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Abstract:

Game studies have basically been conceived as an interdisciplinary field that has attempted to develop a broad framework for the study of games (this includes video games, board games and interactive stories). They have described the experiences of developers and the communities that surround them, as well as ontologies, methodologies, etc. However, it is necessary to continue researching around games, integrating new directions of studies with the intention of opening the field to new ideas and people.

KEYWORDS

Video games, Digital society, Game studies

Resumen:

Los estudios del juego han sido concebidos básicamente como un campo interdisciplinario que ha intentado desarrollar un marco amplio para el estudio de los juegos (aquí se incluyen videojuegos, juegos de mesa e historias interactivas). En ellos se han descrito experiencias de desarrolladores y de las comunidades que los rodean, así como ontologías, metodologías, etc. Sin embargo, es necesario continuar investigando en el área de los juegos, integrando nuevas direcciones de los estudios con la intención de abrir el campo a nuevas ideas y personas.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Videojuegos, Sociedad digital, Estudios del juego.

Resumo

Os estudos de jogos foram concebidos basicamente como um campo interdisciplinar que tentou desenvolver uma ampla estrutura para o estudo de jogos (incluindo videogames, jogos de tabuleiro e histórias interativas). Eles des-

creveram experiências de desenvolvedores, das comunidades que os cercam, bem como

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Videogame, sociedade digital, estudo de jogos.

Game studies can be seen as a stream of research on video games, digital games and games in general that arrived at the beginning of the 2000s with the rise of video games as a popular pastime, but also joined this boom by the fact that some academic journals have been consolidated (Stenros and Kultima, 2018). Conceived as an interdisciplinary area and with expert researchers in very diverse fields of study, it has tried to define a coherent framework to study games where designers, developers and academics describe their experiences, methodologies, predictions, and analysis, among other things; and give visibility and importance to the communities that arise around the games.

In recent years, some attempts have been made to measure the scope of research topics in this field. For example, bibliometric analyzes have been carried out with the intention of establishing data and detecting which are the most researched topics or the communities that are observed around them (Melcer et al., 2015), in addition to classifying the games and their derived genres (Coavoux et al., 2017). Although these voices have grown to include the investigation of various games (not only digital) and all those adjacent phenomena, it is evident that we still have limited research in the study of games. There is a lack of research with an emphasis on cognitive studies, artificial intelligence, informal learning (Scolari and Contre-

ras-Espinosa, 2019) or in other more technical areas.

Deterding (2017) highlights that game studies were initially formed to be an “umbrella” discipline, but it has become a sub-community within game research. In addition, he points out that the exodus of academics from the areas of communication and psychology to this area has served to broaden the study of games. With this, new research, approaches, and points of view have been generated. Basically, game studies today have scholars from areas like humanities, social sciences, communication, user-centered design, etc., and a large group of followers of its study as a cultural phenomenon. Deterding further suggests that something similar to what happened with cinema has happened in this field, by predominantly addressing the social and cultural aspects, and then moving to much more technical issues.

But we must consider that it is also necessary to review the panorama of current games, as well as the variety of phenomena that are now included in the concept of “game”. Not only video games, board games or interactive stories could be included in the definition. It is missing to incorporate eSports and many other activities that are not easily classified as games but that currently share some aspects or digital infrastructure. The concepts and classifications created years ago around the game may be limiting or not very broad for the currently established dynamics and for the game practices

that players use now. In addition, it is necessary to delve into the situation of women in games, in other groups (Fron et al., 2007), in races (Gray, 2012) and in the employment situations as industry workers (Hammar et al. 2020). It is necessary to move away from binary classifications and visualize a path towards fluid and inclusive classifications.

It is even necessary to investigate new methodologies, both in the sense of approaches on how to analyze games, or how we should select games that we want to analyze. Coavoux et al. (2017) indicate that in any field of research, especially in culture or arts, the personal tastes of the researchers are very important in the choice of research objects. Therefore, when delving into the methodologies currently used in research related to games, we would be taking into account that route those researchers follow. I believe that we must open ourselves to new concepts, accept new choices from researchers, but also include new methodologies to conceive new studies. According to Pettman (2019), we should adopt a new approach to examine the processes and conditions that allow us to study games in another way. We could see the other side of the coin integrating new directions of studies, in the same way that has been done with other areas with more tradition. This would even help reduce the perceived barrier for newcomers to these studies, as it would open the field to new ideas and people.

The articles contained in this monograph represent a testimony of the need to continue researching the area of games. That is why we took on the task of making a hole in the area of

game studies and new faces in the Obra Digital magazine. The reader will find a wide variety of articles that study the video game from the point of view of education, an analysis of the stereotyping of bisexuality, the management of a political community, or the importance of the recreational medium to favor ideologies. Also included in the monograph is a study on the empowerment of women by analyzing the work of *The Last of US part II* and reflecting on how narratives promote critical thinking. Finally, the importance of *Flash* in the configuration of various artistic movements linked to the virtual environment is highlighted.

This is a very special issue for us, not only because of the articles gathered in the monograph, but also because from this issue the magazine Obra digital will change its team and activity. In the same way that the game studios faced changes, this must define a new framework of work. Changes are inevitable but necessary to make sense of our goals. I only have to say: thank you very much to all the readers and authors who have accompanied us in all these years. I do not want to close without publicly thanking Dr. Cecilia Ugalde Sánchez, my friend and colleague. Thank you for all your work and constant involvement throughout this stage. I hope you enjoy this issue dedicated to video games as much as we have enjoyed editing it.

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Videoludic narratives and digital society: contemporary issues in pixel format

Narrativas videolúdicas y sociedad digital: la problemática contemporánea en formato píxel

Narrativas videolúdicas e sociedade digital: problemas contemporâneos em formato píxel

INTRODUCTION

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Abstract:

This monograph aims to reflect on how the world of video games can show and study aspects such as loneliness, death, wars, humanitarian crises, environmentalism and identities. To this end, a varied cast of specialists on the subject, applying a holistic approach that combines game studies, sociology, international relations, cultural studies and gender studies,

take advantage of the potential of the medium to make a novel and complex portrait of everything we can play, which is nothing less than our reality, with all its edges.

KEYWORDS

Video games, Contemporary issues, Digital society, Game studies

Resumen:

El presente monográfico pretende reflexionar cómo desde el mundo del videojuego se pueden mostrar y estudiar aspectos como la soledad, la muerte, las guerras, las crisis humanitarias, el ecologismo o las identidades. Para ello, aplicando un enfoque holístico que combina los *game studies*, la sociología, las relaciones internacionales, los estudios culturales o los estudios de género, un variado elenco de especialistas sobre el tema aprovecha las potencialidades del medio para hacer un retrato novedoso y complejo de todo aquello a lo que podemos jugar, que no es ni más ni menos que nuestra realidad, con todas sus aristas.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Videojuegos, Problemáticas contemporáneas, Sociedad digital, *Game studies*

Resumo

Esta edição tem como objetivo refletir sobre como aspectos como solidão, morte, guerras, crises humanitárias, ambientalismo ou identidades podem ser mostrados e estudados a partir do mundo dos videogames. Para isso, um elenco variado de especialistas no assunto, aplicando uma abordagem holística que combina game studies, sociologia, relações internacionais, estudos culturais ou estudos de gênero, aproveita o potencial do meio para fazer um retrato novo e complexo de tudo que podemos jogar, que não é nem mais nem menos do que a nossa realidade, com todos os seus cisalhamentos e arestas.

PALABRAS-CHAVE

Videogame, Problemas contemporâneos, Sociedade digital, *Game studies*.

Our societies are increasingly playful, and video games are one area where much of the subjectivity and artistic education of people, including young people, is constructed. Video games, in their different genres and categorizations, have an enormous power of centrality and social representation due to their relation to the construction of cultural identities, the diversity of their forms of expression, and their projection as a universal language. Both developers and players are capable of projecting the realities they experience onto them.

As a cultural artifact, video games implicitly carry an ideology that, like the construction of meaning, is reflected and carried out through the gaming experience, commonly known as gameplay. As such, they entail problems of a political, economic or social nature: armed conflicts, humanitarian crises (famines, refugees), the consequences of neoliberalism, climate

change, loneliness, suicide, sexual identity, racism and marginalization, to mention only a few.

In this regard, video games should be understood as sociospatial practices in which the physical world and ludic space feed off each other, especially in those video games that reflect armed conflicts inspired in real or plausible situations, as in the case of the Tom Clancy franchise's *The Division* (2016-2018) or visions of the world with a marked colonialist character, such as Sid Meier's series of strategy video games *Civilization* (1991-2016). Although, as with other media, many of the games are in alignment with the *status quo*, there are other riskier ones that address themes like loneliness, relationships or the consequences of economic crises such as *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017), *The Stillness of the Wind* (Fellow Traveller, 2019) and *Kentucky Route Zero* (2011-2020).

Since video games are an eminently interactive medium, as expressive-artistic media they enable us to explore themes addressed by each particular game in a totally different and active way compared to their predecessors. With this monograph we aim to analyze in depth how some typical problems of our time and society are reflected in the world of video games and through the defining elements of the language of the medium. There can be no full citizenship without a ludic literacy in which you can access video games, understand their meaning and create content through the medium.

The articles contained in this monograph testify, once again, to the boom in the representation of video games in multiple cultural and academic events, from exhibitions (*Games and Politics; Video games: The two sides of the screen; Homo Ludens: Video games to understand the present*) to publications in specialized media (Moreno and Venegas, 2020; Martín and Navarro, 2021; Gómez-García *et al.*, 2021), and relevant meetings of experts such as the First International Congress of DiGRA Spain 2021, held in Mataró last year. These events are very important examples of the interest that these “videoludic cultural artifacts” continue to arouse. Perhaps their success is not so much because they faithfully reflect the reality that surrounds us, but rather their ability to move us when we sit in front of the screen. As Electronic Arts predicted back in 1983, “video games would bring people’s thoughts and emotions closer” (Anable, 2018: IX)

In this regard, the article “Video games and global citizenship: Analysis of the applicability of *Never Alone* in educational contexts” analyzes how there is still some resistance on the part of teachers and parents to the use of video games in the classroom. This is why Marta Pérez, Iria Sobrino and Marta Rodríguez propose an analysis model to measure the suitability of vi-

deo games in education from the perspective of education for development and global citizenship, combining methodologies of this current with others specific to video game studios and applying it to the case of *Never Alone*.

Carlos Ramírez proposes in his research “Call me by my name: Analysis of the strategies of erosion and stereotyping of bisexuality in video games” a categorization of the main strategies of erosion and stereotyping of bisexuality in video games, in order to delve into the quality of their representation and the characteristics that make video games a unique medium for this purpose.

In “Democratic characteristics in government simulation video games”, Carlos Moreno carries out a study of the democratic characteristics present in the relationship between the player and the virtual citizens in various video games for the management of a political community. The study analyzes various mechanisms of informal citizen counterpower based on the representation of a political and legitimate conflict or framed in a problem of productivity or delinquency, and in which significant deficits in the areas of deliberation and participation in decision-making are observed, proposing alternative mechanisms.

Next, Antonio César Moreno, in “Techno-nationalism and reconstruction of the past in China through video games”, analyzes how the different educational and cultural organisms of China, especially since the Patriotic Education campaign of Jiang Zeming, have used the format of video games to promote nationalism and rewrite China’s past through *cultural digital techno-nationalism*. He highlights the importance of Chinese video games in promoting state ideology and uniting society around a series of myths and historical themes. In the same vein, referring to international geopolitics, nationa-

lism and digital propaganda, José Antonio Moya's text focuses on Russia and its main creations related to war.

In "Empowerment in the representation of female video game characters: Raising awareness of social problems with *The Last of Us Part II*", Guillermo Paredes studies *The Last of Us Part II*, by Naughty Dog, with the aim of analyzing the empowerment of the women who appear in it and how social problems of contemporary society, such as homophobia or ideological extremism, are manifested through them.

In "Conscientious ludonarratives: Narrative adventures to promote the representation of minority groups", Alberto Porta reflects on how conscientious ludonarratives can promote critical thinking in players, and they do so by means of a complex ludic-narrative interweaving following the clear concerns of designers who seek to transmit specific values that can be applied beyond the ludofictional world.

Tomás Grau, in the article "*Flash*, Newgrounds and the confluence between the history of the Internet and video games", reviews the importance of the flash editing program in the config-

uration of various artistic movements linked to the virtual sphere at the beginning of the 21st century. He examines its influence on popular culture and its relationship with the creative communities that emerged in this ecosystem, and the future that awaits them and the content generated.

The issue closes with two texts inserted in the miscellaneous section: *Who's afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? Representation of childhood fears through the independent video game Fobos* and "Scrubbing up on-line: How best practice hospital websites can drive medical tourism". In the first, appealing to the expressive, artistic and didactic nature of video games, Rocío Serna-Rodrigo and Albert Solé analyze how these metatexts are capable of reflecting the fears of children's and young adult literature in pixel format. Finally, Natàlia Ferrer-Roca, Sílvia Espinosa-Mirabet and Andréa Oliveira explore the communicative management of hospitals through their corporate websites, whose intention is to convey reliability and credibility in order to establish relationships with users in the field of health tourism.

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Videogames and global citizenship: analysis of the use of Never Alone in an educational context

Videojuegos y ciudadanía global: análisis de aplicabilidad de Never Alone en contextos educativos

Videogames e cidadania global: análise da aplicabilidade do Never Alone em contextos educacionais

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ARTICLE



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Abstract

Videogames have become one of the most popular leisure activities among children and teenagers. Schools have been progressively incorporating digital games as a formative complement although teachers and parents still show some resistance to their use in the classroom. This article proposes an analysis model to measure the adaptation of video games to the educational environment from the perspective of education for development and global citizenship, combining methodologies of this current with others specific to the study of video games and applying it to the case of *Never Alone*. It is concluded that the potential of video games for education in values requires the development of analysis tools and the involvement of teachers and parents.

KEYWORDS

Videogames, Citizenship education, ICT in education, Qualitative analysis, New literacies, Digital culture.

Resumen

Los videojuegos se han convertido en una de las actividades de ocio más populares entre niños y adolescentes. La escuela los ha incorporado progresivamente como un complemento

formativo, pero todavía hay resistencia a su uso en el aula por parte de docentes y padres. Este artículo propone un modelo de análisis para medir la adecuación de los videojuegos al entorno educativo desde la perspectiva de la educación para el desarrollo y la ciudadanía global, combinando metodologías propias de esta corriente con otras específicas del estudio de videojuegos y aplicándolo al caso de *Never Alone*. Se concluye que el potencial de los videojuegos para la educación en valores requiere del desarrollo de herramientas de análisis y de la implicación de docentes y padres.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Videojuego, Educación ciudadana, TIC en la enseñanza, Análisis cualitativo, Nuevas alfabetizaciones, Cultura digital.

Resumo

Os videogames tornaram-se uma das atividades de lazer mais populares entre crianças e adolescentes. A escola tem incorporado progressivamente como complemento da formação, mas ainda há resistência ao seu uso em sala de aula por parte de professores e pais. Este artigo propõe um modelo de análise para medir a adaptação dos videogames ao ambiente educacional na perspectiva da educa-

ção para o desenvolvimento e cidadania global, combinando metodologias próprias desta corrente com outras específicas ao estudo dos videogames e aplicando-a ao caso de *Never Alone*. Conclui-se que o potencial dos videogames para a educação em valores requer o desenvolvimento de ferramentas de análise e o envolvimento de professores e pais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Videogame, Educação cidadã, TIC no ensino, Análise qualitativa, Novas alfabetizações, Cultura digital.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the consumption of video games for recreational purposes has increased exponentially (Newzoo, 2018). Some reasons for this growth, technological (the implementation of games on mobile devices) or sociological (changes in leisure models and interpersonal relationships), and have caused players, or gamers, to have determined “the pace of change” (Newzoo, 2018, p.6) in an industry in continuous transformation. There has been a substantial change in the expansion of consumption modes, which now expand beyond the action of playing towards the spectatorship associated with e-sports and a growing consumption of gameplays (Johnson and Woodcock, 2018) and towards collecting, as an attitude of emotional involvement at a time when most games can be purchased virtually. The COVID-19 pandemic caused the year 2020 to become an “unprecedented time for the video game market, which broke records for profits, users and growth” (Newzoo, 2021). Although the industry expects a slight drop in consumption, the pandemic has contributed decisively to accelerating the process of erosion of the stigma that weighs on this cultural form (Wijman, 2021).

In 2018, Spain ranked ninth in the world (and fourth in Europe) in revenue from the video game industry (Newzoo, 2018). In 2020, the total turnover of physical and online video game

sales increased by 18% compared to the previous year, reaching 1,747 million euros (Asociación Española de Videojuegos [AEVI], 2021), an amount that exceeds you grow the sum of the film and music markets. In 2020, with the boost generated by confinement, 15.9 million players were reached, of which 54.1% are men and 45.9% are women (AEVI, 2021). The age breakdown of video game consumption reveals that they are especially popular among users between 25 and 34 years old, although boys between 6 and 14 years account for 15% of male gamers, while girls of the same age they account for 11% of all female gamers (AEVI, 2020).

In this context of growth of the video game industry, its use as an educational resource has also increased substantially (Checa-Romero, 2016; Gilbert, 2019), while it has become popular in other sectors such as business, organizational management, internal training, health or social policies through gamification processes (Caponetto et al., 2014), that is, “use of elements designed for the game in non-ludic contexts” (Dicheva et al., 2015, p. 75). In parallel, academic interest in the use of games for education has increased, which has generated a mapping of gamification experiences in the educational context (Borges et al., 2014; Dicheva et al., 2015).

1.1. ORIGIN OF THIS WORK

The participation of two of the authors of this article in a teacher training activity on the persistence of gender stereotypes in the media, organized in 2019 by the Xunta de Galicia¹, allowed them to learn first-hand the impressions of a group of 44 teachers of initial, primary, and secondary school on the use of video games as a teaching tool. In general, the teaching staff demonstrated throughout the experience a significant lack of knowledge about video games as a possible educational tool and a certain hostility towards this form of leisure of their students, which they linked above all to violence. Those attending the course were also especially concerned about the lack of supervision of families of the type of video games used by their sons and daughters. The demand, therefore, from the teachers participating in the course was more information on games suitable for the age range of their students and with educational content, since they were willing to work with video games in the classroom. This perception ratifies the results of the report by the Association of Distributors and Publishers of Entertainment Software (ADeSe), in which the teachers interviewed also asked for more information about video games.

Following this request, the course teachers developed a short list of video games as a suggestion for primary and secondary students. The selection of materials responded to four criteria: content with education in values and a game system based on collaboration, adjusted to the PEGI age rating system, availability for different devices and operating systems, and

prices below 30 euros. Among the video games selected and shared with the course attendees, some widely studied such as Minecraft (Mojang, 2011) were included. However, it was a more interesting challenge to find games that had not been used in formal education, despite having educational values in their conception and gameplay. Of all of them, it was considered that the independent video game *"Never Alone"* (Upper One Games, 2014) deserved a delayed study in this regard. After a first game experience, the potential of the product to address the key elements of the Global Citizenship Education curriculum was discovered, so it was decided to guide the analysis in this direction and start working on the development of an analysis instrument that could be applicable in the evaluation of video games with similar contents.

1.2. PERCEPTION OF THE TEACHER ON THE USE OF VIDEO GAMES IN THE CLASSROOMS

The potential of video games as educational tools lies in their ability to turn the learning process into a truly enjoyable activity for players (Gee, 2004). As Egenfeldt-Nielsen (2009) states, learning is part of all video games, including commercial ones. This is because, in order to progress within them, it is necessary for the player to know and learn the mechanics of the game. It is in the hands of the teaching staff, therefore, that this potential is profitably exploited within the classroom, identifying the characteristics that make a video game a learning tool that is suitable for their teaching objectives and complementary to other more traditional methods; but also, outside the classroom, educating parents about the use of video games at home.

¹Marta Pérez Pereiro and Marta Rodríguez Castro gave five seminars entitled "Gender stereotypes in the media" within the framework of the training program "Communicate in equality": <https://www.edu.xunta.gal/portal/node/26638>.

However, despite the positive experiences that support the educational potential of video games and initiatives such as *Media Education Booklets*, which encourage parents and teachers to mediate the gaming experience of young people (Pereira et al., 2012), video games continue to be a “neglected medium” in classrooms (Gilbert, 2019).

ADeSe², in a 2012 study conducted in Spain that measured the use of video games by teachers of children between 5 and 12 years old, revealed that 30.9% of the 511 teachers interviewed had used video games in the previous year. Although there are no more recent data to establish a comparison, it can be deduced that the percentage of its use in education has grown exponentially, along with the increase in its consumption as entertainment. Some of the data from this quantitative study serve to explore the attitudes of teachers towards video games and their most frequent uses. Thus, with respect to the areas in which a greater usefulness of video games was appreciated, the subjects chosen were mathematics (58.2%), knowledge of the environment (50.6%) and Spanish language (50%), which presented values distant from others such as religion or ethics (3.8%).

Two years later, the report *Level up learning: A national survey on teaching with digital game*, which collected the responses of 694 teachers from public elementary and secondary schools in the United States, showed a significantly more intense activity in the use of video games. Specifically, 74% used video games for instruction and “teachers who used video games more regularly [...] also reported better gains in foundational and complementary skills” (Takeuchi

& Vaala, 2014, p. 47). The perception of North American teachers in 2014 about the main problems to use digital games in the classroom was no longer focused on the lack of knowledge detected in the previously cited reports, but on the lack of time to use games and their cost. The lack of familiarity with technology moved, in this report, to the sixth position of the perceived barriers.

Despite the disparity of the educational systems, the data extracted from the reports shows an evolution towards a greater interest in taking advantage of the educational potential of video games, derived from a greater knowledge and use for entertainment purposes in the private life of teachers. The integration of gamification strategies and the use of video games in the classroom has been shown to be effective in different age groups from childhood (Marín-Díaz et al., 2020) to university education (De Souza et al., 2019), and in its application to different subjects, from social sciences (Monteagudo-Fernández et al., 2021) to mathematics (Marín-Díaz et al., 2020) or chemistry (Traver et al., 2021).

1.3. EDUCATION FOR GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP AND THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF USING VIDEO GAMES IN THIS FIELD

Education for Global Citizenship (hereinafter EGC), also known as “education for development, global learning or global education” (Longueira, 2019), is an area that has been expanding throughout the world since the mid-twentieth century, and can be defined as:

a continuous socio-educational process that promotes a critical, responsible, and committed global citizenship, at a personal and collective level, with the transformation of the local and global reality to build a fairer, more equi-

2 The Asociación Española de Distribuidores y Editores de Software de Entretenimiento (ADeSe) became the Asociación Española del Videojuego (AEVI) in 2014, whose reports are also cited in this work.

table and more respectful world with diversity and with the environment, in which all people can develop freely and satisfactorily. (Aguado, 2011, p. 5)

Experiences in this field tend to incorporate active methodologies and innovative resources, so the use of video games fits perfectly into this area. This is demonstrated by the academic research carried out in the last decade, which has been oriented fundamentally in two directions: the analysis of video games linked to CGE or to other bordering areas, such as ethical education or environmental education (Marino and Hayes, 2012; Rojo and Dudu, 2017; Galván-Pérez et al., 2018; Moreno Cantano, 2019), and their application to the classroom (Bachen et al., 2012; Blevins et al., 2013; Chee et al., 2013; Lugo Rodríguez and Melón Jareda, 2016; Sousa et al., 2018). In this sense, the guide for families and teachers on digital games and global citizenship published by the Joan Gantz Cooney Center in New York (Shapiro, 2018) also stands out. The results of these publications indicate, on the one hand, that there are more and more video games on these topics and that they are of higher quality and, on the other, that their introduction in school, if accompanied by adequate teaching intervention and a dialogical methodology, can contribute to a greater involvement of students in the struggle for global justice.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The video game *Never Alone* (Kisima Ingitchuma in Iñupiat) was created in 2014 by the producer Upper One Games, a non-profit organization dependent on the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), the tribal council of the natives of the central region of the south of Alaska. The decision to create this video game, together with the educational production company E-Line

Media, was made by the elders of the council, who saw their cultural legacy in danger due to the alienation of the younger generations due to new technologies. Thus, “the elders presented a plan: they were going to use those same technologies that were taking our children to bring them back” (Colleps, 2016, p. 140). The result of this initiative, *Never Alone*, is an atmospheric platform puzzle inspired by an Iñupiat legend in which little Kunnunkaayuka travels through the tundra to discover the origin of a storm that destroys his village. In the video game version, the protagonist of the action is Nuna who, accompanied by an arctic fox, travels to the heart of the storm to stop it.

