a far-right narrative in mind, but where the player has to work hard to construct one by using politically charged actions. With this, the game's affordances allows for the possibility for any player to play and experiment with politics.

Notably, in either case we did not have to prioritize either humanist determinism or technological determinism. Using the theoretical concept of moments of political gameplay works to highlight the interchange between game and player which produces the end result – politicized gameplay – allowing questions of intentionality to take a back seat. Instead, this model brings our attention to the relational formations that produce political gameplay. This change in analytical approach opens up avenues for further investigation and conclusions about political mobilization through gameplay, and the implicit politics of video games generally.

Moments of political gameplay does not dismiss more essentialist claims as false. Rather, my hope is that the framework of *moments of political gameplay* (or more generally, *moments of gameplay*) can provide a qualitative tool to help game studies researchers conceptualize our relational transformation with the physical world and with games. This is because the concept of moments of political gameplay enables us to answer 'what political outcomes arise from the figuration created between human, political and game' by tracing the political exchange and transformation that happens from the human-game-political relation. In the gameplay moments described in this chapter, political elements are found within the gameplay body through game design – either from deliberate design choices to guide the player, or through the affordances of the gameworld and the player's own political inclinations.

Additionally, in this chapter, I have shown the capacity this framework has to highlight the relations that *mobilize* a player to enact and perform right-wing politics, allowing for new ways of studying digital mobilization. In both AG2 and RDR2, addressing moments of political gameplay is essential in order to foreground the effects and outcomes of the relation: the player and game *participate* in processes that mobilize them to reproduce far-right digital action. Each actant participates in the relation through the actions they take. From politically charged actions and challenges enacted through the moments of gameplay, political transformation becomes effective in mobilizing these various actants in a relationship to re-enact right-wing practices. In other words, the player and the game *become political* through their constant interaction with one another.

In this way, I believe this framework has the potential to describe and conceptualize relational recruitment processes that come from the assembling of games, humans and other cultural phenomena. For example, moments of political gameplay could be used to highlight and outline the microrelations

or interactions that lead any player further towards actual far-right recruitment. Schlegel states that games could increase the susceptibility of recruitment processes for individuals (Schlegel 2020). Players concretize their own political identity by participating in political gameplay and, sometimes, later become involved in larger political networks such as #Gamergate,¹⁰ the manosphere, the proudboys, QAnon and so forth. Spotting and dissecting moments of political gameplay in these contexts could work to uncover the relational ties between gameplay, other platforms and far-right subcultures.

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NOTES

1. Akin to an *event* proposed by Seth Giddings (2009).
2. Other gameplay models exist (e.g. see MDA [Hunicke et al. 2004] and A.G.E. [Dillon 2010]). In game studies and game design research, it is often debated what type of model is more 'appropriate' for designing and critiquing games. However, my argument here is not in favour of one model over another. Rather, I hope to illustrate how gameplay *is* a relationship between player, the game and game technology. All other models are illustrated to reflect a relational process, however, with certain emphasis on different parts or actants.
3. Giddings uses the term 'event'.
4. This is to say that a player intending to play politically (or more generally perform any political practice) will of course contribute to a moment of political gameplay.
5. A famous YouTube personality whose channel is largely devoted to humour and video games. However, PewDiePie has been accused of anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim bigotry (Munn 2019).
6. The game mentions the intentional link between the game level and the real-world park on a warning screen prior to entering the digital park.
7. This is an infamous chatbot that became racist after 'learning' from Twitter for several hours (Neff and Naggy 2016).
8. The game designers have deliberately included a 'P' in the LGBTQ+ acronym to insinuate that pedophiles are part of the queer community.
9. Safiya Noble advises against the re-printing of this slur in her book *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (2018).
10. A group dedicated to defending video games against the evils of feminist and progressive views (Gray et al. 2017; Salter 2018).

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