This game has aroused quite a bit of interest from academic critics. One of the aspects that has been most emphasized is the fact that, within an industry in which games featuring male and white characters predominate overwhelmingly, *Never Alone* questions these hegemonic repertoires in a commitment to self-representation, visual sovereignty, and intersectionality (Gaertner, 2016; Lietz, 2017; Longboat, 2017; Murphy, 2017). In this sense, the values of the Iñupiat people are an intrinsic part of the product’s design, not only at the narrative level, but also in the game mechanics themselves. Thus, as the adventure progresses, the player learns the importance of responsibility towards the community and the land, judgment, and emotional control (Meloche, 2017) or cooperation (Longboat, 2017). As for the effects of the video game on users, these will differ depending on whether they belong to the community. For Iñupiat players, the recognition of scenarios, situations and values can suppose the reinforcement of their self-esteem as a group and an incentive for linguistic revitalization (Lacho and Leon, 2017). For the non-Iñupiat player, the *Never Alone* experience makes it possible to establish an ethical relationship with this

community (Cariou, 2016), which could incite cultural curiosity and, eventually, political commitment (Braith, 2017).

Although the potential of the game for EGC seems obvious, it has never been explored from this point of view. So, this proposal consists of analyzing it to assess its applicability in formal educational contexts. In this sense, the objective of this research is twofold: 1) develop an analysis tool that allows evaluating the applicability of a video game in the educational field and 2) test said tool with the *Never Alone* case study. The methodology of this research was designed based on the objective of merging own methods of video game analysis as a medium (Nacke et al., 2009; Malliet, 2007; Pérez Latorre, 2015) with others linked to the EGC.

In relation to the EGC, there is no consensus about what its contents and learning objectives should be. On the one hand, because the school curriculum is the responsibility of the states (Organization of the United Nations for Education, Science and Culture [UNESCO], 2017) and, on the other hand, because there is an open debate on its definition, domains, and pedagogical practices, led in recent years by criticism of universalist visions of EGC from a postcolonial perspective (Andreotti, 2010; 2014; 2015; Digón, 2019). However, among the publications that have come to light in recent years, there are some guides to introduce EGC in formal and non-formal education: these are documents without normative intention, created by NGOs or international entities. Among them, Oxfam (2015) has been selected due to its international relevance and the breadth and flexibility of its categories.

In this way, an analysis sheet was designed (see Table 1) articulated from two axes: a horizontal axis with three large categories (character/player, game world, and rules and game mechan-

ics), and a vertical axis with the key elements of the CGE curriculum, as formulated by Oxfam (2015). From this combination of analysis categories, it is hoped to understand to what extent the specific characteristics and game mechanics of *Never Alone* have the potential to be linked to the EGC.

3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The game is based on *Kunuksaayuka*, an Iñupiat oral story spread by the narrator Robert Nasruk Cleveland and collected in the volume *Unipchaanich imagluktugmiut: Stories of the Black River People* (Gaertner, 2016). The traditional story tells of the adventure of *Kunuksaayuka*, a young hunter who sets out in search of a solution to a problem: the constant snowstorms that prevent him and his people from going out to hunt caribou. After several days of travel, he realizes that a giant is the one who causes the storms by removing the snow from the road with an adze. *Kunuksaayuka* manages to remove the tool and, with it, the storms cease.

On this simple argument, close to the etiological myth, the *Never Alone* team built a more complex narrative in which a series of elements typical of the Iñupiat culture were seamlessly incorporated: mythical beings, beliefs, objects linked to traditional forms of life, community values, etc. Other changes were also introduced to adapt the story to the present time, such as the female role or references to the effects of climate change. The story is narrated through two common devices in video games: the voiceover and the interspersed texts. The oral story is in the Iñupiaq language and is subtitled in the languages in which the game is available. The texts are literal quotes from Nasruk's story, which are interspersed as a presentation of the different stages of the protagonist's journey.

Table 1

Summary of the categories of analysis used in the *Never Alone* study

Game Specific Features		Key Elements of the CGE Curriculum
Character/ player analysis	Character structure State standards Behavior inducing norms	Concepts K1. Social justice and equity K2. Identity and diversity K3. Globalization and interdependence K4. Sustainable development
Game world analysis	Non-playable characters Natural elements Cultural elements	K5. Peace and conflict K6. Human rights K7. Power and governance Skills
Analysis of the rules and game mechanics	Connection between actions and objectives Conditions to win or lose	S1. Critical and creative thinking S2. Empathy S3. Self-awareness and reflection S4. Communication S5. Cooperation and conflict resolution S6. Ability to manage complexity and uncertainty S7. Informed and thoughtful action Values and attitudes V1. Sense of identity and self-esteem V2. Commitment to social justice and equity V3. Respect for people and human rights V4. Diversity of values V5. Concern for the environment and commitment to sustainable development V6. Confidence in the transformative capacity of people V7. Cooperative mode

Source: information synthesized by the authors from Pérez Latorre (2015), Malliet (2007) and Oxfam (2015).

3.1. NEVER ALONE CHARACTER/PLAYER ANALYSIS

The main character is Nuna, an Iñupiat girl who appears from the beginning of the game as the protagonist that the player will control. This change with respect to the traditional story responds, according to the creators of *Never Alone*, to an attempt to compensate for the underrepresentation of women in video games and offer girls a “strong, ingenious, intelligent and brave” character model (Upper One Games, 2014) (V1). In addition, for male players, the fact of embodying this character could contribute to the development of empathy (S2). Soon after, an arctic fox will also appear as the second character to accompany Nuna. Contrary to what usually happens with the companions of the hero or heroine of video games, who help at certain times and do not carry out decisive actions, the fox, a kind of totem animal, will be essential for Nuna as the game progresses, not only advance in her mission, but directly survive. Thus, the relationship between the two characters through the game mechanics becomes an essential element that also endorses the title of the game, which in turn is the poetic summary of the way of life in the Arctic of the Iñupiat community (K2, S5, V4).

The status rules for both characters are simple, so there are no extra actions to keep them in their original status other than those that must be performed to progress through the game. This means that the health of Nuna or her fox are not affected unless they fail their mission and one of them dies. In this case, the game restarts at the last checkpoint. However, when it comes to the moods of the characters, *Never Alone* presents a peculiarity: every time one of the characters dies, the other mourns ostensibly. This is an unusual form of empathy in video games (S2), in which the action usually conti-

nues without any emotional reaction from the main characters.

Regarding the rules to induce behaviors that serve to make the character behave in a certain way in the medium or long term (Pérez Latorre, 2015), there are online multiplayer games such as *World of Warcraft* (Krzywinska, 2007), which reward cooperative behavior. In *Never Alone*, these rules are based on a system of correspondence and codependency, which will determine the success or failure of your actions in the game (S5, V7).

3.2. THE WORLD OF NEVER ALONE

Following the analysis model of Pérez Latorre (2015), the video game world would be made up of non-playable characters, objects, natural and cultural elements. The relationship between these is especially useful for the analysis of *Never Alone*. In the game, a material plane is superimposed, constituted by the environment of the Alaskan tundra, its inhabitants (humans and animals) and some culturally relevant objects. Also, there is an immaterial plane, in which cultural aspects such as the Iñupiat language and mythology are integrated (K2, V4). Both planes are presented as an indistinguishable whole in the creation of the game environment.

The non-playable characters of *Never Alone* respond to the sentient world on the one hand, and to the mythical world on the other, and are shown as enemies or allies in Nuna and the fox's progress towards the origin of the storm. Thus, they will be chased by a hungry polar bear and swallowed by a whale, but they will also face specific characters from the Iñupiat culture, such as the Little People or the Terrible Man. However, perhaps the most significant aspect in relation to the values transmitted by the game is the constant presence of charac-

ters who help the protagonists in the difficulties they encounter throughout their journey (S5, V7). From the beginning of the story, we find the helper spirits, who manifest themselves in the form of different animals, such as herons and schools of fish, which are activated thanks to the intervention of the fox. These are multiple representations of Sila, the spirit that lives in the natural elements and in which a fundamental part of the Iñupiat worldview is summarized: the connection between spirituality (K2) and respect for nature (K4).

Another relevant character is the Owl Man, who introduces Nuna and the fox in their adventure and plays the role of donor within the story, that is, the character who delivers a magical object to the protagonist if he can pass a certain test. (Propp, 1971). In this case, the test consists of obtaining a ritual drum and the reward is a Bola, a traditional Arctic weapon that will help Nuna complete her mission. These two objects, together with the adze that the protagonist snatches from the Giant at the end of the game, have a unique cultural significance (K2).

In addition to the characters and objects, the physical environment itself, understood as a natural and cultural landscape, acquires a prominent role in the game. The blizzard not only works as the puzzle that Nuna must solve, but also constitutes an ongoing challenge in her progress, in the face of which she must develop survival skills. The northern lights will also be an obstacle for the protagonists, in this case due to the Iñupiat belief that it contains the spirits of dead children, who can attack people if they do not follow the advice of the elders (K2). Finally, another difficulty derived from the environment is the appearance of a thin and fragile layer of ice, on which Nuna and the fox must stay afloat, in a reference to the consequences

of climate change for the lives of people in the Arctic. (K3, K4).

3.3. NEVER ALONE RULES AND MECHANICS

The rules and mechanics of a video game, on which its playability largely depends, involve performing certain activities to achieve a goal (Pérez Latorre, 2015). In this sense, each game presents a series of behavior patterns of the characters to achieve partial objectives, such as overcoming certain phases, and the result of completing the game. In *Never Alone*, the actions of the characters must be aimed at discovering the origin of the storm without creating parallel missions except the rescue of the Owl Man's drum. Again, the cooperative mode is the most relevant element of the game (S5, V7). The player must change the actions of Nuna and the fox to overcome the obstacles and solve the puzzles that arise throughout the game. Each time one or the other character is selected, a white halo surrounds their bodies, so the player can know what actions to take. While Nuna relates to the natural elements, the fox activates the supernatural elements of the game, particularly the spirits that allow them to transit between platforms (K2, V4).

When the characters manage to save a screen, the player obtains rewards external to the development of the story itself. An owl flying in the background indicates that a video of "cultural stories" has been unlocked, a series of short documentaries on different aspects of Iñupiat cultural life. There are, specifically, 24 pieces that show the oral testimony of the elderly and cultural ambassadors of the community around reasons and situations that appear in the story of the game. Thus, instead of rewarding characters with new abilities or a different

look, the reward for overcoming a certain obstacle goes to the player, who will have to pause the game's progress to enjoy the reward. It is in these videos where the aspects linked to the EGC are shown in a more explicit way, since the general discourse of the interviewee's points in that direction. The main topics addressed are the following:

- The relationship with nature. The traditional way of life of the Iñupiat people, sustainable and respectful of the environment, is valued (K4, V5). The special incidence of climate change on the Alaskan environment and its repercussions for the local population are explained (K3).
- Art and culture (K2). Different forms of tangible and intangible Iñupiat cultural heritage are described, such as ivory carvings, the drums, oral storytelling, and mythology.
- Community values. A society characterized by cooperative work (K7) is portrayed, articulated mainly around hunting and fishing. The individual does not act for his own benefit, but rather assumes a responsibility with respect to the collective (V6).
- Spirituality (K2, V4). This aspect can be found across many of the videos. The idea of Sila, the spirit of life, shows the sacred links of the human being with the natural world. The spiritual dimension of art and even hunting is also highlighted.

When it comes to the conditions to win or lose, there are stable problem-solving patterns in *Never Alone*: it is essential to advance and overcome each of the scenarios, among which cutscenes and quotes from the narrator are interspersed. In these, the natural elements of the tundra such as ice, the arctic wind or icebergs are the obstacles or advantages nec-

essary for the protagonists to continue their adventure. In the progress of the story, there is a fixed stage through which the player must necessarily pass and marks the end of the first part of the game: the Terrible Man kills the fox who, in a particularly emotional cinematic, transforms into the spirit of a child. Although it can be understood as an error caused by the inexperience of the player, the narrator's voice suggests that it is part of the story: "The fox was reborn in a new form, or had it always been like this?". It is, again, a cultural reference, since in the Iñupiat people there is the belief that all animals also have a human form and that, like people, they are endowed with a soul (K2, V4). From this point on, the game controls for this character change, forcing a new learning process. In this aspect, as in overcoming most obstacles, the player is required to have the ability to seek imaginative solutions (S1).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Video games are formed as essential products of the cultural industry that can serve educational purposes, thanks to some of their specific characteristics. The interactivity of the stories or the need to mobilize skills such as spatial intelligence, the ability to perform several tasks at the same time or the use of the imagination have been noted in the scientific literature as values that video games can contribute to the academic curriculum. In recent years, parallel to the expansion of the EGC in the educational systems of different countries, its use has been explored for learning content or, rather, for the experimentation of experiences that can result in the construction of a critical and citizenship committed to global challenges. For its part, the video game industry has begun to develop programs that raise awareness of the impor-

tance of its products beyond mere entertainment, by understanding video games as cultural and, in many cases, educational products. Thus, the Asociación Española del Videojuego has developed *The Good Gamer*, an initiative that since 2018 promotes collaboration between administrations, educational and health communities, and parents, with the aim of promoting the responsible use of video games. In this line, this work connects with the concern of creating a pedagogy for the use of video games and opens a path to continue researching the products available in the market and carry out experimental studies on their educational applications by proposing an analysis model applicable to other video games that can be used in classrooms.

In the case study proposed here, the video game *Never Alone* is presented as an interesting example of how an interactive narrative can smoothly incorporate aspects that can be linked to the contents of the EGC. As the adventure progresses, the player learns different things, becomes familiar with the Iñupiat way of life, their language, art, beliefs, and values; realizes the need to be creative and work cooperatively to solve problems; feels the responsibility to act for the benefit of the collective and experiences the unequal consequences of climate change while coming into contact with lifestyles that are more respectful of the environment. The immersive experience of the game would thus allow the development of what Bachen et al. (2012) call global empathy, a necessary disposition for global citizenship. All these aspects contain great educational potential, but only with adequate mediation could they provoke the necessary reflections to transform mentalities and encourage action to build a fairer world. As stated in the title of the analyzed video game, "*Never Alone*", schoolchildren must know and play accompanied by their teachers

in the school environment, and by their parents or guardians at home. For this, and for a fruitful use of these interactive narratives, a constant investment is necessary in knowledge of universes that have become the main source of leisure today, in addition to conforming as cultural constructions, which are not only created from proposals merely industrial, but from independent art as in the case of *Never Alone*.

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"Call Me by My Name": Analysis of the Strategies of Bisexual Erasure and Stereotyping in Video Games

"Lláname por mi nombre": análisis de las estrategias de erosión y estereotipación de la bisexualidad en el videojuego

"Me chame pelo meu nome": análise das estratégias de erosão e estereótipo da bissexualidade no videogame

2

ARTICLE



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Abstract

Bisexuality continues to be an invisible orientation, even within the LGBTQ collective. While its representation in video games has been scarce and ambiguous, other media has marked it by a series of stereotypes common for this collective, outside and inside fiction. Through a qualitative content analysis of 98 bisexual characters from video games, a categorization of the main strategies of erosion and stereotyping of bisexuality is proposed, in order to deepen the quality of its representation and the characteristics that make video games a unique medium for this purpose.

KEYWORDS

Bisexuality, Representation, Video Games, Stereotypes, Sexuality.

Resumen

La bisexualidad sigue siendo una orientación invisibilizada, incluso dentro del colectivo LGBTQ. Su representación en el videojuego ha sido escasa y ambigua, mientras que en otros medios ha estado marcada por una serie de estereotipos habituales para el colectivo, fuera y dentro de la ficción. Mediante un análisis cualitativo de 98 registros de personajes bisexuales en los videojuegos, se propone una categorización de las principales estrategias de erosión y

estereotipación de la bisexualidad, con el fin de profundizar en la calidad de su representación y en las características que hacen del videojuego un medio singular para este propósito.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Bisexualidad, Representación, Videojuegos, Estereotipos, Sexualidad.

Resumo

A bissexualidade continua a ser uma orientação invisível, mesmo dentro da comunidade LGBTQ. Sua representação no videogame tem sido escassa e ambígua, enquanto em outras mídias tem sido marcada por uma série de es-

tereótipos habituais para o coletivo, fora e dentro da ficção. Por meio de uma análise qualitativa de 98 registros de personagens bissexuais em videogames, propõe-se uma categorização das principais estratégias de erosão e estereotipagem da bissexualidade, a fim de aprofundar a qualidade de sua representação e as características que tornam o videogame um meio único para este fim.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Bissexualidade, Representação, Videogame, Estereótipo, Sexualidade.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bisexuality has been recognized as an invisible orientation in various spheres including the media, the LGBTQ community, sexology, psychology, and psychotherapy (Barker & Langdridge, 2008; Olvera Muñoz, 2017). This invisibility has also been linked to a high rate of mental disorders among people identified as bisexual compared to heterosexual and homosexual orientations (De Barros, 2020; Nelson, 2020). According to Olvera Muñoz (2017), “within sexual minorities, bisexuality is considered a minority among minorities [...], it must be hidden through various political, economic or cultural apparatuses with the aim of maintaining the social order of sexuality” (p. 36).

This phenomenon has been exhaustively analyzed by Yoshino (2000), who, based on a study of American popular culture, elaborates the theory of an “epistemic contract of bisexual erasure” applicable both to the media framework and to legal, political, and cultural spheres. The four points that make up Yoshino’s theory are: 1) bisexuality suffers greater in-

visibility than homosexuality, an invisibility that finds its root in a process of social “erosion”; 2) said erosion occurs due to the interest shared by two dominant groups (those identified as heterosexual and homosexual, that is, monosexual people) to make bisexuality invisible; 3) both groups share common interests for the stabilization of sexual orientation, for maintaining sex as the dominant measure of differentiation and for defending the norms of monogamy, and 4) said pact of erosion affects the process of accepting bisexual identities in the public and private spheres.

Yoshino’s (2000) starting point (that bisexuality is the invisible identity of the entire LGBTQ spectrum) has been shared by various later authors (Barker & Langdridge, 2008; Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009; Domínguez Ruiz, 2017; Olvera Muñoz, 2017; Harman, 2019; Nelson, 2020). All of them consider bisexuals to be invisible in relation to both heterosexuals and homosexuals. For Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell (2009), “Bisexuality is fundamentally unsettling to the hegemonic institution of heterosexuality and its queer counterpoint, homosexuality, and is

therefore ultimately ignored by both” (p. 298). This continued symbolic erosion is justified by the assumption that bisexuals are a minority, despite studies suggesting that plurisexuals represent 50% of non-heterosexuals (Madison, 2017).

The scant representation of bisexuality in the media is related to the performative difficulty of orientation itself. This difficulty is linked in turn to the interstitial nature of bisexuality, explained by the heterosexual matrix of Judith Butler (1990). Broadly speaking, the Butler matrix considers everyone to be heterosexual until proven otherwise, which significantly affects non-monosexual identities. Due to the social importance given to sex and gender when determining the sexuality of the individual, the Butler matrix explains, for example, that the assumption of a “feminine” bisexual woman attracted to a “masculine” man does not go beyond being a mere entelechy, since both are going to be interpreted by default as heterosexual both in the media and in public life.

Table 1

Heterosexual Matrix (Butler, 1990).

Gender →	Male	Female
Sexual orientation ↘		
Sex ↓		
Man	Heterosexual	Homosexual
Woman	Homosexual	Heterosexual

As Harman (2019) suggests, “bisexuals regularly become defined based on who they have chosen as a partner instead of their overarching sexual identity, in turn creating more invisibility for the group” (p. 557). This phenomenon causes what Alarie and Gaudet (2013) correctly define as the impossibility of achieving “authentic” bisexuality. For many people, one can only be bisexual if they are equally attracted to both sexes, something that rarely happens in practice.

Thus, the bisexual is often marked as indecisive or confused, and society hopes that sooner or later they will end up recognizing their “true” monosexual orientation.

1.1. STATE OF THE ISSUE

Contrary to the video game, the literature dedicated to the study of the representation of bisexuality in novels, films and television already has a long tradition (White, 2001; Diamond, 2005; Alexander, 2007; Barker & Langdridge, 2008; Medina-Rivera, 2014; De Barros, 2020; Nelson, 2020). In the case of the novel, it has been pointed out that “there is a new generation of writers who express homosexuality in a much more open way, but who at the same time condemn the bisexuals as indecisive or frustrated beings who does not fully understand that in reality, they are homosexuals” (Medina-Rivera, 2014: pp. 149-150). In this sense, the belief that bisexuals (especially males) are protohomosexual is still widespread today (Alexander, 2007; Alarie & Gaudet, 2013). James (1996) regrets the frequency with which some media texts in which bisexual characters appear are appropriated from homosexual and queer perspectives, as reflected in the cases of the cult film *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) (Alexander, 2007; Barker & Langdridge, 2008) or the most recent *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017).

Diamond (2005) points to a growing representation of sexual freedom and homosexual relationships in North American films and television fiction. In turn, Meyer (2010) suggests that “queer visibility on television has increased, including representations of bisexual identities” (p. 367). In contrast, it has been pointed out that plurisexuals are often characterized poorly and through harmful stereotypes (Nelson, 2020) and that bi-representation in the media has often been “sensationalized, brief, uneven, and

unexamined” (Hutchins, 2007 cited in Alexander, 2007: p. 116).

As for video games, some quantitative studies have shown that the explicit presence of LGBTQ characters is still scarce, and that most of these are represented as NPCs (non-player characters) whose sexuality is only known if the user plays several times and in specific conditions (Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Utsch et al., 2017). This has meant that much of the research on LGBTQ representations has focused on the mechanics and little on the narrative, due to the scarcity of characters designed from a genuinely LGBTQ perspective (Utsch et al., 2017). Returning to Shaw and Friesem (2016), “Although games with same-sex romance options allow for players to make their avatars homosexual or bisexual, the backstories of these characters rarely suggest they are” (p. 3883).

The extensive quantitative analysis carried out by Utsch et al. (2017) reveals that gay characters are the most frequent (38%), followed by lesbians (21%) and bisexuals (20%). In addition, the presence of bisexuals has remained low until the 1990s, when visibility began to grow until it reached its peak at the end of the first decade of this century. In general, gay characters lead representation across all genres, although the study points to a balance between the three main orientations in RPGs and shooters (Figure 1).

Thus, we see how the history of bisexuality in the video game is closely linked to the history of LGBTQ representation, although it also retains its own peculiarities. In general terms, the absence of characters from this group continues to be very pronounced. According to a recent study by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (2021), only 0.03% of a sample of 27,564 video game characters were identified as LGBTQ. In addition, bisexual characters

present a series of added challenges that are reproduced both in other media and in the day-to-day life of the non-monosexual group. The work of making the video game more visible has left us with very positive moments, but it also still faces a series of important challenges linked to the needs and demands of part of the bisexual community.

1.2. HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

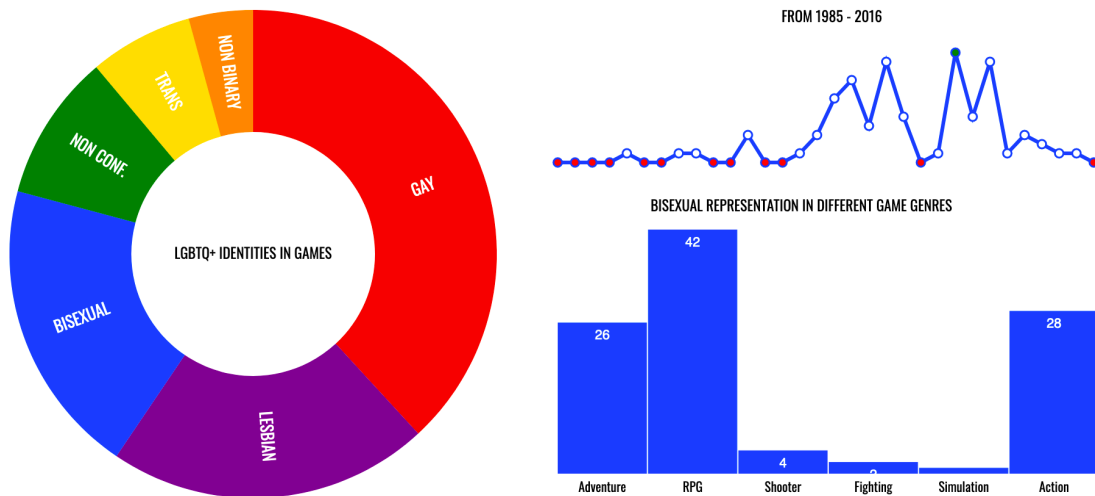
This literature invites us to make two assumptions in relation to the still limited knowledge about the representation of bisexuality in video games. In the first place, we consider that bisexuality is a doubly invisible orientation, due not only to the lack of representation that this group already supports outside the video game, but also to the complexity of including explicit signifiers in a medium where the control of the narration often falls on the player. This means that bisexuality is increasingly relegated to queer readings that may not meet the needs of a group that has expressed its desire for greater explicit recognition within the medium (Nix, 2018; Bevan, 2021).

Secondly, when bisexuality is explicitly represented in the video game, a series of traits are common, inherited from other media, whose categorization has been the objective of this study. These two interrelated phenomena must be addressed so that bisexual orientation achieves greater recognition outside and inside the video game.

The first assumption has already been addressed in a significant way by Shaw and Friesem (2016) and Utsch et al. (2017). These studies have put into practice quantitative methodologies to draw conclusions about the volume of representation of bisexuality in the video game. The results have been published in an extraor-

Figure 1

Representation of bisexuality in video games (Utsch et al., 2017).



dinarily useful database: LGBTQ Video Game Archive (<https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/>). Less has been written about the quality of this representation. To what degree does bisexuality in the video game reproduce the same stereotypes and traits present in media such as novels, movies, or television? How does the nature of the video game affect the construction of bisexuality? Why are some patterns repeated and not others? The importance of these questions has been advanced by Shaw and Friesem (2016), when they point out that “Quantitative research could complement qualitative research in analyzing patterns in representation and how they have or have not changed over time” (p. 3886).

2. METHODOLOGY

As Castelló (2008) argued, any methodology for analyzing identity construction processes must include prior theorizing about the referent under study. In our case, it means finding an answer as clear as possible to the question: how do we identify bisexuality in the video game? This issue, as Alarie and Gaudet (2013),

Harman (2019) and Nelson (2020), among others, have already advanced, does not have an easy solution. The reasoning requires a pause, perhaps briefly, on the difficulty that bisexuality encounters in being represented outside and inside fiction. People who fall under the so-called “bisexual umbrella” often lack the appropriate nonverbal signifiers to express their orientation to strangers (Hayfield et al., 2013). The bisexual’s need to identify verbally is a mechanism that arises in response to the absence of a stable “bisexual display” (Hartman, 2013).

The notion of *bisexual display* refers to how a plurisexual identity can be evident beyond sexual activity or behavior. According to Hartman (2013), “A bisexual display involves using the accoutrements of gender, as well as more direct visual and verbal cues, to project a bisexual identity through interactions with others under current societal norms and expectations” (p. 43). However, there are no clear signifiers of bi/plurisexuality, and those that do can be difficult to articulate (Harman, 2019; Nelson, 2020). In this sense, Meyer (2010) comments that bisexual characters in fiction rarely “come out of

the closet". Instead of betting on clear signifiers, their sexuality is introduced in a casual and ambiguous way, which only reinforces hegemonic discourses about heterosexuality and homosexuality "as valid, nondebatable identities" (Meyer, 2010, p. 380).

This problem was already evidenced by Shaw and Friesem (2016): "In many cases, games do not explicitly define these characters' sexualities, and the process of untangling implied sexuality is a contentious one" (p. 3880). Utsch et al. (2017) point out that there is a fundamental difference between explicit and implicit representations of sexual orientation. While the first leaves little or no room for interpretation of the character, the second falls exclusively on the reading of the text. A prominent case is the character of Ellie from *The Last of Us* saga (Naughty Dog, 2013-2020), whose homosexual/bisexual orientation has been the subject of analysis and discussion by fans since the launch of *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (Fandom, 2014; GameFAQs, 2014).

With these considerations, we have opted for a definition of bisexuality that is as limited as possible, but without forgetting the "volatility of meanings" that Castelló (2008: 189) points to when designing a content analysis of an identity nature. We therefore understand bisexuality as sexual or romantic interest, or the ability to have sexual or romantic interest, towards people of more than one sex and/or gender. This definition tries to reconcile the proposals of Gagnon et al. (1999) and Flanders et al. (2017), including the notions of both biological sex and gender identity. This does not mean that said inclination should be represented to the same degree in the text, but it does mean that there should be sufficient evidence to interpret that the character follows or has followed this behavior at some point.

Having detected the obstacles of the investigation, and reached a definition of the object of analysis, we have given way to the design of the work methodology. To do this, we turned to Flick (2015), who proposes three qualitative research perspectives, each with its own theoretical positions and data collection and interpretation techniques (Table 2). The proposed objectives have led us to embrace the second perspective, characterized by constructionism as a fundamental theoretical position, a data collection method based on the collection of documents (video games with the presence of bisexual characters) and an interpretation method based on the qualitative content analysis (Table 2)

This qualitative content analysis has been carried out adopting what Flick (2015) calls a "social representation theory" (p. 42). Thus, we have started from the theoretical concepts (the general) towards the media texts (the particular) to reach some conclusions, following a deductive logic. Due to the limited resources available for this work (both logistical and extension), which in any case should be seen as a first approach to a field of study still in its infancy, we have worked directly on the LGBTQ Video Game Archive database, specifically on the category of bisexual characters. This category, made up of 98 entries (N = 98), has been the sample of our analysis.

Although the database is an incomplete work and does not yet include all the characters identified as bisexual, it does collect information on the vast majority, which is why it has been extremely useful documentary work to start our investigation. Starting from our own categorization of the main mechanisms of erosion and stereotyping of bisexuality (Table 3), we have analyzed the sample extracted from the LGBTQ Video Game Archive, in order to find

Table 2*Perspectives in qualitative research (Flick, 2015).*

	Approaches aimed at subjective points of view	Description of the creation of social situations	Hermeneutical analysis of the underlying structures
Theoretical positions	Symbolic interactionism Phenomenology	Ethnomethodology Constructionism	Psychoanalysis Genetic structuralism
Data collection methods	Semi-structured interviews Narrative interviews	Discussion groups Ethnography Participant observation Interaction Log Collection of documents	Interaction Log Photography Films
Interpretation methods	Theoretical coding Content analysis Narrative analysis Hermeneutical methods	Conversation analysis Discourse analysis Document Analysis	Objective hermeneutics Deep hermeneutics

out to what extent the video game promotes or distances itself from these traits.

3. RESULTS

3.1. BISEXUALITY AS A PHASE/CONFUSION

The first of the images that have been identified reflects bisexuality not as a stable identity, but as a stage from which a monosexual identity will emerge sooner or later (Barker & Langdrid-

ge, 2008). Because plurisexual people are often interpreted as half-straight/half-homosexual, rather than as having an independent orientation, the belief that bisexuality is temporary and illusory persists (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Nelson, 2020). In this sense, the bisexual is accused of being either a confused heterosexual (image more commonly associated with women), or a repressed homosexual (image more commonly associated with men). This trait is linked to the conception of being bisexual as someone in a permanent state of confusion in relation to their feelings.

Although this stereotype has appeared frequently in other media, especially in adolescent characters such as Ramona Flowers from *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, Willow Rosenberg from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or Blaine Anderson from *Glee*, we have not found explicit examples in the analyzed video games. It is the players themselves who, through matching mechanics present in many role-playing games, often build their own stories and interpret their own games in a bisexual key. And it is they who ultimately have the authority to decide the sexual orientation of their character.

3.2. BISEXUALITY AS AMBIGUITY/FUN

Something more frequent is the image of the bisexual as an individual who intentionally plays with ambiguity and has fun crossing the limits, without ever defining themselves or letting society define them. Several authors have highlighted in this sense the media importance of the so-called *bisexual chic* (Gagnon et al., 1999; Klesse, 2018; Stechschulte, 2020), a popular trend among some artists of the seventies and that continues today as a form of measuring sexual fluidity, especially among young people (Gagnon et al., 1999). The representation of this fluidity has cultivated an image of bisexuality as

a decision that can be made at any time, rather than as a stable identity. This trait also entails the consolidation of a series of adjectives commonly associated with bisexuals, in fiction and outside of it: ambiguous, indecipherable, frivolous...; people who, ultimately, “have fun” playing with their orientation. This behavior, a priori beneficial to sexual freedom, ultimately continues to be linked to heteronormativity, “because the individual eventually defers to powerful heterosexual norms, their ‘openness’ serving as evidence that bisexuality is a fictitious concept rather than a valid identity category.” (Meyer, 2010, p. 371).

This trait can be seen with remarkable assiduity in Japanese video games, where bisexuality is rarely made explicit and instead is played with indefinite character, sometimes as comic relief for the action. Let’s think about the character of Bartz Klauser in *Final Fantasy V* (Square, 1992), which feels attracted to his partner Faris shortly before discovering that he is a woman in disguise. Even so, he maintains an interest in her throughout the adventure, which has been a reason to interpret the hero as implicitly bisexual. It is also common for Japanese video games to associate homosexuality/bisexuality in men with femininity. The mannered features of Bartz Klauser in *Dissidia: Final Fantasy* (Square Enix, 2009) seem to indicate, again, the intention of the developers to mark his orientation. Other characters who have fallen into this stereotype are Zelos, from *Tales of Symphonia* (Namco, 2003), Yusuke Kitagawa, from *Persona 5* (Atlus, 2017) and *Persona 5: Dancing in Starlight* (P Studio, 2018), or Vamp, from *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (Konami, 2001). Likewise, the introduction of transgender and gender-queer characters, such as Excellus and Libra, from *Fire Emblem: Awakening* (Intelligent Systems, 2013), has been another of the strategies of Japanese video games to present bisexuality

in a hidden way. Although this representation is a positive sign of sexual fluidity, it also implies a negative association between sexual orientation and gender identity, something that particularly affects the bisexual community.

3.3. BISEXUALITY AS INFIDELITY/PROMISCUITY

Various authors have agreed to point out the stigma that surrounds bisexuals as promiscuous, irresponsible, and untrustworthy people (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013). As Yoshino (2000) explains, the threat that bisexuality symbolizes is not only quantitative — “they can leave you for twice as many people” — but especially qualitative — “they can leave you for someone with whom you cannot compete” —. This, says the author, generates constant anxiety in the bisexual couple:

It is not that one’s bisexual partner can leave you for twice as many people, but that she can leave you for a different *kind* of person. The anxiety is aroused not by rivals who might also offer what you possess, but by rivals who might offer what you do *not* possess. (Yoshino, 2000, p. 421)

This promiscuity appears, in turn, linked to the confusion and lack of maturity with which bisexual people tend to be associated (Diamond, 2005), incapable of being tied to a monogamous relationship. Although less frequently than in other media, video games have also used this feature to characterize bisexual characters. One of the paradigmatic cases is that of Reaver, antagonist and villain of *Fable II* (Lionhead Studios, 2008) and *Fable III* (Lionhead Studios, 2010). He is a seemingly immortal character who has amassed a fortune, first through piracy and later, in *Fable III*, through the Industrial Revolution. Bisexuality, far from being

significant for the plot, is used to accentuate the amoral and libertine traits of the character, who seems designed in the image and likeness of the iconic Lord Byron. Through his personal diaries and some scenes of his, we learn that Reaver is fond of having multiple sexual encounters, sometimes simultaneously, with men and women alike. Added to this promiscuity is a total lack of empathy towards people, whom he can execute in cold blood without his pulse trembling, which is why it also fits with the two traits that we will see below: perversion and sociopathy.

Other bisexual characters, although they are not explicitly represented as promiscuous, allow a reading in this sense. An interesting case is that of Rachel Amber, from *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm* (Deck Nine, 2017). The co-star of the *Life Is Strange* prequel is at times insinuated and at times portrayed as secretive, enigmatic and, to some extent, manipulative. On the one hand, Rachel maintains a romantic relationship with Chloe Price, for whom she seems to have sincere feelings. But as the plot progresses, we discover that Rachel leads a double life involving at least two other people: Frank Bowers, a young drug dealer, and Mark Jefferson, the main perpetrator of the crimes in the game. The biggest conflict between Chloe and Rachel stems from the deception she is subjecting Chloe to, hiding her intimate relationship with Frank from her. The reasons, however, are not entirely clear, and it could be a manipulation by Rachel towards Frank with the intention of getting his money and escaping from Arcadia Bay with Chloe. These circumstances, in addition to other signs present in the game such as rumors and graffiti that point to Rachel's promiscuity, have drawn an enigmatic, confused, and deceitful bisexual character. At times, she recalls the inscrutable Laura Palmer from *Twin*

Peaks, a series with which *Life Is Strange* maintains an evident transtextual relationship.

3.4. BISEXUALITY AS PERVERSION/HYPERSEXUALITY

Hypersexuality has been recognized as another of the common stereotypes of bisexual people (Madison, 2017; Klesse, 2018; Nelson, 2020). This has generated a canonical image of the bisexual as an individual who enjoys sex for sex's sake and who practices all kinds of fetichisms. As Yoshino (2000, p. 420) suggests, "Bisexual desire is seen not as a completion, but rather as an excess." Bisexual insatiability has been associated with the idea of having sex with more than one partner at the same time. In this sense, the male gaze has resignified much of the bisexual representation in an attractive way for the straight cis men, that is, favoring bisexuality among women so that men can participate while preserving their heterosexual orientation. Madison (2017) gives the example of an article published in *The Guardian* (Browne, 2014) entitled *Make up your mind! The science behind bisexuality*. The main image of the article shows a young boy posing in bed with a cigarette and surrounded by two sleeping girls, one on each side, in a clear post-coital attitude that invites us to question: who is really the bisexual in the image? Following De Barros (2020), "bisexual women tend to be depicted using their same-gender attraction as a 'tool' to get what they want, or the depiction is done in an oversexualized manner meant to draw male attention" (p. 106).

This male gaze on the bisexual object of desire, common in film and television, has permeated video games on occasion. In *Fear Effect 2: Retro Helix* (Kronos Digital Entertainment, 2001), the mercenary Hana Tsu-Vachel, who in the

first part of the saga establishes a relationship with the mercenary Glas Royce, appears linked to the hacker Rain Qin, implying her bisexuality. Although the relationship was not shown explicitly in the game, the advertising left little room for interpretation (Figure 2), falling into the fetishization and hypersexualization of the protagonists' behavior. The couple would reappear, this time confirming their relationship, in the third part of the saga: *Fear Effect Sedna* (Sushee, 2018).

Figure 2

*Hana y Rain, from Fear Effect 2:
Retro Helix (LGBTQ Video Game Archive, 2015).*



More broadly, the theme of perversion has encompassed male and female bisexual characters alike. The hypersexualized image of Zagreus, protagonist of *Hades* (Supergiant Games, 2018), and his circle of gods rescued from Greek mythology once again emphasizes the celebration of bisexuality as an uninhibited and insatiable orientation. Nor is the resource of the love triangle between the Greek hero and his companions Megera and Thanatos lacking in the work of Supergiant Games, a recurring figure that perpetuates promiscuity as a distinctive feature of bisexuals.

Sometimes, the perversion has ended up leading to sadism, especially in antagonists and villains. Added to the insatiable Reaver are characters like Volgin from *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (Konami, 2004), Peter Dreyfuss from *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013), Mileena from *Mortal Kombat 11* (NetherRealm Studios, 2019), Tharja from *Fire Emblem: Awakening* (Intelligent Systems, 2013) or Morinth from *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare, 2010). In all of them, implicit or explicit bisexuality is used to highlight the amorality, perversion and hypersexuality of these characters.

3.5. BISEXUALITY AS A MENTAL DISORDER

Taking the two previous traits one step further, bisexuality has also served to highlight the sinister, deviant, and perverse nature of certain characters. The works of White (2001) and Alexander (2007) have dealt with the cases of Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), Mike in *Mike's Murder* (James Bridges, 1984) or the criminals of *American Commandos* (Bobby A. Suarez, 1985) as paradigmatic examples of this feature, very common in the Hollywood of the eighties. "Drug kingpin, serial killer, SM practitioner, sex deviant, and gender outlaw. This iconography of human evil has the effect of eliciting [...] biphobia" (White, 2001, p. 43). We are talking about a trait that raises the promiscuity and perversion seen before to enter the field of sociopathy; a stereotype that, surprisingly, is more common than it seems in video games.

We start with several characters from the *GTA* saga. On the one hand, Eddie Low, from *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008), is an NPC that appears in random encounters and is described as a serial rapist and murderer who was

sexually abused as a child. After the protagonist, Niko Bellic, does various errands for him, Eddie tries to assassinate him. The player can then end his life and put an end to the crimes, even though Niko had ignored multiple hints of Eddie's psychopathy when he was helping him dispose of the bodies of his victims. Bisexuality reappears in *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013) twice. The aforementioned Peter Dreyfuss is joined by the co-star of the adventure Trevor Philips, a sociopath victim of abuse who finds pleasure in any sexual practice, regardless of the gender of the other person. Although Trevor shuns the bi-label at all times, which would position him as a repressed homosexual in a world where testosterone is necessary for survival, his behavior, his lewd comments, and the information we have about his background suggest bisexuality or corrupted pansexuality; very typical of the Rockstar company.

Another successful video game from the developer, *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego, 2010), insists on this pattern through the villain Vicente de Santa. De Santa is a captain in the Mexican army and works under Colonel Agustín Allende to put down the revolution led by Abraham Reyes. De Santa is portrayed as a cruel, abusive, and sadistic man who flirts with women and men, having a special inclination for young boys like Quique Montemayor, an effeminate boy who acts as the captain's servant. After De Santa's death, Abraham Reyes comments that "many kids will finally be able to sleep peacefully in their beds".

The perversion associated with bisexuality has also made its way through the historical video game, with the appearance of the infamous Marquis de Sade in *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (Ubi-

soft, 2014). The paraphilias with which bisexuals tend to be associated appear linked to a psychological damage characteristic of this class of characters. One of the earliest examples of a bisexual protagonist, Curtis, from *Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh* (Sierra Entertainment, 1996), is a paradigmatic case of the frequency with which fiction has treated bisexuals as people with traumatic pasts that have deviated them from the good path of monosexuality. In *Phantasmagoria*, Curtis is portrayed as a young man who has just been released from a psychiatric facility after undergoing electroshock therapy due to an atrocious childhood. Although he is in a non-monogamous relationship with Jocilyn, he ends up hooking up with Therese who, in turn, introduces him to the local BDSM scene. Eventually, he becomes attracted to his friend Trevor, who dies shortly after Curtis tries to kiss him.

Recently, some video games have addressed bisexuality as a factor linked to some type of psychological disorder from a more emotional point of view. *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017) and *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017) have sensitively addressed the fact that bisexuals show greater signs of depression, anxiety, suicidal behavior, delinquency, and drug use than other members of the LGBTQ collective (Kaestle & Ivory, 2012). In the first, Lewis, the eldest of the Finch brothers, is portrayed as a young man with mental health problems and drug use who ends up taking his own life at the canning factory where he works. Despite the stereotypes used, Giant Sparrow's work invites reflection on the circumstances of Lewis's death and what we could have done

Table 3*Erosion strategies and stereotyping of bisexuality.*

Trait	Characteristics	Representative cases
Bisexuality as a phase/ confusion	Denial of bisexuality as a stable identity Bisexuality as temporary and illusory Confusion about feelings	
Bisexuality as ambiguity/ fun	Bisexuality as “appearance” Ambiguous, indecipherable, and frivolous personality Association with femininity	Bartz Klauser (<i>Final Fantasy V</i> , <i>Dissidia: Final Fantasy</i>) Zelos (<i>Tales of Symphonia</i>) Yusuke Kitagawa (<i>Persona 5: Dancing in Starlight</i>) Vamp (<i>Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty</i>).
Bisexuality as infidelity/ promiscuity	Generation of distrust Confusion and immaturity Irresponsibility and lack of commitment in relationships	Reaver (<i>Fable II</i> , <i>Fable III</i>) Rachel Amber (<i>Life Is Strange: Before the Storm</i>)
Bisexuality as perversion/ hypersexuality	Bisexuality as a source of insatiable desire Male gaze that eroticizes bisexuality among women	Zagreus (Hades) Hana (<i>Fear Effect 2: Retro Helix</i>) Volgin (<i>Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater</i>) Morinth (<i>Mass Effect 2</i>)
Bisexuality as a mental disorder	Stereotype of the “bisexual male killer” Bisexuality as a symptom of emotional trauma Association between bisexuality and depression	Eddie Low (<i>GTA IV</i>) Curtis (<i>Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh</i>) Lewis (<i>What Remains of Edith Finch</i>) Mae Borowski (<i>Night in the Woods</i>)
Bisexuality as a risky practice	Bisexuality as a “bridge” between the hetero and homosexual worlds	Trevor Philips (<i>Grand Theft Auto V</i>)

to prevent it. For her part, Mae Borowski, the protagonist of *Night in the Woods*, is an anthropomorphic cat who returns to her hometown of Possum Springs. During the adventure, it becomes clear that the pansexually oriented Mae suffers from depression and anxiety, struggling to reemerge from a dissociative disorder that makes her life feel meaningless. Mental health issues are everywhere in *Night in the Woods*, but in a natural and not necessarily dramatic way that helps normalize diversity, rather than using it to capture player interest.

3.6. BISEXUALITY AS A RISKY PRACTICE

Finally, the non-monosexual collective has often been seen as a dangerous “bridge” capable of carrying sexually transmitted infections (STIs) between the heterosexual and homosexual “worlds”. Through a study of the treatment of bisexuality in the medical literature over two decades, Kaestle and Ivory (2012) found that more than 20% of the publications used the metaphor of the bridge, thereby associating bisexuality with promiscuity. White (2001, p. 43) has observed that the rise of the “bisexual male killer” in Hollywood cinema finds its roots in the association of bisexuality with AIDS in the dominant social and political discourses of the 1980s. Again, this trait does not act separately, but in relation to other stereotypes, such as polygamy and promiscuity, behaviors that increase the feeling of threat and the erosion mechanisms of bisexuality. This feature has not been explicitly detected in video games, although it is possible to read certain characters

such as Trevor Philips and Eddie Low from the perspective of the “bisexual male killer” proposed by White (2001).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The content analysis carried out allows us to draw a series of conclusions, as well as raise new questions for future research. In the first place, we see an irregular translation of the most common stereotypes of bisexuality to the video game. Of the six proposed traits, two have hardly been represented: bisexuality as a phase or confusion and bisexuality as a risky practice. Of the remaining four traits, we note a significant presence of bisexuality as ambiguity among Japanese games, while the other three, closely linked to each other, are spread more between titles of North American and European origins. In this sense, we can conclude that bisexuality tends to be more implicit in the Japanese video game and more explicit in the Western one. Bisexuality from the Japanese point of view appears more linked to other traits such as femininity, cross-dressing, and often serves as comic relief for the plot. By contrast, bisexuality is treated more seriously in North American and European video games, which leads to both negative (Eddie Low, Rachel Amber, Trevor Philips...) and positive (Lewis Finch, Mae Borowski) stereotyping.

In general, the analysis has allowed us to see that bisexuality is not as subject to prejudice as in other media, especially cinema and tele-

vision, where numerous examples of the traits listed are not lacking. Although this encourages us to think that video games, given their short history, have been more quickly aware of the demands of the LGBTQ community, they do not eliminate one of the main problems pointed out by numerous authors: the generalized invisibility of sexual diversity in this medium. It is then a matter of relativity. The presence of stereotypes associated with bisexuals is not as significant as in other media because the number of explicitly LGBTQ characters in video games is still minimal (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2021). We will have to wait, therefore, for bisexuality to be more explicitly present to obtain better results.

We must insist on the question of explicitness. We have verified how in many of the cases recorded by the LGBTQ Video Game Archive, bisexuality is confused with the freedom, if not indifference, shown by players to engage in romantic and/or sexual relationships with NPCs of any gender; but bisexuality is not part of the narrative of these characters at any time. This form of representation, called “playersexuality” (Tierney, 2020), has become a shortcut to introduce bisexuality without taking sides for it. This freedom, although it favors the perception of a fluid sexuality controlled by the player, simultaneously erodes the stability of disputed identities, such as bisexuality, which would benefit from a greater unequivocal representation free of interpretations.

With these conclusions, we want to commit ourselves to continue developing the issue of bisexuality in video games through new approaches. It is urgent to broaden the focus of text analysis to the context and work from the point of view of reception, engaging in conversation with the players to better understand the meaning that these representations have for them. Only in this way will we be able to provide the analysis of LGBTQ content with the necessary instruments to answer questions that are often overlooked when we study representation: for whom is representation important? How is it received and in what context? These are some of the questions that we want to address in future works.

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OBRA DIGITAL

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Democratic Characteristics in Government Simulation Video Games

Características democráticas en videojuegos de simulación de gobierno

Características Democráticas em Videogames de Simulação de Governo

3

ARTICLE



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Abstract

This paper analyses nine videogames centered on managing a political community by studying the democratic characteristics present in the relationship between the player and the virtual citizens. The political communities of the games are sometimes presented as homogeneous and structured around the leader. In other cases, they appear as plural and unsubmitive. The games show diverse mechanisms of informal citizen counterpower, but the conflict may be presented as political and legitimate, or as a productivity or crime problem. Finally, we note important deficits on the dimensions of deliberation and decision-making participation. Based on these, some alternative mechanics are proposed.

KEYWORDS

Videogames, Democracy, Government simulators.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza nueve videojuegos de gestión de una comunidad política, estudiando las características democráticas presentes en la relación entre el jugador y los ciudadanos virtuales. Las comunidades políticas de los juegos se presentan en ocasiones como homogéneas y estructuradas en torno al líder, y en otras, como plurales y contestatarias. Los juegos muestran diversos mecanismos de contrapoder ciudadano informal, pero el conflicto puede presentarse como político y legítimo, o enmarcarse en un problema de productividad

o criminalidad. Finalmente, se observan importantes déficits en las dimensiones de deliberación y participación en la toma de decisiones, para lo cual se proponen algunas mecánicas alternativas.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Videojuegos, Democracia, Simuladores de gobierno.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa nove videogames de gestão de uma comunidade política, estudando as características democráticas presentes na relação entre o jogador e os cidadãos virtuais. As

comunidades políticas dos jogos se apresentam ora como homogêneas e estruturadas em torno do líder, ora como plurais e rebeldes. Os jogos mostram diversos mecanismos de contrapoder do cidadão informal, mas o conflito pode ser apresentado como político e legítimo, ou enquadrado em um problema de produtividade ou criminalidade. Por fim, observam-se déficits significativos nas dimensões de deliberação e participação na tomada de decisões, para os quais se propõem algumas mecânicas alternativas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Videogames, Democracia, Simuladores de governo.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to his doctoral thesis dedicated to videoludic analysis, Pérez Latorre (2010) resorts to the approach of Brian McHale (1987) in which he defends that science fiction is the fundamental genre of postmodernity. It is, he argues, because science fiction focuses on exploring a new world, with its own entities and rules, rather than following the adventures of characters. Like science fiction, video games contain this double narrative dimension, in which understanding the video game world represents a fundamental part of the gaming experience. These worlds, at the same time, are impressive conglomerates of ideological content, which tell us about our reality and shape it through fictional realities.

Government simulators are video games in which players take control of a political community and manage its development, usually making relevant political decisions. Like science fiction, they present “possible worlds” (Planells, 2015), and simulate complex political systems, which sometimes seek to resemble our contemporary systems, as in *Democracy 3* (Positech Games, 2013). In other cases, they are set in fantasy or science fiction settings, managing non-human political communities, such as societies of peaceful dragons in *Endless Legend* (Amplitude Studios, 2014). In one case or another, they offer representations of politics and the role of citizens in the community and can offer alternative imaginaries regarding how we should organize and live. Playing these games is a democratic practice, in the sense of an essay, a particular political learning that must consider the designed content of the game, the interaction and the emotions and ideas aroused in the players.

In this article, we will carry out a content analysis of nine government simulation video games with the aim of exploring the representations they offer of their virtual political systems and studying what relationship these have with concepts that have traditionally been associated with democracy.

Our idea of democracy comes from a long historical tradition of political concepts, institutions and regimes, a conglomerate of ideas that are often contradictory to each other, but which circulate together in our popular imagination. It is one of those “floating signifiers” (Laclau, 2016), which various actors seek to appropriate. They do so, on the other hand, because the idea of democracy provides legitimacy. In Spain, in 2021, almost 80% of Spaniards considered that democracy was “preferable to any other form of government” (Center for Sociological Research, 2021). In that sense, to affirm that something is, or is not democratic, is a powerful argument.

At the same time, our contemporary societies are experiencing a certain crisis or degradation of their democratic institutions. The idea of “political disaffection”, a loss of trust towards institutions and in particular towards parties, has been around for decades (Mair, 2015) but it can

be increased with new worrying dynamics, such as the emergence of authoritarian movements and parties or the growing spread of fake news (the latter contribute to building radically different worldviews, in which there are no common truths to debate, which leads to insoluble conflicts).

This situation invites a collective reflection on our institutions, of which video games can be a part, and this article seeks to be a modest contribution. As we will see, many of the analyzed video games do not seek to represent democratic political systems, but they can incorporate present and characteristic elements of a democracy. We start then from a notion of democracy not as a pure political regime, but as a conglomeration of characteristics that may be present in various regimes. In the following pages we will present some characteristics of what has been considered democracy throughout history and that we will look for in the political systems present in the analyzed video games. However, we will present the theoretical inspirations of this work from the perspective of *game studies*.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 GAME STUDIES AND GOVERNMENT SIMULATORS

Research on the political content of video games makes sense by assuming that they influence the ideas and worldviews of their players. Sociology has long worked on the idea that cultural products contribute to shaping our representation of the world and game studies have pointed out some peculiarities of video games (such as interaction or the ability to build worlds with their own rules) that potentially reinforce their social and political impact (Bogost, 2007). Some studies (Imhoff et al., 2021; Barthel, 2013) have wanted to evaluate with specific measurements the political learning of players after playing certain video games through experimental studies or surveys with modest but positive results. Certain learnings were recorded with sufficient levels of statistical validity, but it is likely that many of these learnings are not clearly conscious or are developed more through continuous play than in a temporally limited experimental study. Sociocultural analysis, of which videogames are a part, moves in a swampy terrain, with clear indicators of its importance and of the political effects of culture, but with an evident difficulty in clearly measuring them in a society where cultural consumption is extremely varied and plural.

Although video game content studies have generally focused on political criticism (Pobłocki, 2002; Zamaróczy, 2017, among others), more recent game studies have begun to pay attention to video games as instruments for promoting civic and ethical values. The literature on

ethics and video games has disproved some myths about sadistic players, showing that they habitually put moral behaviors into play (Schrier, 2016) and pointing out components that the design of a game can take into account to generate ethical reflections (Schrier, 2015, Zagal, 2011, Simkins, 2008). Others have pointed out how some video games can help promote civic values (Dishon & Kafai, 2019) or reflect on public administration (Exmeyer & Boden, 2020). In a more critical line, the *Gamevironments* magazine published an issue in 2020 focused on the relationship between democracy and video games. This leads us to think that the way in which government simulators involve players in the management of a state and in interaction with virtual citizens could both reinforce authoritarian ideas about social reality and encourage civic and pro-democratic behavior, inside and outside the video game.

On the other hand, although government simulators are rarely treated as a genre, there are multiple comparative or individual game analyzes that highlight and criticize their political characteristics (McNeil, 2016, Pobłocki, 2002; Shields, 2009). The specific issues that the authors highlight are varied: imperialism and colonialism (Douglas, 2002, Ford, 2016, Oliva et al., 2009), ecocidal developmentalism (Evans-Thirlwell, 2021) or international relations (Zamaróczy, 2017), among others. A few, however, focus on characteristics directly related to the organization of the political system and the interactions between citizens and state power. Planells (2015), for example, suggests that *Tropico* is an interesting representation of political pluralism, where citizens organize themselves into ideological groups (environmentalists, ca-

pitalists...) with different interests and “ideal worlds”. In this way, both the homogeneity or pluralism of the political community represented and the ability of citizens to bet on certain public policies are highlighted. Regarding the same game, Shields (2009) talks about the organization of a certain “social contract” between player and citizens that arises from the ability of the latter to boycott their government. For his part, Dolkemeyer (2020) presents a more aesthetic analysis for *Frostpunk*, in which he suggests that there are mechanisms, not present in other games, by which the player feels within the political community, thus potentially maximizing the empathic component.

2.2 HISTORICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF DEMOCRACY

Our conception of democracy is the product of millennia of political experimentation, institutions, and concepts. More than talking about “democracy”, it makes sense to talk about the “characteristics of democracy”, aspects that at one time or another have been part of its political history. These characteristics will be the elements that we will look for in the games, with which we will briefly explain how they have operated throughout history.

• Participation in decision-making

Traditionally, classical Athens is considered the first democracy (although there are previous experiences). For Josiah Ober (2018, pp. 57-76), the fundamental element of Athenian democracy was found in the access of ordinary citizens to positions of power and decision-making, either through the assembly (open to every citizen) or the institutions chosen by lottery (such as the popular courts or the *boulé*). Deci-

sion-making by the people was the constitutive element of Greek democracy, but it has mostly disappeared in other regimes considered democratic, where the popular selection of leaders has been imposed so that they are the ones who make the decisions.

• Public deliberation and collective interests

Another significant aspect of classical Athens was the importance given to deliberation, a mechanism that brought into play and trained civic virtue, which was present in all citizens (Plato, 2013). Deliberation has found its space in all democratic political regimes, but with different approaches. Although in Athens, or in what has come to be called the republican tradition, deliberation had to do with civic virtue and collective interests, for the liberals it has to do with negotiating between different interests in search of a solution that satisfy the majority. Deliberation has lost political weight since the first democratic experiences, but in recent decades the school of thought of deliberative democracy, particularly defended by Habermas (1998), has advocated recovering it together with greater popular participation in decision-making. Some experiences of deliberative democracy have been launched through the selection of a small number of citizens by lottery for the elaboration of complex proposals (such as a new electoral legislation in Canada), with encouraging results (Lang, 2007).

• Representation and selection of leaders

Although representation was already present in Athens (through a few elective posts, but above all through lottery and the idea of the assembly as a “the polis gathered”), it has been the cornerstone of liberal democracies, which rejected lottery in favor of the election

for two fundamental reasons: to select leaders considered “better” than their representatives (instead of “equal”), and to understand political legitimacy not as a product of participation in decision-making, but as a product of consent (Manin, 1998, pp. 103-118). Thus, our representative democracies are based on the selection of political representatives and leaders, in what Schumpeter (1971) described as a selection process of competitive elites.

- **Counterpower and separation of powers**

On the other hand, both in liberalism and in the republican tradition, counterpower mechanisms have been privileged to avoid tyranny. For the most part, these mechanisms have been institutional, such as the division of powers or legal limitations. But, throughout history, non-institutionalized citizen counterpowers (protests, boycotts, strikes) have also developed in all kinds of regimes.

Finally, some other features will be part of our analysis. Several authors have defended a certain level of economic equality as an attribute of democracy, insofar as it ensures citizen rights and a better distribution of power in society (Tusell Collado, 2015, pp. 183-184). On the other hand, political theory has discussed a lot regarding the characteristics that a political community should have in terms of social homogeneity or pluralism. Liberals have always defended their idea of community as an association of individuals, while authors like Schmitt have opted for less instrumental articulations (Schmitt, 1998).

3. METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE SELECTION

The sample is made up of nine government simulators: *Pharaoh* (1999), *Imperivm Civitas III* (2009), *Civilization V* (2010), *Tropico 4* (2011), *Democracy 3* (2013), *Endless Legend* (2014), *Frostpunk* (2018), *Surviving Mars* (2018), and *Surviving The Aftermath* (2020)¹. These are relatively popular simulators, with significant sales numbers compared to other games of the same genre and with a temporary distribution that, prioritizing the most modern games, includes some old works. At the same time, most of these are city-building games, but two of them (*Civilization* and *Endless Legend*) are considered 4X (an acronym for *Explore, Expand, Exploit, Exterminate*; empire-building and quest for supremacy games). Finally, *Democracy* simulates public policy decision-making in a modern nation state.

From a methodological perspective, multiple analysis models have been proposed when studying video games, considering their particularities with respect to other cultural objects (Pérez Latorre, 2010; Navarro, 2016), and we rely on them. Our understanding of the player who occupies the position of the State is nourished by a semiotic perspective, similar to the one proposed by Pérez Latorre (2010), but the analysis is framed in what we could define as a systemic or ludic analysis. This is because we want to focus on the internal workings of the political system, understood as a designed set of institutions, actors, and rules of the game (institutional and non-institutional). We want to know who makes the decisions, how and throu-

¹ Below, these games will be cited without detailing the year or the particular installment (*Imperivm Civitas* instead of *Imperivm Civitas III*), to facilitate reading and because the conclusions are normally applicable to the saga as a whole.

gh what processes. The narrative aspects are essential to understand how these rules are presented and to intuit the vision that the players could have of them, but that analysis will be reserved for another occasion.

The analysis of the political system focuses on four axes:

- Citizen action competencies and their activation rules (Pérez Latorre, 2010, p. 120). What they can do, how and why they do it (representing the power of citizens and their repertoires of collective action).
- The acting powers of the player (which in this case represents the power of the ruler and the State).
- The characteristics of the political community, such as the social composition of the citizens or the distribution of resources.
- The objectives of the game.

The analysis of these elements will be organized in three sections from the point of view of political theory: the characteristics of the political community, the citizen counterpower systems, and the dimensions of deliberation and direct participation in decision-making.

4. GAME ANALYSIS

4.1 FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POLITICAL COMMUNITY

The virtual political communities of the analyzed games present a set of characteristics related to their basic political configuration, what we could call their character. These seem to move in a line with two ideal types at the ends. On the

one hand, we find organic communities with strong social homogeneity, a natural leader and a kind of manifest destiny expressed in the objectives of the game (like *Endless Legend*). On the other, heterogeneous communities in which citizens have diverse interests and leadership is more often questioned. In general terms, the games that present totally fictitious communities are more similar to the first model, while those that propose supposedly reliable historical representations (*Imperivm Civitas*), or relatively modern ones are closer to the second.

Although the popular selection of leaders has been considered a fundamental element of modern democracies, in government simulators the game begins with the player already in the position of leader-state. However, the type of leadership that is presented is variable. In *Civilization*, for example, the leader is presented as a personification of the character of the community, so that both are confused. He is also an immortal, eternal leader, present during the approximately 6,000 years of game, a videoludic fiction that presents us with a model of political community with Schmittian overtones (Schmitt, 1998). In less radical cases, the leader is the founder of the community (as in *Surviving The Aftermath*) which gives him a certain “manifest destiny” sometimes related to survival in a dangerous world. In others, the leader directs the community, but uses it with a certain patrimonial logic, as in *Imperivm Civitas*, where the foundation of cities has as its objective the growth of the family's influence. Finally, *Tropico* and *Democracy* stand out because their leaderships are the most disputed: they must stand for competitive elections, and they will lose the game if they do not win them.

That line between organization and plurality seems to be represented in the objectives as well. In *Endless Legend*, for example, there are “faction” missions, related to the cultural character of each of the playable fantasy races. In *Civilization*, a certain natural will in humanity is assumed to lead its people “to the glory” (which normally comes to mean supremacy). At the other extreme are *Tropico* and *Democracy*, where the goals of the players are largely undetermined (although there are formal goals, very different public policies with an impact on the community can be chosen) and where citizens have their own different goals. Both games are based on faction systems, where citizens belong to certain ideological groups and want different policies and forms of society (Planells, 2015).

That element makes *Tropico* and *Democracy* the games with the highest level of social heterogeneity. Perhaps it is also worth mentioning *Imperivm Civitas*, where the community is necessarily divided into social classes, which have different interests regarding the type of goods and services they want. These three games are also the ones with the highest levels of economic differences, although the first two can reduce them through a redistribution policy. In the others, the interests, and ideological approaches of the members of the community are very similar or, at least, society always expresses itself as a unified and organic whole. The latter is interesting, for example, in *Frostpunk*. Here, the game features discussions among citizens regarding the player’s policies, but the public opinion is reflected and unified in the community’s indicators of discontent and hope, and when the player is expelled, there is never a civil conflict, but an act of the community. Even if we think that it

is a decision of the majority, the community is presented as a unified whole through that decision.

On the other hand, there are some functionalist social divisions (such as the specialists in *Civilization*, or the biologists or geologists in *Surviving Mars*), but these rarely include ideological differences or differences in the redistribution of resources. For example, in *Endless Legend* or *Civilization*, we never find any kind of hoarding of resources. In *Pharaoh*, access to these does not depend on whether the citizens can pay for them, but on whether their home is in a provision zone. The citizens, in fact, use their money only to pay taxes but they leave the city if these are too high.

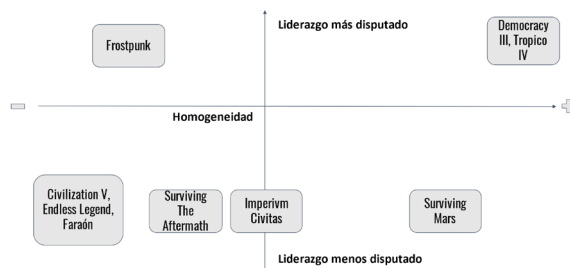
Thus, a first approach to the type of political communities offers us various models. We find ourselves with strongly structured communities, with natural leaders and a collective character reflected in their objectives. Also, we find instrumental communities, founded by the leaders but used according to their own objectives, and in which citizens usually arrive or leave the city depending on its attractiveness and the living conditions it offers, as if it were a monetary exchange. Finally, there are also some plural, heterogeneous communities, more similar to our modern vision of society. Although each game tends to be closer to one or the other, these are ideal types, and it is possible that each game contains characteristics of others.

The following diagram seeks to visually show the characteristics of the games analyzed based on two of the proposed dimensions. The level at which the player’s leadership is disputed and social homogeneity, referring to the si-

milarity of citizens among themselves in terms of interests and actions, accompanied by a similar distribution of resources. Given that each game has unique characteristics that are difficult to compare with each other, the positions of the games should not be taken strictly, but rather indicative of general trends.

Figure 1

Distribution diagram of the games by social homogeneity and disputed leadership



4.2 CONTROL AND COUNTER-POWER

All historical political systems that have been considered democracies have incorporated a legal and institutional dimension, a set of rules of the game that defined what could be done and how. Legal procedures, in fact, have often been considered counterweights against the claims of powerful actors, with the factual capacity to do things that the laws do not allow them.

Government simulators, however, hardly incorporate legal mechanisms that regulate the functioning of political life. It is true that games have their own “laws” that regulate their world, but these, even when they are social, are more like physical ones: they define what can or cannot be done in an absolute way and not just formally. Institutional actors external to the player are extremely rare: there are no judges or parliaments, but only figures like the “advisors” in *Civilization* (without any real power) or the ministers in *Democracy*, who never make decisions on their own, but put their political capital at the service of the players. Only in cases like *Tropico* can illegalities be committed (such as assassinating a political rival), but even there you will not find opposition from institutional actors, but from the citizens themselves.

In a context of general absence of institutions, rules of the game and leadership selection processes, citizen opposition becomes the fundamental element of counterpower in the games analyzed, and this is in turn the most developed democratic component among those studied.

As for the liberals, who understood popular control more as a system of incentives than obligations (Manin, 1998, pp. 201-206), government simulators abound with mechanisms by which popular discontent has negative implications for the player. In very few occasions, it forces the player to make certain decisions.

Games vary in terms of the power of citizen control: in some cases, they can remove the player from power and make him lose the game (*Democracy*, *Frostpunk*...), while in others the effect of discontent is less, such as the fact that some citizens leave the city (*Pharaoh*). The intensity of the control usually comes from the hand of another relevant difference, related to the conception of the conflict that arises. In this sense, five ways of conceiving the effects of discontent are presented.:

- **Discontent as a productivity problem.**

In these cases, citizen discontent does not generate any political response per se, but it has pernicious effects on the political community and represents an obstacle to the player's victory by generating a problem of inefficiency. In the *Pharaoh* city builder, part of the population will leave the city if they lose access to goods or services, which hinders growth and the development of economies of scale. In *Civilization*, the unhappiness of the population decreases its growth and makes the soldiers fight worse, and in *Endless Legend* productivity is affected.

- **Discontent as a crime problem.** In some games, like *Surviving The Aftermath* or *Imperium Civitas*, discontent causes some citizens to turn criminal and steal food or burn down buildings, respectively.

- **Discontent as a business management problem.** This framework doesn't have the presence and consistency of the other four,

but finds some expression in *Surviving Mars*, a Mars colony-building game. Before well-being, the inhabitants of the neighborhood are provided with "comfort" through the provision of services. At the same time, tourists regularly visit the colony and rate their satisfaction with the experience of returning to Earth. In this way, a business management of discontent is adopted, where political incentives acquire the characteristics and logic of the private management of services, and citizens become clients.

- **Discontent as political anger.** In this case, the discontent generates a properly political malaise against the government and its policies and is expressed in the will to expel it from power, but it is not built on concrete alternative political proposals. This is the case of *Frostpunk*.

- **Discontent as a political alternative.** In both *Tropico* and *Democracy 3*, the citizens who express their discontent have clear political preferences alternative to those of the player (such as less or more defense of the environment or investment in social policies). Contrary to the previous cases, discontent does not arise only from poor living conditions, but also from political disagreement.

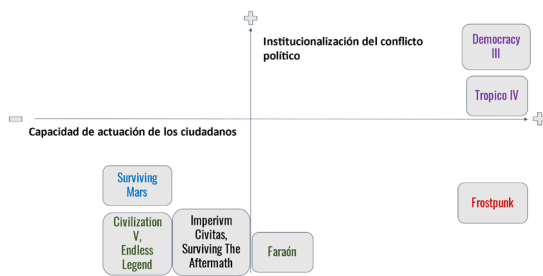
These are ideal types, so each game can combine various perspectives, although they usually don't. In the last two types, discontent is presented as a political problem, and not merely a technical one, but it is the fifth that clearly

provides greater agency to the citizenry, whose preferences are close to the same cognitive level as those of the player. The first three, on the other hand, are closer to the idea of politics as technocracy, where efficiency in pursuing the goals of the game replaces politics itself.

The following diagram summarizes the approximate position of the games based on three dimensions: the power of citizens to set the player's political agenda (on the horizontal line), the institutionalization of political conflict, through, for example, regulated elections (on the vertical line) and the framing of the conflict, which can be seen in the colors of each game (productivity in green, crime in black, business management in blue, discontent as political anger in red and discontent as political alternative in purple). As we mentioned, we can observe correlations between the framing of the conflict and the power of citizens, as well as between institutionalization and citizen power.

Figure 2

Distribution diagram of the games by the ability of citizens to act, institutionalization of the political conflict and framing of the political conflict



4.1 DELIBERATION AND PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING

Deliberation has been a fundamental aspect of the decision-making process among various democratic traditions, whether understood as a process of training and putting into practice civic virtue to achieve collective wisdom, or as a process of negotiation between factions that allows reaching a solution satisfactory to the majority (the latter is the case for liberals (Manin, 1998)). Although deliberation today seems rather formal at the parliamentary level, it occupies a relevant role in decision-making in the formation of the so-called "public opinion". In our complex democracies, deliberation and the formation of public opinion take place through the mediation of a multitude of actors with different functions and powers, from individuals and public figures to social movements, organizations, parties, and media. As a result, we find a society with a dynamic public opinion, in which various issues enter and leave the public agenda and the perceptions of citizens and other actors change over time. It also offers what is, a priori, the main incentive for political activity, which is the ability to present ideas and projects for society and convince the necessary actors to implement them. Deliberation also functions as a counterpower mechanism, which is why authoritarian regimes often want to limit it.

Deliberation is, however, a fundamental absence of government simulators. In games, citizens react to the situations in which they or the community find themselves (for example, their happiness in *Civilization* or the economy in *Democracy*), or to the decisions made by the player (unanimous or heterogeneous), but these reactions are predetermined and programmed, they are never debated or changed by being convinced of something.

Sometimes the deliberation is presented briefly in a narrative way, as in *Frostpunk*, when, after enacting a law, various opinions of the citizens regarding it show up, but without any mechanical effect. Similarly, in the speech in *Tropico*, the player wins votes for the elections through promises but does not convince anyone to change their ideological position. At the same time, in *Democracy*, citizens can change their minds on a particular issue if their social situation changes (for example, if a driver stops driving, he or she will no longer have a problem with fuel tax increases), but never as an effect of a deliberative process; on the contrary, as a consequence of a change of objective interests. In this way, the absence of deliberation supposes an absence of social dynamism and an approximation to democracy and to citizens as rational voters/consumers, whose decisions are made in accordance with the evaluation of their interests and preferences. Democracy is represented in a similar way as imagined by theorists of economic democracy, based on rational choice theory (Downs, 1957).

One of the potential effects of this representation of democracy has to do with the promotion of authoritarian reactions in the game. Faced with the impossibility of convincing citizens of a certain policy, the only way to carry it out is to unilaterally exercise power to implement it and,

as in *Frostpunk*, deprive citizens of their tools of counterpower. This dynamic can be reinforced if the player is sure that what he intends to do is objectively better than what the citizens propose, which leads us to consider the question of the idea of collective wisdom and the infantilization of citizenry in government simulators.

As we have previously verified, only in two of the games do the citizens propose alternative policies to those of the players, while in the others the players react to the circumstances but lack a program. At the same time, games may feature critical circumstances for survival (as in the post-apocalyptic settings of *Frostpunk* and *Surviving The Aftermath*) or game objectives that are known to the player but are unclear if the citizens share them (such as supremacy in *Civilization*). In both cases, the citizens can appear uncooperative, unsympathetic towards the player, and even capricious in their demands. In the same way, the player has a set of technical information that citizens cannot access, such as statistical data on productivity and living conditions, future technology developments and their current requirements, or potential natural disasters or serious weather changes. This information allows players to develop a long-term strategy (compared to the short-term needs of citizens), which, together with the lack of political initiative of the latter, contributes to this process of infantilization in which the players appear as the ideal actors for making “good” decisions.

Something similar happens with the idea of collective wisdom. Advocates of deliberation have argued that it is a suitable process for making good decisions, since it involves more perspectives on the issue to be discussed than that of the autocrat. The problem, once again, is that

there is no assembly where citizens share these perspectives, but the only actor with the possibility of learning about them (to the extent that the game allows it) and incorporating them into the final decision is the player (for example, by reading the claims of each faction in *Tropico*).

Thus, the absence of deliberative mechanisms, accompanied by a representation of citizens as rational consumers and childish subjects at the same time, and the concentration of information in the hands of the player promote the acceptance of an authoritarian relationship as the most effective and suitable formula for making decisions in the game. The games themselves then give an ideological justification to the fact that there is not a single mechanism for direct participation of citizens in decision-making. The buildings that are built, the laws that are signed, international relations, the technology that is researched and any other public decision using the common resources of the community is made exclusively by the player or State.

Although there are clear mechanical and technical difficulties for the simulation of deliberation and participation in games, these could give rise not only to very innovative games, but also to games with the capacity to teach pro-democratic values. In the *Frostpunk* expansion “*The Last Autumn*”, a theoretically very interesting mechanic appears. When confronted with the labor claims of the workers, the player can create a union. This reduces the risk of a strike and creates a space where the workers meet and make some decisions for the commu-

nity, autonomously and independently. Other games could incorporate significant mechanics in which the players give up part of their decision-making power and obtain, in return, greater citizen collaboration, promoting negotiation and cession over the application of authority.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In general terms, the analyzed government simulators do not present democratic systems. With a total absence of direct participation of the population in decision-making, virtual political communities are built on the consent of the authority of their leaders, be they chosen or natural. This consent is attenuated by a relatively developed dimension of counterpower, but which is often framed as a technical problem and gives citizens little agency (or directly infantilizes them). Even in games that seek a more accurate representation (such as *Democracy*), the actions of citizens are built based on rational choice theory, which excludes any kind of deliberative aspect. It is difficult to associate the models of government simulators with real democratic experiences. Although the importance of consent versus participation or the logic of counterpower would bring us closer to liberal approaches than to, for example, the model of classical Athens (Manin, 1998), we are very far from the former, given the almost total absence of institutions or the tendency to present homogeneous communities. Although the proposals of the simulators emerge from diffe-

rent sources, their political systems are unique and respond to the particularities of the video game and the genre.

This scenario is problematic in terms of transmitted values, since there are ideological mechanisms to justify the autocracy, but there is room for alternative mechanisms that reinforce pro-democratic values.

This work can be extended in different ways. On the one hand, it requires a more in-depth analysis, incorporating a narrative dimension and considering the perceptions of the players. Another line of research could be found at the design level to try to understand how and why the decisions that have led to this type of representation have been made (and that are probably not consciously ideological, but rather explained by subconscious worldviews, principles of the video game genre and approaches in terms of gameplay, mechanics, and challenges). But the most interesting, knowing that there

are problematic representations of democracy in video games, is probably to propose alternative designs, which lead us to think about government simulators in another way. Mechanics related to ceding power, dialogue, convincing or being convinced, and listening and understanding could complement the rationalization of resources according to an objective and oppose the understanding of citizens as resources and opponents, as well as the fantasy of power that video games typically exhibit. If games can function as citizenship schools, perhaps they can contribute to rethinking what democracy means and to rethinking our own societies.

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Techno-nationalism and reconstruction of the past in China through video games

Tecnonacionalismo y reconstrucción del pasado en China a través de videojuegos

Tecnonacionalismo e reconstrução do passado na China através de videogames

4

ARTICLE



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Abstract

This article analyzed how the different educational and cultural organizations in China, especially since Jiang Zeming's Patriotic Education campaign, have used the video game format to favor nationalism and rewrite the country's past through cultural digital techno-nationalism. A holistic methodological analysis was carried out that combines cultural journalism, sociology, international relations, and audiovisual communication. As a preliminary result, we can note that the importance of the Chinese video game medium to promote state ideology and unite society around a series of myths and historical themes.

KEYWORDS

Digital nationalism, History, Video games, Ideology, State control, China, Jian Zeming.

Resumen

En el presente texto vamos a analizar cómo los diferentes organismos educativos y culturales del país asiático, especialmente desde la campaña de Educación Patriótica de Jiang Zeming, han utilizado el formato de los videojuegos para favorecer el nacionalismo y reescribir el pasado de China a través del *tecnonacionalismo digital cultural*. Todo ello bajo un prisma metodológico holístico que combina el periodismo cultural, la sociología, las relaciones internacionales y la comunicación audiovisual.

Como resultado preliminar podemos avanzar la importancia del medio videolúdico chino para favorecer la ideología estatal y cohesionar a la sociedad alrededor de una serie de mitos y temas históricos.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Nacionalismo digital, Historia, Videojuegos, Ideología, Control estatal, China, Jiang Zeming.

Resumo

Neste texto vamos analisar como as diferentes organizações educacionais e culturais do país asiático, especialmente desde a campanha de Educação Patriótica de Jian Zeming, utilizaram

o formato dos videogames para promover o nacionalismo e reescrever o passado da China através do tecnacionalismo digital cultural. Tudo isso sob um prisma metodológico holístico que combina o Jornalismo Cultural, a Sociologia, as Relações Internacionais e a Comunicação Audiovisual. Como resultado preliminar, podemos adiantar a importância do meio de videogame chinês para favorecer a ideologia estatal e unir a sociedade em torno de uma série de mitos e temas históricos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Nacionalismo digital, História, Videoagmes, Ideologia, Controle estatal, China, Jian Zeming.

1. INTRODUCTION

In each nation, people tell stories of how they have reached their current situation, from the most basic forms of social organization (family nucleus, tribe, group, collectivity) to the most complex. A central element in the creation of these narratives is knowing those episodes that are selected to be remembered and those that are preferred to be forgotten. It is the way in which states build their national identity (Wang, 2014, p. 20). For decades, different countries and international agents have been using the video game format to spread their reinterpretation of the past within their borders and defend their current position in international geopolitical strategies. As different studies have analyzed with interest, such as *Observant States: Geopolitics and Visual Culture* (Macdonald et al., 2010), a large part of the population understands international politics and the main war conflicts that derive from it through images. If they are accompanied by sound, video and text, the effect is even greater. This combination highlights the power of empathy to homogenize all these elements and impact

the viewer (Schrier & Farber, 2021). There are numerous examples that confirm the relevant role played by video games as a mechanism for transmitting and expanding the internal and external ideals of a nation in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, South Korea, Turkey, etc. (Venegas & Moreno, 2021; Moreno & Venegas, 2020).

Focusing our attention on China, as the journalist Minxin Pei (2001) pointed out, “national experiences and collective memory constitute a powerful force in decision-making in matters not only internal but also foreign policy.” Education and culture, in all their manifestations and formats, have played a preponderant role in forging this past identity. It has had the intention of unifying the mind of the population in a series of capital principles, with the capacity to project the future of the country in a hegemonic context and international reaffirmation. Based on the works of Zheng Wang (2008 and 2014), the patriotic education campaigns orchestrated by the Chinese Communist Party from the time of Jiang Zeming to the configuration of a new cultural identity will be studied (Liu, 2012). The use that has been given to digital media (Schneider, 2018) and propaganda (Brady & Juntao, 2009)

will be analyzed with the ultimate purpose of focusing on video games, an element of great value recognized by the Chinese Communist Party itself for updating history and the foreign spread of Chinese culture.

Parks M. Coble (2010) of the University of Nebraska questioned, when referring to China, “can the past serve the present?”. The answer is emphatically affirmative. The great past ephemerides have been updated through the new formats and technological channels of the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, such as the world of video games, and have given rise to what Schneider (2018) has defined as digital nationalism, which:

“... describes a process in which algorithms reproduce and enforce the kind of biases that lead people to see the nation as an important element of their personal identity and as the main locus of political action. The biases themselves are much older than digital technology. We can find them in all kinds of social networks, which frequently transmit the symbols of nationalism to their audiences. Digital nationalism is special because these existing biases are further strengthened and made to seem natural by virtue of the pervasive personalization processes, preference filters, and group bubbles that have come to define communication in the internet age. (p. 18)”

Some models of this expression of symbols and traditional cultural heritage can be found in the enormous success of several Chinese video games that have recently appeared, which follow this dynamic, as well as in the recovery of ancient analogical games and customs from several centuries ago. At the confluence between the two is where one of the paradigms

of this new nationalism lies, not without a strong ideological and propagandistic character. In February 2011, China's National People's Congress passed the country's first law on the protection of the country's cultural heritage (Chinese Policy Observatory, 2011), which was intended to enhance the preservation of its historical, literary, artistic, and scientific legacy. Within this heritage, there are almost 900,000 different elements. The large Chinese technology conglomerates, led by Tencent, have put the enormous potential of their creations at the service of this measure. One of the most striking cases is that of the video game *King of Glory*, also known as *Honor of Kings* (2015), which in just two years reached more than 80 million downloads and, in May 2017, became the most profitable mobile title of the world (BBC WORLD, 2017). It is an online multiplayer video game in which the user will find some of the great heroes and heroines of the country, many of them from the Three Kingdoms period (from 220 to 280 AD), such as: the Lord of the Lü Bu war; Cao, last prime minister of the old Han dynasty and leader of the Wei kingdom; Liu Bei, Emperor of Shu; Diao Chan, one of the four great beauties of ancient China; or the great general Han Xin. In addition to bringing these narratives closer to millions of people inside and outside the country, it has participated in the promotion of intangible cultural heritage by promoting events of this nature or participating in them through its most representative avatars. In April 2020, and in collaboration with the Shandong Art Research Institute, *King of Glory* joined the city of Weifang, the world capital of kites (an object very present in the skills of some of the characters from this video game), to “awaken” the memory of traditional festivals, despite the criticism it had received years ago from the official newspaper of the Communist Party, the People's Daily (Chow, 2017). One more example of the difficult and complex rela-

tionship between ideology and economy within the country, the oscillation between “techno-socialism and state capitalism” (González, 2021, p. 21). Local artist Guo Hongli produced numerous paper kite models inspired by the theme of this title. As Guo Xuendong, head of the Shandong Institute, pointed out, “intangible cultural heritage must first be known by the public so that it is perpetuated among new generations.” For this reason, Tencent also collaborated in promoting the project to protect the knowledge of the Eight Immortals (Shandong Business Daily, 2020). This is a group of national deities of special veneration, who according to traditional beliefs, existed on earth during the Tang or Song dynasties and practiced alchemy and some methods to achieve immortality.

Figure 1

Screenshot of Cao in King of Glory.



There is an official current of reinterpretation of the past in accordance with the current approaches of Chinese politics, which is relying on interactive digital creations for its dissemination and disclosure. A multitude of references are counted within this dynamic. One of them is *The Han Dynasty Imperial Mausoleums Museum* (Pai Jia Digital Creative Technology Co, 2017), which uses virtual reality to view in all kinds of details the resting place of the great emperors of the Han dynasty, including the famous Terracotta Warriors, through different clues and puzzles related to Chinese history. This is another example of the contribution that culture can achieve within the new nationalism of the Asian giant, in an analog or digital playful format.

2. THE HISTORICAL VIDEO GAME AT THE SERVICE OF NATIONALISM

Chinese society is currently experiencing a double cultural identity confrontation between two paradigms that are linked at the same time in the antithesis between the other and the self (Wu, 2014): modernity and tradition. This clash is especially visible in the generation born in the eighties of the last century. They are the great beneficiaries in terms of material and economic prosperity of the country's spectacular pro-

gress in recent decades. Most of these young people are characterized by a culture of global mass consumption, in which the Internet and electronics are some of its most characteristic features. They express a desire for cultural belonging different from that of their parents, born into the revolutionary idealism of the Mao era. Their identity and historical vision are deeply linked with the contemporary media.

The story is “freed” from traditional textbooks and is integrated into everyday life through popular media culture: movies, TV dramas, video games, etc. The story is associated with nostalgia, entertainment and is understood as a cultural product of consumption. For this generation, as Liu Kang (2012, pp. 17-19) points out, present Chinese history has little relevance or practical implication for their current life. This does not mean that they do not feel a great patriotism towards past episodes or any “aggression” against the political, cultural, and social identity of the nation.

Following the April 2008 riots in Tibet and the international protests over the Beijing Olympic Games, thousands of overseas Chinese students mobilized on social media against the “distortion and demonization” of China in the Western media. Likewise, during the Sichuan earthquake of that year, there was a huge participation of the younger sectors of the population in actions of help and assistance. Although they are complacent participants in the global consumer society, at the same time, they are increasingly aware that resorting to the common history of the country is the best way to identify themselves with others. Progress can only develop through the memory and maintenance of historical tradition. These “millennials”, described as *xiao fenhong* (‘little roses’), are increasingly nationalistic and actively combat those who do not submit to the official regime in any digital medium (Li, 2017). The prolifera-

tion of historical video games or the presence of elements referring to the cultural and political heritage of the country in these digital creations does nothing more than respond to this demand and the desire to spread Chinese culture throughout the world.

This context determines the nature of most of the video games with a historical theme and set in China from the year 2001 (date of release of *Three Kingdoms: Fate of the Dragon*, Object Software) to the most recent. Chinese-style video games based on stories from imperial China, myths, legends, folklore, and literature, adopt Confucianism, Buddhism or Taoism, as well as other philosophical and religious components to build their narratives and game rules.

With a strong nostalgic tone, this genre of productions is designed to “provoke cultural sympathy, longing for one’s roots, and the search for identity” (Li, 2020). Most of the titles move in two genres of fiction: the *wuxia* and the *xinxia*, set in the world of the *jianghu*. *Wuxia* means ‘heroes of the martial arts’ and within its components are mysticism and legends, normally exaggerated in the narratives, in an environment that promotes the exploration of the world and the freedom of the characters that transit it. In its essence, there is a great contrast between the simplicity of life in ancient China, with great adventures that transcend the lives of simple humans. The *xinxia* genre is situated with a “high fantasy” component in which heroes with natural powers face all kinds of demons or evil creatures in universes divided into different kingdoms. All this develops in an architectural and material setting with elements of past Chinese dynasties.

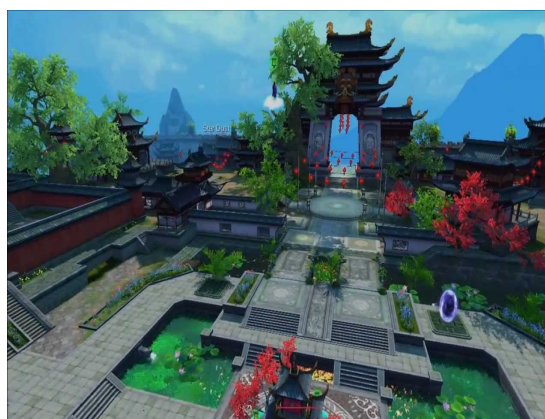
In short, these are societies governed by martial codes of honor and courage, in idyllic landscapes, rivers and lakes, in a never-ending struggle between Good and Evil, the *jianghu* (Yuen,

2012). In the video game field, one of the first obligatory references is *The Legend of Sword and Fairy* (Softstar Entertainment, 1995), whose excellent reception has caused this series to extend its creations to the present. The video game paradigm combines all the named aspects of wuxia, xinxia and jianghu, in a real historical context. Gods, demons, fairies, humans, and ghosts appear in a period that extends from the origins of the universe, with the appearance of the mother goddess Nüwa and Pangu, creator of the Earth, until the time of the Northern Song dynasty (centuries X-XIII AD). Over the years, and according to technological improvements, this type of video game has advanced in aspects of details, visuals, and sound. There has also been a greater interest in incorporating different contents that are increasingly associated with the country's cultural signs in the narratives and in the objects, practices and decoration that appear in them.

The developers of *Jade Dynasty* (Perfect World Games, 2009), a free-to-play online game, worked with several scholars and curators to show their characters' weapons in the most accurate and detailed way, including traditional Longquan swords with an antiquity of more than two thousand years. In addition, the mural paintings of Dunhuang (dated to the Tang dynasty, 7th-10th centuries AD) and the Confucius temple in Nanking have been incorporated into the scenes. Today, this cultural constellation serves not only as a background for the game, but also for a deeper experience through its richness of detail and artistic nuance. Lu Xiaoyin, executive director of this company, argues that these games also can promote national culture abroad through rules and mechanics that are common to any interactive creation (Ru, 2019).

Figure 2

Jade Dynasty screenshot highlighting a bucolic past.



Within Chinese historical video games, the dominant theme is related to the Three Kingdoms period (2nd-3rd centuries AD), a turbulent time of confrontations between different territories but which ultimately led to the unification of China. The relevance of this event, one of the constitutive milestones of the country's nationalism, has been widely reflected in the digital field. The huge number of titles that deal with it attest to this and do nothing more than respond to the growing demand of the population to relive these events. In addition to projecting the past context into the present, this format serves to publicize scenes of daily life, from dice games to the demanding exams that citizens who wanted to join the imperial civil service had to pass; as seen in *Wu Confucian Painting Volume - Apocalypse* (Wuru Xiaosheng, 2020) or *Call Me Emperor* (Clicktouch Co., 2020). On STEAM, one of the main digital platforms for downloading video games, around thirty titles can be found by entering the word "Three Kingdoms". On Google Play, almost a hundred games can be found on the same theme, figures that are undoubtedly surprising even considering their gigantic size. population.

3. POLITICAL PROPAGANDA AND IDEOLOGY IN VIDEO GAMES

Historical memory is one of the fundamental features in the formation of group identity. Authors such as Anthony D. Smith (1999) emphasize that ethnicity, nation, or religion are the basis of historical myths that define who belongs to a group, what it means to be a member of it and who are its enemies. These myths usually have a factual basis, but that is selected or exaggerated in its historical representation. Group identity is based largely on the memory of certain confrontations throughout their existence. And the recourse to these past episodes can be diversified in two ways: “chosen glories” or “chosen traumas” (Wang, 2014, p. 20). Whether one or the other option is transmitted from generation to generation, through the family, education, political spheres, or through participation in ceremonial rituals of exaltation (joy) or pain (trauma, such as the Nanking massacre or the Sino-Japanese War of 1937). Both elements serve as a timeless union between the collectivity of a certain nation. Memory is used, for better or for worse, as a connecting link.

This link between memory and history is particularly powerful with the participation of the educational system. Schools are the basic social institutions for transmitting national narratives about the past. After the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989 (an authentic exercise of opposition and challenge to the almighty Chinese Communist Party by the citizens), the politician Deng Xiaoping concluded that this serious incident demonstrated the “carelessness” on the part of the authorities for the “ideological education” of the population. In 1991, Jiang Zeming, the leader of the Party, promoted the patriotic education campaign:

The objectives of the patriotic education campaign are to boost the spirit of the nation, increase cohesion, foster national self-esteem and pride, consolidate, and develop the widest possible patriotic united front, and direct and unite the patriotic passions of the masses toward the great cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics. (Wang, 2008, p. 788)

The idea was to link national pride and patriotism to the ideological vindication of the Communist Party but determined by the history of the country. Communism was to be combined with traditional culture, using the past to serve the present. However, on this occasion the class struggle was not useful to conform to their patriotic interests. A decade later, and in view of the technological changes experienced worldwide, the deputy director of the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party presented a report in which he appealed to the media and new interactive formats to promote state ideology (Nie, 2013). In 2005 at the United Nations 60th Anniversary Summit, Party General Secretary Hu Jintao appealed to traditional Chinese culture to achieve a harmonious world. From the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the academic field, research was promoted between ancient diplomatic theories (from the imperial era) and contemporary diplomatic strategies (Yu, 2014).

This redefinition of the past in accordance with state interests and applied to the world of video games reached its peak in 2005. Hand in hand with Shanda Interactive, the largest online gaming operator in the country, the General Administration of Press and Publications (in hereinafter AGPP), the Propaganda Department

of the Party Central Committee, the Central Civilization Bureau and the Communist Youth League promoted the Chinese Heroes (Zhong Hua Ying Xiong Pu) project. The objective was to develop games based on historical events that “stir” the consciences of the population (Li, 2020, p. 2). This initiative intended, in addition to promoting the national digital industry, to maintain government control of a medium with a great ideological influence on young people.

For this reason, in September of that same year, an “anti-addiction system” was launched in China in online games “to protect the physical and mental health of players”, one more example of the ambivalence between political, ideological, and economic interests. Among these measures was the appearance of messages on the screen reminding them “that they exceeded the recommended time and that their permanence in front of the computer is harmful” (Dickie, 2005). And, most importantly, to replace the time spent on fantasy video games of foreign origin (especially Japanese and South Korean) with others aimed at reinforcing ethics, morals, and knowledge of national glories in the form of certain “exemplary” historical figures (Jiang & Fung, 2019). Within the first phase of this project (which had the pretentious goal of “reviving” 100 historical figures) five names were included. First, Lei Feng, an iconic soldier of the People’s Liberation Army. A model of the Maoist era known for his self-sacrifice and unblemished ethics. In *Learn from Lei Feng*, *Xue Lei Feng*, (Shanda, 2006), distributed mainly among students, the game mechanics encouraged them to perform “collaborative acts” such as sewing and darning socks to gain experience and progress. The ultimate goal was, imitating the life of this character, to be able to meet the supreme leader, Mao Tse Tung. A sixth grader in Yuexiu District, Jin Jao, perfectly summed up the purpose of this “memory” creation:

As long as my experience, reputation, skills, and loyalty meet the criteria of the game, I will win and meet Chairman Mao. I still have several tasks to perform. I will work hard and strive to get the president’s autograph as soon as I can. (China.org, 2006)

Another of the “heroes” chosen for its digital release was Zheng He, a 15th-century Chinese Muslim sailor and explorer (although his religious affiliation was not highlighted), famous for his seven expeditions throughout the Indian Ocean. He was designed to remind children of the importance of cultural exchange between China and other countries. Accompanying Lei Feng and Zheng He would also be Zheng Chenggong, a Ming dynasty warlord who claimed victory over the Dutch garrison in Taiwan. Bao Zheng, a symbol of justice who stood out for his intransigence against corruption, was also included. Finally, Yue Fei appeared, a great warrior of the Song dynasty (12th century), who according to legend defeated one hundred thousand soldiers of the Jin (Jurchen) dynasty with just five hundred men (Davies, 2005).

It is difficult to distinguish in these creations what is indoctrination or educational purposes, even more so when these “heroes” are transferred to the present and must relate to the country’s armed forces. Army recruiters complain that the new generations are dominated by “spoiled brats interested only in their technological gadgets, such as the PlayStation Portable (PSP)”. This comment reveals the exasperation of military personnel with the value system of young people (Naftali, 2014, p. 4). For this reason, the Propaganda Department of the Popular Liberation Army has promoted digital cultural creations in recent times to improve its image and increase its attractiveness among said population niche. Within the education campaign mentioned in previous pages,

a guide for the implementation of Patriotic Education was included in 1994 to strengthen the civic-military unity within Chinese society as well as to make youth aware of the importance of “protect the territorial integrity, national sovereignty and independence of the homeland”. To better convey these ideas, the campaign advocates the use of entertainment as a medium of education and presents “the use of entertainment as a medium of education and employs a broad range of media channels for this purpose, including art exhibitions, books, newspapers, television shows, video and audio products, films, computer games, and the Internet.” (Naftali, 2014, p. 6). A recurring theme has been the “traumatic and humiliating experience of Western and Japanese incursions” (Nie, 2013). This has led to the direct participation of the national military in the creation of these recreational digital products. Like other industries, such as cinema or music, the state ideology has made an appearance increasingly accentuated in this medium. Unlike American productions, Chinese movies and video games focus their argument on sacrifice for the nation as the supreme reason. A clear example of this is the title *Glorious Mission* (Giant Interactive Group, 2013), in which the player must assume as his own the objectives of Chinese international politics, such as the control of the islands of the China Sea in dispute with Japan.

The true intention of this video game genre, and in response to the demand made by some military authorities, was to increase recruitment and glorify war. As some studies analyzed by Alberto Venegas in his work *Interactive Past* (2020) have highlighted, there is a relationship between war video games and the improvement of the military reputation among its players. This implies that any representation in dissonance with state approaches, in this video game industry or any other, will quickly come

up against the heavy curtain of censorship (Holmes, 2021). One of the most current examples of this problem is found in the blocking of the trailer (no longer directly the final product) of *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* (Activision, 2020) due to the inclusion of an image (which occupied only one second of the total) of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests against the communist government. Faced with Chinese complaints, Activision decided to eliminate this scene due to the possibility of losing the billions generated by this Asian market. There is something that is also decisive: the Chinese technology conglomerate Tencent owns 5% of Activision (Batchelor, 2020). This title is very significant in terms of the propaganda capacity that the video game world can have, capable of bringing historical events to the fore and generating debate about them. Not only has it annoyed China, but it has also earned Russian animosity by starting its presentation video with photographs of Yuri Bezmenov, a KGB deserter who achieved great fame in the 1980s by explaining to the media the psychological warfare that Moscow was conducting against the US (Egorov, 2020).

Figure 3

Censored scene in Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War (Source: AFP)



4. DISCUSSION

Video games have become one of the main state cultural industries for promoting nationalism and exporting a positive image of China abroad. They not only promote this identity trend through their content and discourse, but also through the laws and policies that surround them and reveal their economic importance. One of the features of the so-called neo-technological nationalism is to protect and promote national industries and keep the country's official discourse "unpolluted" regarding its own past. Of the 989 titles approved in 2018, only 30 were foreign, a clear confirmation of these restrictive policies (Niko Partners, 2019). This implies that the State has become a powerful subsidiary for the development of national digital companies (such as Shanda or Tencent), which benefit from these measures but at the same time are conditioned by the ideological nature of their creations.

These limitations represent an important burden in the process of taking advantage of video games as part of the cultural soft power of the country. According to the Anholt-GfK Roper Nations Brand Index, which annually measures the image of 50 countries, China ranked in a prominent third place due to its "culture and heritage" but fell to the worst positions when referring to governance and political sphere. As various international analysts point out, "people already know that China has an ancient and rich culture, emphasizing that point more does little to foster new visions of the country." As the researcher Nicholas Dynon (2014) points out, the motto of Chinese public diplomacy "all culture, no politics" will have little success

regardless of the medium chosen for its promotion (as in this case, interactive video-game digital products) if it does not there is a change in the political structure. We consider, in line with works such as those by Halter (2006) and in agreement with these arguments, that this genre of outlined videogames will mainly have a nationalist component with a propagandistic and educational purpose.

From a cultural point of view, and with clear nationalist references, Chinese interactive digital creations are part of the strategy to reinforce the country's identity through the projection of a past that is extolled among the new generations. This desire to recover ancient heroes, traditions, and values, such as the Three Kingdoms period (there are more than a hundred video games centered on this era), to highlight the value of national culture and history, not only among its citizens but beyond the Great Wall. This is part of the broad debate in which the country is going through and oscillates, that is, choosing the path of tradition or modernity. This technological nationalism, following Schneider's definitions, fosters an identity current through content and narratives in all kinds of formats, among which the digital gaming industry is especially relevant. In addition, the policies and regulations that surround it also show the economic importance that this industry represents for the Chinese State: using the past to serve the present and link the past glories and the contributions of the Chinese people to universal culture as an example of the present position that the country wants to achieve hand in hand with the Chinese Communist Party and its current leaders, such as Xi Jinping.

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Empowerment in the representation of female characters in video games. Raising awareness of social problems with *The Last of Us Part II*

Empoderamiento en la representación de los personajes femeninos de videojuegos. Sensibilización ante problemas sociales con *The Last of Us Parte II*

Empoderamento na representação de personagens femininos de videogames. Conscientização de problemas sociais com *The Last of Us Part II*

5

ARTICLE



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Abstract

This research studies the case of *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), understanding the video game as a means of representation capable of promoting critical thinking and social change. This is an adventure set in an apocalyptic future with society decimated by a pandemic, where different female characters converge. As an objective, the empowerment of these women will be analyzed and how, through them, social problems of contemporary society such as homophobia or ideological extremism are manifested. The conclusions show that this game offers a realistic image of women away

from sexism and stereotypes to address these issues.

KEYWORDS

Empowerment, Representation, Female characters, *The Last of Us Part II*, Video games.

Resumen

Entendiendo el videojuego como un medio de representación capaz de fomentar el pensamiento crítico y el cambio social, esta investigación estudia el caso de *The Last of Us Parte II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), una aventura ambientada en un futuro apocalíptico con la sociedad diezmada por una pandemia y donde convergen

diferentes personajes femeninos. Como objetivo se analizará el empoderamiento de estas mujeres y cómo a través de ellas se manifiestan problemas sociales de la sociedad contemporánea como la homofobia o el extremismo ideológico. Las conclusiones muestran que este juego ofrece una imagen realista de la mujer alejada del sexismo y los estereotipos para abordar estos temas.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Empoderamiento, Representación, Personajes femeninos, *The Last of Us Parte II*, Videojuegos.

Resumo

Entendendo o videogame como um meio de representação capaz de promover o pensamento crítico e a mudança social, esta pes-

quisa estuda o caso de *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), uma aventura ambientada em um futuro apocalíptico com a sociedade dizimada por uma pandemia e onde convergem diferentes personagens femininos. Como objetivo, será analisado o empoderamento dessas mulheres e como os problemas sociais da sociedade contemporânea como a homofobia ou o extremismo ideológico se manifestam através delas. As conclusões mostram que este jogo oferece uma imagem realista das mulheres longe do sexismo e dos estereótipos para abordar essas questões.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Empoderamento, Representação, Personagens femininos, *The Last of Us Parte II*, Video-games.

1. INTRODUCTION. THE VIDEO GAME AS A FORM OF REPRESENTATION

Video games are “a powerful form of representation that fosters critical thinking, personal empowerment, and social change” (Frasca, 2001, p. 114). Venegas and Moreno (2021) understand that factors such as easy and free access, the possibilities of connection worldwide and its power of attraction (thanks to interactivity, empathy, or simulation) mean that interactive leisure can “transfer problems real, fully valid and current, of political, social or economic significance to the virtual world” (p. 11), which creates debate around these issues.

Molina (2020) highlights that change in society necessarily implies a use of the media to express different ideas. If we understand videogames as a means of mass communication, they must be presented as “an alternative to market logics and committed to a vision of society with a critical conscience” (Flores & Velasco, 2020, p. 17).

There is no consensus when it comes to calling this type of interactive proposal. Genvo (2021) understands them as ‘expressive games’ that “propose putting yourself in the place of others to explore social, cultural, psychological issues, etc., while allowing you to experience the dilemmas, choices and consequences derived from those situations” (p.12); the gameplay is in the background. Bogost (2007) opts for persuasive games, games that due to their persuasive quality stand out for the desire to convince with an argument. Paredes-Otero (2018b) qualifies as games for social change those “video games that, while teaching social and civic values, seek to make citizens aware of problems of a social nature” (p. 308).

Regardless of their name, these “serious games” offer mechanisms to achieve other objectives besides entertainment (Michael & Chen, 2005), such as teaching or disseminating messages. Some techniques that, for their correct use, must consider characteristics of video games such as multimodality, interactivity, narrative, and multiplayer modes (Klimmt, 2009).

The situation of the game can reduce resistance when receiving messages related to change: interacting with the elements on the screen increases the probability of connecting with the contents of the game and being able to subsequently apply the knowledge acquired. Even the multiplayer modes facilitate communication and resolve doubts (pp. 254-265).

In games focused on social problems such as immigration, homophobia, gender violence (Paredes-Otero, 2018b) and mental illness (Paredes-Otero, 2020), the predominant awareness techniques are the inclusion of didactic material and messages with real data on those topics and engaging the user in the facts with situations where the game directly addresses the player or uses the first-person perspective.

The gameplay based on decision-making is also used to transfer the user to real situations. However, Bogost (2007) underlines that the representation of the problem is simply not enough to create a change, one more element is necessary: arguments for the resolution of said conflicts within the game.

These video games that seek critical thinking and awareness are usually exclusively related to *indie* development studios. Cerezo (2020) argues that in “these independent development teams we put the burden of making video games ‘a mature industry’ and that ‘deals with important issues’, while we allow the companies responsible for the so-called triple A to make games without apparent depth” (p. 155). There is a belief that the big developers move solely for economic reasons and the objective of entertaining, while other purposes are the task of *indie* titles.

However, as we will see in this study, triple-A games can also be about social issues and raise awareness. Hence, the objective of this work is, on the one hand, to analyze empowerment

when representing female characters in the video game *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020) and, at the same time, social problems that are manifested throughout this interactive adventure and the messages that reach the user.

2. THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN VIDEO GAMES

By female empowerment we understand the ability of women to be able to control their own lives, have the same educational and health capabilities as men and equal access to resources and opportunities (ONU, 2017). This requires “awareness, developing self-esteem, expanding their options, more access and control of resources, and actions to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate discrimination and gender inequality” (p. 34).

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, was decisive in the fight for women’s equality. Point 35 insisted on the importance of equal access for women to economic resources, including technology, professional training, and information, as a means of promoting the development of women and girls and the empowerment of their role (UN, 1995).

Technical advances must be used to improve the situation of women, an idea that includes the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Specifically, under the premise “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”, the need to “improve the use of instrumental technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women” (UN Women 2015). An objective that can be

reached with information and communication tools such as video games.

Women have always been present in interactive leisure since practically the conception of the video game. Whether as a programmer, founder of development companies or responsible for the artistic treatment of games (Marie, 2018). However, her role in the history of the video game has been silenced, to the point of making the female presence invisible and even decontextualizing her work (Gil, 2020).

In Spain, although of the 15.9 million players in 2020, 45.9% were women (AEVI, 2021), in terms of development they are only 18.5% (DEV, 2021). For Garzón (2021), the contrast between both figures responds to the fact that the video game draws from “the oppressive structures generated by heteropatriarchy” (p. 480). Hence, for many years there has been the belief that the target of video games were men. With titles for men, created by men, “[a woman] is made to know that this is not her place, it is not a socialization space that belongs to her or in which she will feel comfortable” (pp. 482-483).

Díez (2004) concluded that video games “tend to reproduce sexual stereotypes contrary to the values that we have established educationally and socially as basic principles in our society” (p. 329). Rodríguez (2016) highlights how “women tend to embody passive or simply decorative and hypersexualized characters; while male characters are characterized by their strength, their leading and dominant role, their resolving capacity, etc.” Continuing with hypersexuality, Downs and Smith (2009) highlighted that factors such as nudity, disproportionate body dimensions and inappropriate clothing were more typical of female than male characters. In terms of attitudes, Ivory (2009) recorded active roles in 75% of the male characters in the cases studied, while their female counterparts barely reached 33%.

Going deeper into the roles, Curiel (2018) establishes a classification of five types according to the representation of female characters in video games. The woman as an object or damsel in distress is the most recurrent form, where the male character sets off to save his female counterpart (Princess Peach in the Super Mario games). The woman as destination, the suffering caused by the villain is the starting point for the hero to begin a story of justice or revenge (Shadows of Mordor, by Monolith Productions, 2014). The woman as a recipient consists of turning her into an “affective reward for having done something for a woman” (p. 125), like rescuing her, with which the hero receives the well-known “kiss of victory”, either literally or metaphorically (Shadow of the Colossus, Team ICO, 2005).

Titles such as *Final Fantasy VIII* (Squaresoft, 1999) or *Resident Evil Village* (Capcom, 2021) present women as opponents, who use their status as women to hinder the protagonist, usually male, exploiting “her sexuality to deceive, trick and betray” (Curiel, 2018, p. 127). Very different from the woman as an assistant, whose role is reduced to being a companion to the male protagonist, assuming an added difficulty due to her helplessness (BioShock Infinite, by Irrational Games, 2013).

Finally, there is the role of women as controllable subject or protagonist. However, being able to adopt the role of a woman in a game corresponded above all to a marketing strategy to attract the attention of a market dominated by men (Atrio, 2019), as happened with *Lara Croft* and *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996) until the reboot of the saga in 2013.

To this must be added the so-called “pink games” such as *Imagine being a mother* (Visual Impact, 2007) in which women are shown in a stereotyped way and discrimination is perpe-

tuated by reminding “the infants who approach the technology what their place is in society, what type of entertainment is theirs, and establishing a clear dividing line between leisure for girls and leisure for boys” (Garzón, 2021, p. 476).

The year 2013 was a turning point when some companies marketed games starring women with strong personalities (Atrio, 2019). The developers “are beginning to realize that what we are asking for now are very different things, at least in the treatment given to women” (p. 491). Hence, there are female characters who “desire, fear and fight for what they believe in. The player can choose to ignore them or support them, but regardless of how they decide to configure their play experience, female representations increasingly show a psychological complexity that overcomes traditional prejudices” (Planells, 2012, p. 14). Characters like Max in *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2016), Aloy in *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) or, as we will see, Ellie in *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), show that this change of representation is not something exclusively of independent studies. Paredes-Otero (2018a) points out how, from the very covers of the games, the female characters are no longer hypersexualized, and wear clothing far removed from eroticism, thus leaving aside the role of women as sexual objects.

However, Garzón (2021) speaks of the fear that companies have for creating these different characters in large developers, a slower process compared to “the independent scenario, which works under its own rules, but has a limited impact” (p.497). Along these lines, Cabañes (2020) mentions the rejection of those who do not belong to the universal target “by the gaming community, which insults, despises and even harasses or threatens those who belong to other groups” (p. 212). This not only occurs

with derogatory comments towards specialized journalists (Manzano-Zambruno & Paredes-Otero, 2020), eSports players (Díaz, 2018) or developers, but even towards characters that deviate from universal representation. This was the case of Abby, protagonist of *The Last of Us Part II*, who received homophobic comments from users (Delgado, 2020) or about Aloy’s “unfeminine” appearance in *Horizon Forbidden West* (by Guerrilla Games; 20 Minutes, 2021).

3. THE LAST OF US PHENOMENON

Focusing on the video game franchise on which this studio revolves, *The Last of Us* was a game developed by *Naughty Dog* and was released for sale for PlayStation 3 in 2013. The plot places the player twenty years in the future with a United States post-apocalyptic and a society decimated by a fungus known as Cordyceps, capable of infecting human beings and causing them to lose reason and become violent and cannibalistic. The few survivors live in quarantine zones controlled by the military or in groups without law or order. In this context we find Joel, a smuggler who is tasked with taking Ellie, a 14-year-old girl immune to the virus, to Massachusetts.

The journey of both characters through a devastated United States and the relationship established between the two made this video game one of the most awarded in history, it accumulated more than 250 awards (Muñoz, 2021). Seven years later, in 2020, and in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the sequel came out, *The Last of Us Part II*, which achieved records and milestones practically since its launch. It sold four million copies in just three days (Alonso, 2020), being the fastest-selling PlayStation 4 exclusive (Malo, 2020), and sur-

passing its predecessor in just seven months with 255 awards (Muñoz, 2021).

The saga has aroused interest in the academic community. Hughes (2015) analyzes it from the perspective of ludonarrative dissonance. Farca and Ladevèze (2016) understand this game as an example of critical dystopia where cities reflect the rejection of capitalism. Murray (2019), on the other hand, focuses on the characters, specifically on how the loss of power and dominance of the white race is illustrated through a narrative based on the fear of contagion, the apocalypse, and the collapse of society.

Atrio (2019) focuses his study from the point of view of the representation of female characters, shown realistically in terms of clothing, especially, while the narrative techniques do the opposite, eliminating attempts to show women independent of the figure masculine. For his part, Suárez (2020) highlights how the game criticizes the present through a post-apocalyptic future thanks to the aesthetics, the characters, the settings, and the elements present in them, as well as interactivity. Radchenko (2020) does the same with the concept of metamodernism and how it manifests itself through the oscillation between the new and the old, the reconstruction or the feelings that the characters express. Finally, Anyó and Colom (2021) analyze the feelings produced by the characters in both games of the saga, introducing the term “emotional ambivalence” or the coexistence of two or more opposite emotions.

4. METHODOLOGY

We start from the hypothesis that *The Last of Us Part II* breaks with the classic stereotypes of representation of female characters in video games and that these figures also serve to address various social problems. To verify or re-

fute this statement, this video game is studied from the point of view of ludonarration (Cuadrado & Planells, 2020) to “unravel how this process of interweaving narrative elements occurs in a specific video game” (p. 41).

The success in sales and prizes obtained from this sequel, as well as the academic interest that the first game aroused, makes us choose *The Last of Us Part II* for this work. In addition, its triple A game condition makes it ideal for the proposed objective in order to check what the female characters that are presented are like and the messages on social issues that reach millions of receiving users.

The method used consists of a ludic-narrative analysis, a technique previously used to study the representation of social problems such as mental illness (Paredes-Otero, 2020) or death and awareness of it (Paredes-Otero, 2021) through the interactive entertainment. The analysis is carried out in two phases. First, the characters themselves are focused on and categories related to classic stereotypes of representation and of women in video games seen in the conceptual framework are taken into account, such as physical appearance, clothing, and dramatic roles. The second phase shows how situations typical of social problems manifest themselves at specific moments taken from the game.

5. RESULTS

5.1. EMPOWERMENT OF FEMALE CHARACTERS

The empowerment of women in *The Last of Us* saga can be seen in the number of female characters, their roles, and the evolution of both factors between the two installments of the saga and their comparison with their male

counterparts. In the first game there were six men and five women, of which one man (Joel) and two women (Sara, in the prologue, and Ellie, during a segment of the story) were controllable for much of the adventure.

The roles of these characters were similar, regardless of gender. We could find smugglers, both Joel and Bill (men) and Triss (woman), or mere survivors like Ellie or the pair of brothers Sam and Henry. On the other hand, the groups that Joel and Ellie encountered along the way were led by characters of both sexes: Marlene was the leader of the militia known as Los Luciérnagas, while David did the same with a band of cannibals, and the marriage composed by Tommy and Maria was in charge of directing a settlement of survivors.

In *The Last of Us Part II*, the number of characters grows, especially the female ones, and reaches an equality of eight men and eight women. The playable characters also change: Joel is controlled only in the prologue while the female figures of Ellie and Abby are distributed throughout the rest of the story.

In terms of roles, Ellie evolves from a mere survivor to a scout for a community of survivors, a role similar to that of Joel, Dina and Jesse, leader of the scouts. Tommy and Maria maintain their role, while in the military, the leader is the male figure of Isaac. Going down the hierarchy we see that there are both men (Owen and Manny) and women (Abby, Mel, and Nora). The last two carry out sanitary tasks together with the male character of Jerry (surgeon). There are also other roles such as bartender (Seth) and survivors (Lev and Yara). Table 1 shows the relationship of characters and roles in both games:

Table 1

Characters from The Last of Us saga and their dramatic roles

PERSONAJES DE LA SAGA THE LAST OF US			
THE LAST OF US		THE LAST OF US II PARTE II	
Character	Dramatic role	Character	Dramatic role
Joel	Smuggler	Joel	Scout
Sara	Student	Ellie	Scout
Tess	Smuggler	Tommy	Group leader
Ellie	Survivor	María	Group leader
Bill	Smuggler	Dina	Scout
Sam	Survivor	Abby	Soldier
Henry	Survivor	Lev	Survivor
David	Group leader	Manny	Soldier
Marlene	Militia leader	Mel	Doctor / soldier
Tommy	Group leader	Nora	Medical officer/ soldier
María	Group leader	Isaac	Military leader
		Owen	Soldier
		Jesse	Group Leader
		Yara	Survivor
		Jerry	Surgeon
		Seth	Bartender

Apart from seeing women as subjects in the characters of Ellie and Abby, the role of women as sender, triggering the implementation of the male character, is reversed. If in the first game, Sara's death caused Joel to have the personality that he shows with Ellie. In the second, it is the deaths of Joel and Jerry that cause Ellie and Abby respectively to start their path of revenge and change their character.

5.2. THE HOMOSEXUALITY OF ELLIE AND DINA

The Last of Us Part II shows Ellie being openly gay. Through a diary that she writes, it is revealed that she had a partner named Cat. Everyone knew about this relationship except Joel, something that she justifies by writing: "Should I tell him? I don't know. I don't know how he would react." With this simple phrase, *Naughty Dog* reflects in the game the fear that young people have of coming out to their parents. Later, in a flashback, the moment in which Joel discovers Ellie's sexual orientation is seen, when she is kissing another girl at a party and is rebuked during a homophobic attack. He goes out to defend her to later tell her that he supports her sexuality with the phrase "I don't know what that girl's intentions are, but she would be lucky to be with you."

Apart from the main plot of this video game, Ellie's homosexuality and her relationship with Dina is one of the secondary lines that is most relevant. The user contemplates the courtship between two young teenagers from the moment they begin to notice each other until their breakup.

The high point of this relationship occurs midway through the game when it is discovered that they are living together and raising Dina's child, thus addressing the issue of same-sex families. The two protagonists are seen doing

daily activities of domestic life (washing the dishes, hanging out the clothes, playing with the child, looking for food or sleeping together) in the chapter with the most tranquility and peace in the game. There is no action, no enemy attacks, just two women living together.

Realism is also present when it comes to reflecting how they break up their relationship. Ellie is unable to forget that she has a pending revenge on Abby and decides to sacrifice everything she has achieved with Dina to fulfill it. She tries to convince her by crying and saying: "Come on, we have a family. She can't be more important than this." The important thing about this phrase is the word family, a term used regardless of the gender of the components of a family nucleus.

In relation to sexual freedom, it is also possible to find representations of homophobia. In the first minutes it is implied that something has happened in relation to Ellie's sexuality and a party. We witness the comments of one of the survivors of the community (Seth) and the reluctance of the protagonist to accept her apology by stating: "I don't want to know anything about that bigot." Seth's justification is "I think I drank too much last night", an attempt to seek forgiveness by blaming the alcohol and offering him some snacks as compensation. Ellie's response consists of passing the food package to a colleague of hers saying: "For you, bigotry".

It is not until well into the story when, as a flashback, what happened at that party is shown. Ellie and Dina were dancing with their arms around each other in the middle of other couples when they began to kiss, only to be rebuked by Seth a few seconds later, which led to the following conversation:

- Seth: Hey! It's a family party.
- Dina: Sorry. I'm Sorry!

- Seth: Remember there are children present.
- Dina: Not that you're not an example to follow either. (By this time Ellie and Dina are leaving the dance floor)
- Seth: Yes... What the town needs. Another foul-mouthed lesbian.

The conversation is loaded with nuances. On the one hand, the intolerance of seeing two women kissing and understanding it as something that children should not see, lest they imitate it. On the other hand, Dina and Ellie must go if they want to continue together, that is, they must hide. They have two options: control or avoid their feelings because their union is not well seen in public or isolate themselves and keep their relationship secret. Ellie is one of the best trackers and marksmen in the community, however, her skills take a backseat: she is recognized for her sexuality.

5.3. THE RUPTURE OF ABBY'S FEMALE STEREOTYPES

The second main plot has Abby as its protagonist, a character that breaks with the classic representation of women in video games. She physically distances herself from the prototype of a submissive woman. This character has a strong complexion, with developed muscles, an appearance that is the product of the physical evolution that Abby experiences and whose explanation responds to realistic conditions. She has a goal: to take revenge on Joel for the death of her father, and to achieve it, she undergoes physical training for over four years.

Clothing is another point that distances her from the established canons. Both she and all the characters wear clothes according to the circumstances and move away from the idea that women must necessarily wear sensual clo-

thing such as shorts, tight shirts, or short dresses. In Abby's case, she can be seen wearing a tank top on a sunny day or a coat and mountain clothes when it's cold. None of the characters are sexualized. They are independent women each with their own physique and personality.

5.4. LEV AND GENDER IDENTITY

In Abby's story arc we find Lev, presented as a boy with a shaved head, and his adult sister Yara. Both are deserters from the Seraphites group. Along the way, some enemies throw out statements like "That girl is an abomination." It is not until they call him Lily that it is revealed that Lev is actually a girl. When Abby finds out, Lev asks if she wants to ask him something but receives a refusal from her partner. With this, Abby shows that she respects his identity and that he should be the one to tell it when he wants. However, it is Yara who ends up telling the story of Lily/Lev:

- Yara: It took me a long time to understand why he always questioned the laws, the traditions. When he explained to me how he felt inside I told him he had to keep it to himself. I was hoping he would get over it. Afterwards it seemed that he was fine, then he shaved his head, like men. it was a suicide.

- Abby: Did you run away then?

- Yara: At first, I yelled at him. I hit him. I was so stupid.

- Abby: Why do you think he did it? Shave his head.

- Yara: Last week you were assigned your role in the community. He wanted to be a soldier like me. But they decided that he would be the wife of one of the elders. It's tradition.

- Abby: Poor boy.

This conversation reflects situations that must be endured by those who have a gender identity that is far from the norm. The recommendation that his sister gives to Lev is to hide, something that happens in a similar way with homosexuality. Shaving the head is the act of rebellion against the system of the Seraphites. Lily stops accepting it and embraces his real condition, the best way is to pretend that he is a boy not only mentally but also physically. The reason for this action is an arranged marriage. Lily refuses to be a submissive wife and chooses to run away. Finally, Abby accepts Lev's true identity by calling him in masculine terms.

5.5. PRESENT SUBTHEMES

There are also other sub-themes not so present but with conceptual value to be able to consider this game as a paradigmatic example of the ability to represent social issues through triple A titles:

- Maternity. Theme represented in two characters, first in Dina, who confesses to Ellie that she is pregnant but that she never said anything so as not to be considered a burden, which happens. Ellie's reaction, with the expression "But now you are, aren't you?" manifests the practice of seeing women differently simply because they are pregnant. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Dina is a fundamental part of Ellie's mission: she manages to fix a radio and guide her partner. At the same time, *Nau-ghy Dog* shows the theme of single mothers with the fact that Dina, despite not maintaining the relationship with the father of her child, is willing to continue with the pregnancy alone.

While Dina is in the first weeks of her pregnancy, Mel is in an advanced state of pregnancy, but she also presents herself as an independent woman who wants to remain active, doing

raids, doing medical work and, like Dina, she does not have a properly stable relationship. Mel's character is also questioned that she ceases to be an active part:

- Abby: You could stay, they would you let you.

- Mel: I'd rather stop if it's not necessary.

- Abby: What does Owen think?

- Mel: Not that it depended on Owen...

With this last answer it is clear that she decides what to do with her life, regardless of what others think.

- Religious Freedom: Judaism is a religion that has a place in the game. Looking for gas to power a generator, Ellie and Dina arrive at a synagogue and discover that Dina and her family are Jewish. Dina explains aspects of this religion: she talks about the Torah or the Jewish Bible, the importance of praying as a way to calm down and show respect in mourning, as well as the importance of Jewish holidays.

- Ideological and religious extremism: Both of these themes are reflected in the Seraphites, a radical group whose extremism leads them to reject any technology or improvement they cannot obtain from nature. A radicalism applied to the members of the group: those who distance themselves from the traditions or conduct practices that are frowned upon (such as having a homosexual orientation or rejecting an arranged marriage) are punished with death. Extremism reaches such a point that Lev's own mother wanted to kill him for rejecting her (Lily) girlhood. This extremism is justified based on a female figure they call "The Prophet", who is idolized but whose writings and teachings, however, have been distorted by the interests of those who lead the Seraphites. Some

facts are distorted to manipulate a community unaware of the truth.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

From the results obtained, it is clear that the only form of awareness used by *The Last of Us Part II* is through its narrative with the representation of various social problems or discrimination that affect women, either through situations (homophobia or ideological and religious extremism) or their own characters (physical stereotypes, motherhood, or gender identity).

The player is simply relegated to being a passive spectator, since interactivity, a defining and characteristic element of the video game, on this occasion prevents action beyond the established story. The inclusion of playable options such as decision-making to access speeches from different perspectives or the variety of behaviors and reactions would have been interesting. Educational material has also been lacking, apart from occasional conversations between the characters, to delve into social issues. Other factors that promote awareness through the video game, such as online modes or the inclusion of technical advances that involve other senses (Klimmt, 2009), are also not present.

Regarding the importance of videogames in offering solutions (Bogost, 2007), when it comes to dealing with the problems posed, the *Naughty Dog* game not only does not raise them but also offers at certain times a negative message as a response, such as counteracting violence with more violence, flight, or exile in the face of various forms of discrimination.

These lacks of awareness are made up for when it comes to addressing female empowerment with a balanced number of female characters

relative to their male counterparts, as well as the roles they play within the game.

In conclusion, we affirm that *The Last of Us Part II* stands out in a positive way for its representation of female empowerment and social problems, but it does not take advantage of its potential as a video game to raise awareness beyond showing them on the screen.

Its female characters move away from the classic stereotypes of representation based on sexuality and passivity. *Naughty Dog* has created characters that leave aside the objectification of women thanks to factors such as physical appearance, clothing according to the circumstances shown at each point of the adventure and dramatic roles.

We see empowerment especially in the cases of Ellie and Abby, characters controlled by the player and on which the entire plot revolves (woman as subject). Two complex figures far from the role of damsel in distress to star, along with their companions, equally elaborate stories, regardless of opinions or being limited by male characters. Contrary to what happened with Ellie in the first game (Atrium, 2019). Thanks to the situations and dialogues, *Naughty Dog* brings up issues that concern contemporary society. Ellie suffers from the fear of revealing her sexuality to the contempt for her homosexual orientation, because of which she experiences homophobic comments when she is with her partner and must isolate herself from urban centers. The abilities and work of Dina and Mel are undervalued due to their condition as pregnant women to the point of wanting to be separated. Lev suffers the physical and verbal violence of ideological extremism due to his gender identity, for which he is forced to go into exile and live on the run due to misunderstanding of his situation.

The starting hypothesis is verified, and we can say that *The Last of Us Part II* is an example of how video games created by large developers also deal with social issues, empower and express different ideas like *indie* games do. However, the reactions against the actresses who embodied the characters, the boycott of the game's scores and the harassment of its creators (El Diario, 2020) are situations that demonstrate the complicated situation experienced by women in video games, whether character or player, wanting to show an alternative speech. It is also an explanation for the fact that there is

not a similar ratio between triple A games and *indies* that address these issues, beyond economic benefits and sales.

The Last of Us Part II is a starting point in terms of awareness and triple A games. Therefore, it remains for future research if the *Naughty Dog* title is an isolated case or influences future interactive developments.

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Sensitized ludonarratives. Narrative adventures to promote the representation of minority groups

Ludonarrativas concienciadas. Aventuras narrativas para promover la representación de colectivos minoritarios

Ludonarrativas conscientes. Aventuras narrativas para promover a representação de grupos minoritários

6

ARTICLE



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Abstract

Sensitized ludonarratives promote critical thinking in the player through a complex ludonarrative interweaving under the clear concerns of some designers who seek to convey specific values. These ludonarratives germinate in a space where there is no artistic repression by the designer and where the players are especially interested in discovering, listening, and learning through their relationship with the game, specifically in the narrative adventures that have an election and branching design.

KEYWORDS

Video games, Designers, Conscientious, Persuasion, Ludonarrative, LGBTQ.

Resumen

Las ludonarrativas concienciadas promueven en la jugadora el pensamiento crítico y lo hacen por medio de un complejo entretendido lúdico-narrativo bajo las claras inquietudes de unas diseñadoras que buscan transmitir unos valores concretos. Estas ludonarrativas germinan en un espacio donde no existe la represión artística por parte de la diseñadora y donde hay un especial interés de la jugadora

por descubrir, escuchar y aprender a través de su relación con el juego, concretamente en las aventuras narrativas que cuentan con un diseño de elecciones y ramificaciones.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Videojuegos, Diseñadores, Concienciados, Persuasión, Ludonarrativa, LGBTQ.

Resumo

As narrativas lúdicas conscientes promovem o pensamento crítico na jogadora e o fazem por meio de um complexo entrelaçamento lú-

dico-narrativo sob as claras preocupações de algumas designers que buscam transmitir valores específicos. Estas ludonarrativas germinam num espaço onde não há repressão artística por parte da designer e onde há um interesse especial por parte da jogadora em descobrir, ouvir e aprender através da sua relação com o jogo, especificamente nas aventuras narrativas que têm um design de escolhas e ramificações.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Videogames, Designers, Conscientizados, Persuasão, Ludonarrativa, LGBTQ.

1. INTRODUCTION

Video games have dealt with issues like homosexuality before, more or less successfully, mostly from the perspective of a non-playable character (or NPC) and in a humorous or derogatory way. Classic titles such as *Final Fantasy VII* (Squaresoft, 1997) deal superficially with homosexuality and cross-dressing, making the scene in which the hero, Cloud, cross-dress to save Tifa an iconic one. Other more recent works such as *Persona 5* (Atlus, 2016) were partially censored in the west for containing a homophobic scene where two secondary characters constantly harass one of the minor protagonists, which gives them an image of perverts and sexual predators. It is difficult to find in mainstream or commercial video games such as those mentioned a fair representation of minority groups or on issues that may be controversial for today's society, so our study also focuses on video games that could be generally classified as *indie* or independent.

Videogames recognized as *indies* are mainly characterized by distancing themselves from the canons established by the video game industry and it is in this specific framework where conscientious designers can commit to trans-

mitting their values and causes through ludonarrative. Whether for a motivation to change attitudes or to represent minority groups, these titles seek the best formula to persuade the player and invite her to question her environment and her convictions.

To discuss conscientious ludonarratives, we first need to define the independent video game to later outline queer and persuasive games, which we can understand as a kind of subgenre linked to the first. Instead, our interest lies in knowing the aims and motivations of the work and the designer with the player and not so much in developing a taxonomy as authors such as Bogost (2007) or Pérez-Latorre (2016) have already done.

2. METHODOLOGY

For this study we use a multidisciplinary methodology that addresses the complex nature of the video game medium based on the concept of directed freedom deployed by Navarro-Remesal (2016) who defends that every game is articulated by margins and limits capable of leading the player towards the obligation or prohibition. We also consider the approach of

Planells (2015) to the ludofictional worlds understood as autonomous spaces that move away from the traditional story and are designed to welcome the player, and her behavior. We complement this theory of possible worlds with the mechanisms of construction of meaning that emerge from the relationship between the system and the player and that constitute a language of its own in video game design (Pérez-Latorre, 2012). To these theoretical bases of game studies, we add the design model of choices and ramifications (Fernández-Vara, 2020) to be able to analyze particularly the narrative design and the game design of videoludic works recognized as narrative adventures that are characterized by having a design of decisions through dialogue or the actions of the player.

In turn, we start from the definitions and characteristics of the independent and persuasive video game (Bogost, 2007; Pérez-Latorre, 2016) that help us understand *queer games and persuasive games* and analyze our case studies from a gender perspective (Cabañas, 2015; González-Sánchez, 2018). We complement this vision of game studies by taking into consideration the term of conscientious designers (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014) that help us build the best approximation of conscientious ludonarratives.

In order to approach them, we use three graphic adventures from the developer DONTNOD as case studies: *Life is Strange 2* (2018), *Tell Me Why* (2020), *Twin Mirror* (2020) and the work of Vanilleware, half path between the visual novel and the real-time strategy game *13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim* (2020). We start from the hypothesis that in all videogames the designers have the ability to persuade the player in a more or less conscious way due to the fact that, in addition to making use of their own tools, they inherit and update playful elements from other ex-

pressive media, narrative, performative, sound and visual (Martín-Núñez & Navarro-Remesal, 2021, p. 8).

To demonstrate our hypothesis, we analyze the four case studies based on tools for textual and ludonarrative analysis (Fernández-Vara, 2015; Navarro-Remesal, 2016), which we complement with the game testing technique, understood as the process of playing a videoludic work multiple times with the particular purpose of testing and analyzing the different ways in which a game can develop. Although this technique allows us to experience the game in first person, it has not always been possible to make all the branches without the system forcing you to start the game from the beginning. Therefore, it has been necessary to make up for these limitations with the non-participant observation of subjects who share their gameplays on platforms such as YouTube or Twitch. In this way, it has been feasible to contemplate the different options available to the player in each of the four video games under study.

3. RESULTS

3.1. PERSUASION THROUGH VIDEO GAMES

We are interested in whether a video game is *indie* because of its originality and transgression with respect to the canons established by the video game industry and because of its claims to generate coherence between game design and other aspects such as the psychology of a character and his relationship with the ludofictional world (Pérez-Latorre, 2016, page 24). It is not that these video games seek to differentiate themselves from each other by competing in a market, but that there is no type of self-censorship or institutional pressure and where the designers can “[...] explore more sensitive

issues such as rape, racism, incest, cancer, depression, transsexuality, etc.” (Trépanier-Jobin, 2016, p. 117). The authors should see the video game as a place of expression where they can feel involved on an emotional and ideological level (Pérez-Latorre, 2016, p. 19) without fear of controversy.

When in a video game there is a designer’s predisposition to alter or change the player’s attitude, we could recognize it as a persuasive game (Bogost, 2007). These titles convey messages “[...] under the pretext of generating arguments, showing them different points of view, making them change their beliefs or behaviors” (2007, p. ix). A video game can persuade the player through argumentation, whether through processes, procedural rhetoric, words, verbal rhetoric, images, or visual rhetoric. A video game can persuade through ludonarrative understood as the combination of three levels that give meaning to the game: the purely playful or normative, the one that combines narratives and the one that houses the chain of events that defines the gameplay. (Klevjer, 2001). In other words, the three layers that make up the ludonarrative are regulations, fiction, and story (Navarro-Remesal, 2015) and, therefore, persuasion can occur in any of them.

The ludic-narrative dynamics that participate in the persuasion process can be multiple and are closely linked to the genre to which the title belongs. A narrative adventure like *Twin Mirror* (DONTNOD, 2020) uses the mechanics that make up the decision-making system (rules) to support the construction of characters and locations (narremes) and enhance the plot that gives meaning to the game (story). In the design of ramifications, “the changes in the state of the system are integrated with the story that is to

be communicated” (Fernández-Vara, 2020, p. 66) and offers the player an apparent freedom that is still an illusion that the designer conscientiously builds to limit possible paths. That range “between power and impotence, between obligation and prohibition or penalty” (Navarro-Remesal, 2016, p. 319) is what we know as directed freedom and is present in every video game, even in narrative adventures where the design of choices acts as the axis of ludonarrative discourse. In the end, beyond providing the player with a large number of possibilities (banal on many occasions), the designer chooses to create a series of significant options that affect the story and where the consequences are important and observable by the player. player (Fernández-Vara, 2020, p. 67).

Twin Mirror talks about bipolar disorder and does it through a detective adventure. The game shows how people who, like Sam Higgs, suffer from this mental illness are able to live with it. The player becomes a part of this social taboo during the brief playthrough of the game and witnesses how his mind works. Bipolarity is represented by a second avatar for the same character, whose opinion always differs from the first, gives advice and sometimes acts as an assistant to the protagonist and others as an obstacle (Figure 1). The player, whom we consider a moral agent who responds to ethical reasoning (Sicart, 2009), is the one who must decide Sam’s action and dialogue, accept the consequences of his choices and “[...] apply moral strategies in his gaming experience” (2009, p. 48). *Twin Mirror* gives voice to bipolar disorder, but not only as a problem but as a characteristic of the character, which makes it unique.

Figure 1

The decisions that affect the story are graphically represented with the two versions of the protagonist: one, more rational, and the other, more impulsive.



Nota: Gameplay of Twin Mirror in its version for PlayStation 4.

When the player accesses Sam's mental palace, perceives his world as a labyrinth that builds as he goes along, running through multiple paths, most of which have no exit or end up unifying in a single final square. These labyrinths of memories that help the player to recompose the story like a puzzle (Fernández-Vara, 2020, p. 71) is also a representation of how these limitations work in the video game that always leads the player to a single square of Exit. It is that "[...] promise of freedom, this labyrinth of life in which supposedly every path is eligible, the favorite playful form of the current mainstream video game" (Planells, 2021, p. 1082) and the ideal space for designers transmit values to the player to change the world.

3.2. IDENTITY THROUGH VIDEO GAMES

By *queer game* we understand any video game where the leading role falls on the experiences lived by one or more LGBTQ characters and these, in addition, are usually produced by designers from the group itself (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 3885) and, as we defend in this article, by conscientious designers. These titles seek "[...] the questioning of disciplines as they are known to date, for the sake of greater inclusiveness and the offering of different versions

of the same reality, to provide the interlocutor with the ability to decide for himself" (González-Sánchez, 2018, p. 369). Although there are more commercial video games with LGBTQ characters and that may be motivated to make the collective visible, "[...] *queer games* with queer stories can explore the lives of LGBTQ people in ways that incidental representation cannot" (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p.3885).

The presence of the *queer game* subgenre or label is important since most of the representations of the group in commercial titles usually fall on NPCs (characters not controllable by the player) and it is difficult to do so explicitly. The player usually suspects the sexual orientation of a character because of the dialogues, or it is revealed by meeting specific requirements or conditions in the game (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 3880). We cannot deny that, although few, there are recognized titles from large companies that risk making the collective visible, such as *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020). In contrast, mainstream games do not usually explicitly define the sexuality of queer characters. Moreover, the very process of confirming the sexuality of a character, whether the protagonist or not, is often controversial (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 3880).

Tell Me Why (DONTNOD, 2020) fulfills the characteristics of *queer games* by treating transsexuality and homosexuality and inviting the player to broaden his perception of these in today's society. Tyler Ronan is the protagonist of this narrative adventure with decision-making and is the essential vehicle for the player to learn and understand what transsexuality is and that there is no relationship with sexual orientation.

In *Tell Me Why*, the player is offered the freedom to have or not have a partner since his incarnation as Tyler (Figure 2). However, since it is

a short game (compared to the main titles of this company) there are hardly any alternatives. However, the effort of the conscientious designers in this title does not consist so much in delving into the interpersonal relationships of our avatars but in transmitting the values in a conscious, responsible way and from the greatest possible knowledge.

Figure 2

As Tyler, we can decide whether to become intimate with another character of our same gender or, otherwise, refuse on the pretext of continuing to discover our sexual orientation.



Note: Tell Me Why gameplay in its version for STEAM.

In *Life is Strange 2* (DONTNOD, 2018) the player is part of a ludofictional world starring racism and accentuated by government injustices against the minorities of a country. As it happens in other titles of the franchise, the player endows the main character or the closest NPC (in this case in the younger brother: Daniel Díaz) with a supernatural power that he has to learn to control and that implies a responsibility. However, the telekinesis of the little brother is not enough power to escape the injustice they find in the way of escape.

If *Life is Strange 2* can also be labeled as a *queer game*, it is because of the efforts of its designers to talk about sexuality during the third chapter of this episodic title. Sean Díaz reflects not only on his sexual orientation but also on how his fellow campers experience sex and sexuality. On the one hand, Sean's sexual orientation is left up to the player (Figure 3) who can even decide (only if he chooses the heterosexual relationship) to lose his virginity to Cassidy. The player is also given the option of not being intimate with either of them and leaving the protagonist's sexual orientation in the background. On the other hand, player and avatar discover how for Finn and Hannah, secondary characters who live with them in the camp, sex can be casual and unrelated to love or commitment.

Figure 3

The game asks the player about Sean's sexual orientation only if he has previously made specific decisions.



Nota: Gameplay de Life is Strange 2 en su versión para PlayStation 4.

Whichever path the player takes, these decisions do not affect the course of the plot and are an invitation to discover and experience, through the avatar, sexualities different from their own. After all, as Cabañes points out, “video games have great potential as a laboratory for sexual experimentation, since they can allow us to explore other types of sexuality that in real life are either complicated or directly impossible to experience” (2015, p. 46).

13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim (Vanilleware, 2019), on the other hand, helps us exemplify how a non-queer video game tries to represent the collective in its ludofictional world. It is a difficult title to classify due to its hybridization of genres (visual novel and real-time strategy) where the narrative component predominates, and which is interesting for this investigation due to its at-

tempt to represent a non-binary romance between two protagonists. The visual novel genre is characterized by being considered a derivative of manga where “reading is the main pillar of the work and the player’s decisions determine the progress of the story” (Navarro-Remesal & Loriguillo-López, 2015, p. 10).

In *13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim* the player controls a total of thirteen protagonists who come from different eras and whose stories unfold little by little. Takatoshi Hijiya is a character who comes from Japan in 1940 and who is in love with a girl who introduces herself with the name Kiriko. Hijiya finds out that Kiriko is actually a man and is called Tusaka Okino. Far from feeling rejection, Hijiya continues to feel attracted to him, although he resists desire by taking advantage of an internalized homophobia rooted in his time.

Okino appears throughout the romance story with or without a wig (Figure 4) and Hijiya continues to be apparently interested, regardless of his physical appearance. Through the character’s actions and dialogue, the player understands that Hijiya is not a homosexual character (he is attracted to other girls at school) and is unable to define or label his relationship with Okino. While, in general, the rest of the main cast concludes their adventure with a heterosexual relationship with a happy ending, the romance between Hijiya and Okino requires an interpretation on the part of the player that is overshadowed by the predominance of heterosexual representation and the traditional concept of romance, and of sex, as an exclusive act for the reproduction of the human being.

Figure 4

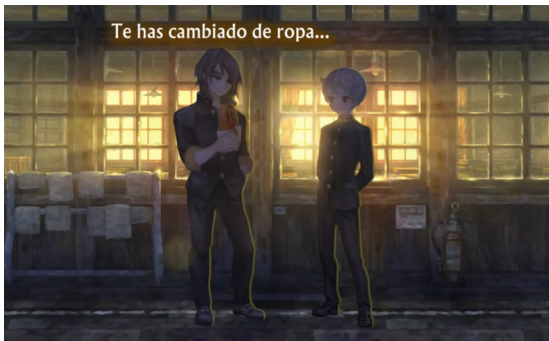
Hijiyama becomes jealous when he sees another boy take notice of Kiriko, aware of his real identity.



Note: Gameplay of 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim in its version for PlayStation 4.

Figure 5

Hijiyama loses some interest when he sees Okino without a wig and without a skirt but finds that his attraction to him remains.



Note: Gameplay of 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim in its version for PlayStation 4.

3.3. THE CONSCIOUS DESIGNER

Whether in an independent or mainstream market, or particularly a *queer* or persuasive game, conscientious designers are characterized by trying to create new and better games considering the values of society and questioning how to apply them in practices to improve the world (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014). Conscientious designers work within a framework of fifteen elements that together constitute the semantic architecture of a video game. In other words, they must be aware of the entire complex ludonarrative system of the video game, and they must try to work on the semantic architecture so that the persuasive act towards the player

is effective. This semantic architecture is composed, according to Flanagan and Nissenbaum, by a total of fifteen components and through the combination of these the conscientious designer generates meanings (Table 1).

Table 1

Summary of the semantic architecture proposed by Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014, pp. 35-71).

SEMANTIC ARCHITECTURE		
1.	Narrative, premise, and objectives	Narrative is an optimal place to introduce content, motivation, and value-rich contexts.
2.	Characters	The character's relationship with the player generates emotional responses.
3.	Actions in the game	The maneuvers that the player can do in the game beyond the common actions depending on the genre.
4.	Decision framework	Through decisions the player explores ethical questions and experiences their consequences without affecting his real world.
5.	Rules of interaction with other players and characters	Relationships with other NPCs or players put into play values such as cooperation or generosity and, competition or self-sufficiency.
6.	Rules of interaction with the stage	The player can be rewarded or punished for exploring the stage, destroying it or building it, depleting it or nourishing it with resources.
7.	Point of view	The perspective and the incarnation in a specific avatar can determine how the player perceives his role in the gaming world and with the rest of the elements that make up the game.
8.	Hardware	The memory capacity, the graphics processing speed or the physical controllers (mouse, keyboard, gamepad) define the possibilities of the designers in the game.

9.	Interface	The mediation of hardware and software attributes with the player.
10.	Game engine and software	The engine of a game, its physics, collision detection, etc. It facilitates or hinders the designer's expression of certain values.
11.	Game context	The video game genre brings with it its own context. An MMORPG with voice or text chat may convey erroneous values not controlled by the designer.
12.	Rewards and scores	The reward structure defines what kind of achievements are valued in the game and can be an interesting element for designers to consider.
13.	Strategies	Similar to rewards. You can convey values to the player to motivate him to use a particular style of play for a purpose.
14.	Game maps	The player's interaction in the space (alone or with other players) defined by a map layout is affected by the actual limitations of the map; certain values can be prohibited.
15.	Aesthetics	Aesthetics, although subjective, expresses values. Work alongside narrative, mechanics, etc. to instill values and meanings.

For a conscientious designer, each of these elements is present during the creation process with the definite desire to change the vision of players on a subject, to expand or correct their knowledge or make them aware of their position in the real world. It is for all the above that we believe that behind the four case studies there is a development team made up, if not entirely, partially, of conscientious designers.

4. DISCUSSIONS

Considering that there are clear motivations of the designers behind these four case studies to persuade the player, we consider that their playful narratives are conscientious. Through the rules, fiction, and story, the four games make the player feel aware of something.

We confirm that *Twin Mirror* stands out for its in-game actions (specifically, its significant mechanics) that deviate slightly from what the player is used to experiencing in a narrative decision-making adventure. We understand that significant mechanics are all those that are intricately linked to the narrative and that seek to be relevant and give credibility to the story (Martín-Núñez & Planes-Cortell, 2015, p. 59). In

this case, Sam's mental capacities give the player the possibility of recreating a car accident or a murder, making him feel part of a criminal investigation (Figure 6). The player reconstructs each phase of a scene as a puzzle in which he can get it wrong without penalty until he gets the right answer. *Twin Mirror* rewards patience and, in turn, trains the player for the outcome when he must face the real moral dilemmas, which are those that alternate the story and whose consequences are not clear because "none of the options has an optimal solution, and each advantage has its drawback" (Fernández-Vara, 2020, p. 70).

Figure 6

Moment when Sam calculates all the possibilities in his mental palace, the player can validate the hypothesis. If he makes a mistake, he can rectify without penalty.



Note: Gameplay of Twin Mirror in its version for PlayStation 4.

If the ludonarratives of *Twin Mirror* are aware, it is mainly because of its significant mechanics, which stands out within its genre, as well as because of the aesthetics that characterize it during Sam's mental recreations. By means of polygonal and colorless graphics, the layer that alludes to the unreality built by his mind on top of the real one is distinguished, always within the ludofictional world presented.

Tell Me Why, in addition to relying on its own mechanics, stands out for educating about transsexuality through one of its protagonists, Tyler Ronan. The player not only has the point of view of a transgender character, but also

takes control of his twin sister, Alysson. Instead, two perspectives entail two different versions of his memories of his childhood (Figure 7). Taking one of them as true becomes an ethical dilemma for the player and that internal debate evidences the persuasion through the characters where emotional empathy comes into play accentuated by a design of ramifications (Porta-Pérez, 2021, pp. 1192-1193). These conscientious ludonarratives make the player feel part of the story and make an effort to understand them, even in relation to the sexual identity displayed in the title.

Figure 7

The player's dilemma in taking one version of the past as true is heightened by the emotional empathy with the story and the characters.



Note: Tell Me Why gameplay in its version for STEAM.

Beyond the efforts of its designers to broaden the perspective on sexuality in *Life is Strange 2*, the player starts from a narrative premise where values are presented that seek to fight against racism. Just as in *Tell Me Why*, the player manages a transgender character to learn about transsexuality first-hand, in *Life is Strange 2*, the player is embodied in a teenager who is the victim of different racist misunderstandings. Sean and Daniel are forced to run away from home due to an unfortunate accident and during their flight to Puerto Lobos, a fictional city in Mexico. They discover how society rejects them or judges them based on their appearance. The ludofictional world displayed

in the game is perceived as a mirror of current society, particularly the United States, and this similarity facilitates the player's empathy with the characters.

The conscientious ludonarratives in *Life is Strange 2* are also perceived in the educational process that the player must develop with the younger brother, Daniel. This teaching of values can occur directly (through dialogues and choices) or indirectly (through the actions conducted by the player and his way of interacting with the game map or with other NPCs) and the result is reflected in the medium and long term. You can rectify behaviors if you perceive that you are not acting correctly. This responsibility accompanies the player throughout the game and the result directly affects the outcome of the adventure, since the last decision will not only be made by the player, but also by Daniel Díaz (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Daniel may or may not agree with the decision made by his older brother but depending on the education that we have transmitted to him, he reacts in one way or another.



Note: Gameplay of Life is Strange 2 in its version for PlayStation 4.

Finally, in *13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim*, the conscientious narratives unfold in its two ludic-narrative blocks: side-scrolling adventure chapters (where the narrative aspect stands out) and real-time strategy battle chapters (where the playful aspect predominates). In order to unlock these chapters, the player must meet certain requirements imposed by the designer so that he does not leave either of the two blocks aside due to lack of interest. In other words, the player accepts that in order to enjoy all the adventure chapters must first invest time in winning battles. In turn, being victorious in combat by meeting specific requirements (carrying a specific character, not using robots from a generation, etc.) grants points that can be redeemed to unlock additional content such as conceptual art or files that complement the story. Although it fulfills the objective of motivating the player to complete the story, this reward structure does not focus on motivating values and attitudes in the game as proposed by Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014, pp. 63-65).

On the other hand, the manga aesthetic that characterizes the visual novel genre and that *13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim* has, transmits values that the western public perceives, in general, in all Japanese video games. According to Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López, the three main axes of this type of video game are character design, game design and the animation of cinematographic sequences, with the possible addition of issues of gender, identity, and sexism (2015, p.8). Therefore, although the non-binary relationship between Hijiyama and Okino is not fully evident (just as *Tell Me Why* does with transsexuality), the aesthetics of the visual novel becomes an essential bridge between the designer and the player; a dialogue where ideas and values are raised, but whose acceptance or assimilation depends solely on the self-reflection of each of the parties.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The conscientious ludonarratives arise from the intention of the designer to promote a change in society in general and in the player in particular through values that adhere to the semantic architecture of video games. The four case studies display a space to encourage critical thinking, as we have seen, through the characters, mechanics, decision frameworks or aesthetics, to name a few. With this article we do not intend to isolate video games developed with these characteristics from the rest, nor is it about labeling a title for its persuasive intention or for representing a minority group. Through our definition of conscientious ludonarrative, we seek to make visible the possibilities of the game to improve the world in which we live, so that both the designer and the player are aware of the power of video games to dialogue about ideas and values, reflect, discuss and improve as individuals and as a society.

A ludonarrative is made aware when there is an intention on the part of the designer to persuade the player, transmit values, represent vulnerable and minority groups, and also to show social problems without fear of controversy. The designer must feel emotionally involved in the game and be able to talk about sensitive issues without the social and political pressure of his environment or country, in addition to having at his disposal the ludic and narrative tools that generate meaning for the effective transmission of ideas and values.

Even with all the training of the designer and the predisposition to build conscientious playful narratives, to improve the world it is important that, as in any dialogue, the players are open to listening, changing, or reinforcing their opinion and, finally, to transmit and apply those values beyond the ludofictional world.

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Flash, Newgrounds and the convergence between the story of the Internet and video games

Flash, Newgrounds y la confluencia entre la historia de Internet y el videojuego

Flash, Newgrounds e a convergência entre a história da Internet e os videogames

7

ARTICLE



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Abstract

The emergence of the Internet in the 2000s brought artistic movements and the generation, distribution, and reception of works that were isolated in the virtual sphere but ended up fundamentally influencing the configuration of popular culture. A key element of this process was the Flash editing program, responsible for providing consistency and stability to most of the web pages of this era. This article will analyze the relationship between the most dynamic communities and this program, paying special attention to the purely interactive

and, by extension, videoludic character that it has fostered over the years, and its future prospects.

KEYWORDS

Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Game Studies, Genealogy, Art History.

Resumen

La eclosión de Internet en los 2000 trajo consigo movimientos artísticos la generación, distribución y recepción de cuyas obras quedaron aisladas al ámbito virtual, pero acabó influyendo de forma fundamental en la configuración

de la cultura popular. Un elemento clave de este proceso fue el programa de edición Flash, responsable de dotar de consistencia y estabilidad a la mayor parte de las páginas web de esta época. Este artículo analizará la relación entre las comunidades más dinámicas y este programa, prestando especial atención al carácter netamente interactivo y, por extensión, videolúdico que ha fomentado con los años, y sus perspectivas de futuro.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Estudios Culturales, Media Studies, Game Studies, Genealogía, Historia del Arte.

Resumo

A expansão da internet nos anos 2000 trouxe consigo movimentos artísticos cuja geração,

distribuição e recepção de obras permaneceram isoladas da esfera virtual, mas acabaram influenciando fundamentalmente a configuração da cultura popular. Um elemento-chave desse processo foi o programa de edição Flash, responsável por fornecer consistência e estabilidade à maioria das páginas web dessa época. Este artigo analisa a relação entre as comunidades mais dinâmicas e este programa, dando especial atenção ao carácter puramente interativo e, por extensão, videolúdico que tem vindo a fomentar ao longo dos anos, e as suas perspectivas futuras.

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1. RESISTANCE TO ANIMALIZATION ON THE INTERNET: TOWARDS A RETURN OF THE GREAT NARRATIVES

The 2000s were a turning point in the field of social and cultural studies, as they were a testing ground for many political theories and practices that predicted the end of history and the entry of human beings into an era without narratives. With the global impulse of capitalism at the end of the century, the end of the Cold War and the unification of several monetary currencies, it seemed that the cultural reality of the nineties pointed towards an intensification of the hegemonic processes that the political and economic convulsions of the Eighties materialized. However, certain major political events such as the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001

or the Atocha metro attack in 2004 and some natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Haiti earthquake in 2010 and the Tohoku tsunami in 2011, have led to a “renarrativization” of political and social life that collides diametrically with ahistorical interpretations of the period. Whether through a resurgence of earlier political formulations like Marxism and anarchism (because of the increase in the number of people who identify with them) or through the rise of radicalisms that caused the rise of fascism in the 20th century, we are living a period in which our priority is to direct our activity and existence towards the achievement of defined political projects.

This evolution of thought among youth can be seen especially in the behavior of various consumer groups and enthusiasts of mass culture such as that from Japan and that of video

games, which during their rise in the eighties and nineties were tended to point out as an exemplary prototype of the historic drift that societies took. Whether it was through a highly optimistic and somewhat naive study of the subversive potential of these fan communities (Jenkins, 2010), or through a more pessimistic vision that stressed the inevitable transformation of these groups into “animals” that collect databases (Azuma, 2009). The interpretation of some differentiated researchers exhibits a vision of the world in which great narratives have disappeared, and cultural signifiers have been emptied.

However, what the increasingly pronounced rise of online communities in the 2000s has come to show is that, far from fully immersing themselves in this trend, today's consumers continue to participate in totalizing narrative frameworks and saturating cultural signs with specific meanings of their personal and community practices. Broadly reflecting the same fragmented trends as fans of previous decades, fans of shows as varied as *Steven Universe* (Lelash et al., 2013-2019), *Sherlock* (Eaton et al., 2010-2017), *Hannibal* (Alexander et al. al., 2013-2015) and the animated film *The Lorax* (Renaud, 2012) generate a seemingly endless stream of alternative interpretations, build their own narratives, and configure their identity in real time. At the same time, the mainstream of these communities lacks much of the subversive potential that Jenkins interpreted during his fieldwork. Instead, they are more interested in extolling their consumer objects, and on many occasions, they are enthusiastic participants in the marketing campaigns on which many of their works are based (Aquila, 2007). Although these activities continue to promote a culture

of participation, their efforts and impulses are being channeled more or less directly through margins of action that easily fall under the umbrella of “participatory propaganda” described by Asmolov (2019).

2. INTERNET AND SUBCULTURAL COMMUNITIES: CREATION OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES THROUGH CONSUMPTION AND RESIGNIFICATION OF SYMBOLS

In short, what the last two decades have come to show, in the face of our way of interpreting culture based on the rise of digital media, is that a good chunk of the predictions made by proponents of the “end of history” have been severely invalidated by historical drifts that point towards an intensification of processes that were considered outdated. Now, this does not mean that a significant portion of the observations made by these researchers have become unusable. The notes made by Azuma around the increasingly accelerated atomization of man's social behavior (which he locates in the figure of the *otaku* and which he suspects will end up affecting the rest of humanity) help explain the immobility that grips many current groups. But in the particular case of popular culture, and especially in the one that concerns us now, it is interesting to see how what seemed like relatively safe predictions have gone in completely unexpected directions.

It is convenient that Hiroki Azuma decides to finish his work on human behavior using a video game as an example (2009, pp. 107-111). Although this author uses the word *otaku* to refer indistinctly to both consumers of anime and manga and consumers of modeling figures and video games, his characterization of the visual novel *Yu-No* (Kanno, 1996) defines an important part of postmodern aesthetics since it prioritizes the selective ordering of narrative and metanarrative elements of a work towards those that are most rewarding. This vision of the act of play is echoed in numerous play design theories and particularly around the study of hypertext carried out by Espen Aarseth in his formative *Cybertext* (1997). Although the subsequent works of the Danish researcher have tried to broaden the umbrella of its application to playful formulas that do not depend on digital platforms, his initial conceptualization of the virtual text as structured in a labyrinthine way (or ergodic, as he himself calls it) reflects the moment, according to Azuma, of the evolution in *otaku* consumption when narrative consumption begins to be replaced by animalistic consumption. That is, a point where the act of consumption is oriented exclusively towards simulacra and not towards narratives (2009, pp. 28-30). A few years later, Aarseth would expand many of the concepts of his original work and would suggest that the primary impulse that guides the players throughout the game constitutes a delicate balance between epiphany and aporia (1999, p. 45): a constant encounter of seemingly indecipherable paradoxes that, when resolved, grant the

player an instant gratification that entices them to continue playing until the next obstacle. Under this descriptive umbrella, the player subject as defined by Aarseth is assumed to have a minimal agency, orients his consumption exclusively towards the elements that generate more emotional or playful affectivity, and remains indebted to the potentialities that the machine can offer. This brings him closer to as defined by Aarseth is who consumes exclusively to find the images that generate *moe* (using terminology typical of the *otaku* subculture) in him. In the *Yu-No* example, we have these two types of individuals (Azuma's animal *otaku* and Aarseth's ergodic gamer) converging into a single figure. Both profiles share the same preferences and desires to order their reading according to personal taste, requires the visual to specifically lend itself to fulfill. And both profiles consume these works preferably for playful pleasure or for the feeling of *moe*.

However, even in the specific case of this work, there are design limitations that guide its range of interpretations towards specific results. Many of these results will be given by the type of implicit player that the designer assumes when configuring the code, derived largely from the communicative framework that the sociocultural context of consumers help to establish. Although it is possible, as Aarseth has continued to do in later years, to continue describing video games as "sign machines" (2001), the meaning that these texts generate ultimately depends on the tools that consumers have when negotiating whatever they extract from

them. What's more, the reverential and ultimately hierarchical treatment that fan communities impose on the consumption of these texts plays a fundamental role in explaining which interpretations achieve normative status and which are relegated as deviations or "perversions" of the primary text.

It is in this context that we must examine the apparently vast phenomenon of Internet fan communities, which began to emerge in the late 1990s and ended up taking over most of the virtual spaces in the 2000s. Although today it is difficult to trace their origin, their popularity is usually located at an indeterminate point between 2000 and 2004, which coincides with the popularization of the Internet in several homes in Spain (Barroso et al., 2018), the United States (Naughton, 2016) and Japan (Aizu, 1998). In the beginning, most of these spaces were exchange spaces where anonymous users shared impressions through paragraphs of text and images, but very soon, they gave way to greater diversity. Among the most popular tools on this platform, Flash stood out especially for its ubiquity. At one point, its presence was critical to the proper functioning of most of the Internet. Among other things, Flash supported the first iteration of YouTube (Warren, 2012) and at one point, it was the backbone of the first online marketing strategies. However, today Flash has achieved notoriety among advertisers and community managers as an unpredictable and unsafe tool, if not completely out of date (Barsby, 2015). The lack of trust directed towards this graphic engine by large companies was

evidenced in the 2010s with significant events, such as it being blocked by devices such as the iPad (Jobs, 2010) and browsers like Firefox.

Despite the progressive lack of support from some companies, Flash has persisted as a useful tool for independent artists and authors who have continued to use it for aesthetic or pragmatic purposes. The argument used by renowned authors of the scene, such as Brad Borne (2019), reveals an ambivalent attitude that recognizes the inherent limitations of the engine but also the advantages it offered when it came to allowing a conjunction of plastic and playful expression, especially useful for the educational environment of the Internet. Applying a phenomenological approach to Flash and the platforms it supports, it is possible to categorize it as a system of expression similar to that of traditional animation. In his analysis of the aesthetic peculiarities of this medium, Thomas Lamarre catalogs the composition and the multiplanar image as essential components of the medium's generation of meaning (2009, p. 26). Under this prism, the change that this technology generates in our perception is one in which perception of depth and the sensation of speed are replaced by an aesthetic in which attention is directed to the mediation between the figures, the background, and the space between animation frames.

Although it might seem that this aesthetic sensation fosters a visual paradigm similar to that of surrealist or impressionist painting, its particularity does not rest exclusively in the arrangement of the forms or their chromatic relationship, but in the interaction that these forms experience when they appear to move through a flat space that simulates a three-dimensional environment. This is what makes Flash games stand out. The first animations made with the program allowed limited mobility that required dividing the figures into many separate components to which specific programming routines had to be assigned. This phenomenon is similar to what was allowed at the time by web generation tools such as Dreamweaver. In addition to helping share content that combined image, text, and sound into a single text, it also reflected the mainstream aesthetic that most of the Internet promoted at the time: one where the illusion of movement and vivid imagery was treated as the future to be achieved. Although its use became omnipresent, the place where it was most encouraged was on corporate pages designed to promote films and products derived from the cultural industry, such as trailers and animation series. Some of the most successful cases of Flash animation applied to corporate strategies include the Warner Brothers initiative to create “digital” series around characters from DC comics, specifically around their heroines (Rosenberg & Stein, 2000-2002). This production was developed to serve as a spin-off to the television animation series of the moment. In addition to having the original voice cast, the insistence on respecting the visual style of the original team is contrasted with the rigid and abrupt animation used by Noodle

Soup Productions, which they would explore in greater detail with later series such as *Venture Bros* (Crofford et al., 2003-2018).

The style of rigid, abrupt and unpredictable movement that series like *Venture Bros* and *Metalocalypse* (Blacha et al., 2006-2012) has become popular among American adult audiences as a consequence of the type of entertainment that *Newgrounds*, *Kongregate* and online exchange spaces helped build in the late 1990s. A pioneering case is *Homestar Runner* (Chapman & Chapman, 2000-present), an animated series characterized by its unpredictable humor and swift changes in tone. This style of comedy could also be found among independent internet animation like the short story anthology *Salad Fingers* (Firth, 2004-2019) and the satirical fantasy series *Charlie The Unicorn* (Steele, 2005-2021). Less marginally popular are parody animations of popular video game franchises, such as *Black Mages* (Roszak, 2004), *Rise of the Mushroom Kingdom* (Solem, 2003), and *Mario Brothers* (Leon, 2003-2006). Although the content of these stories varied in production values, their common denominator tends to be located around the recycling of known works (mostly from the gaming medium) and endowing them with an internal coherence and style that followed a specific vision of the author. The similarities between this scene and other concurrent ones such as the webcomic (which also tended towards indiscriminate recycling of characters and scenes from other video game) and the *machinima* (Lowood & Nitsche, 2003) show that it was not an isolated event and that obeyed a general tendency. However, it is possible to retract the practices of these communi-

ties to those of previous decades that were also organized around the consumption and generation of fan works, such as those described by Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* (2010, pp. 155-159) and by Sharon Kinsella in *Adult Manga* (2000, pp. 108-112). All these examples have in common a predilection or deference for works from consolidated cultural industries, engagement during the act of consumption and the creation of their own spaces that owe their existence to these primary texts and that, despite everything, acquire values of their own. In short, they are a faithful reflection of the *otaku* trends pointed out by Azuma Hiroki of selective consumption and capricious rearrangement of texts but establishing along the way a hierarchy of preferences that maintains an active negotiation of the best valued texts.

Where this desire to approach the aesthetic and structural preferences of the works that have seen them born can best be verified is in Flash animations that deliberately try to recreate interactive experiences. Although this tool was not initially designed to support video games, its original rudimentary programming language allowed components to be provided with basic artificial intelligence. Many times, however, that A.I. was limited to basic path-finding and small alterations to of the object's elements. These are some of the main reasons why the first popular games tended to require very little player input and were limited to genres with very basic control schemes. In *Newgrounds*, *AEvil* (Larz, 2000) is pointed out as the game that made shooting galleries fashionable, from which works such as *Bush Shoot-Out* (Mini-clip, 2007) and *Matanza Cofrade* (J.C.C.S., 2002)

would emerge. On the other hand, *Mystery of Time and Space* (Albartus, 2001) is usually considered the starting point for the game genre that consists of escaping from a room full of puzzles to be solved.

By the middle of the decade, the updates made to the programming language were significant enough to allow a greater variety of games, especially those oriented towards combat systems. Some pioneering examples of this new wave are *Alien Hominid* (Fulp & Paladin, 2002), *Fancy Pants Adventure* (Borne, 2006), *The Big Adventure of Owata's Life* (King Soukututu, 2007) and *Meat Boy* (McMillen & Refenes, 2008). This era also saw the birth of games capable of imitating popular works such as *Final Fantasy IV* (Sakaguchi, 1991) and *The Legend of Zelda* (Tezuka, 1992), but due to inherent limitations tended to establish themselves as parodies of those works, such as *Epic Battle Fantasy* (Roszak, 2009).

3. EXPLOSION OF CONTENT, ENTRY INTO THE MAINSTREAM AND FORMALIZATION OF COMMUNITIES

Until the late 2000s, the prevailing attitude of communities like *Newgrounds*, *Kongregate*, and *Armor Games* used to favor small, self-referential works, whose influence rarely transcended the communities that saw them flourish. This reality has been maintained to a certain extent today but has undergone substantial changes that are due to both technical and social factors. On the one hand, it is important to point

out the gradual abandonment by various users of the Flash graphics engine, which despite continuing to be updated and expanded, remained behind programming languages like HTML5. Adding to the constant criticism of the program were its rejection and subsequent blocking by the dominant platforms, including the company that supported it in the first place. As noted in the introductory session, Flash has been heavily criticized by all manner of developers and its ubiquity throughout the early Internet was always a major sticking point for users who wanted a more expressive tool. However, its increasingly marginal use by all popular services has endowed it with a certain charisma in recent years mostly induced by the user's nostalgia.

In a less commensurable but equally important way, there is the deterioration in popularity that the platform has experienced over the years, especially among veteran players. Although the spaces of *Newgrounds* and *Kongregate* never stopped promoting personal works, visible consumption trends show clear preferences for formats that differ from the genres associated with Flash. This reality became especially obvious shortly after the popularization of escape rooms, difficult platformers and shooting gallery games such as *The Last Stand* (ConArtist Games, 2007). Even with their visual and stylistic variety allowed within these genres, the tendency to catalogue them around labels reveals an increasingly pressing formalization of the creative space. Once again, this trend is not exclusive and could be found in other fan consumption spaces of the moment. However, it is interesting to point out that, in the consumption spaces dedicated to independent video games, the pressure exerted by the expectations of popularity that emerged at the end of the 2000s played a fundamental role in delimiting the artistic output of these groups.

At this time, it is important to point out the rise of the artistic and creative movement that, over the years, has acquired the *indie* label. Although it is a phenomenon subjected to various economic and political pressures that transcend its original sphere, a key trait identified by authors such as Jesper Juul is the obsession with authenticity (Juul, 2017). In an interview with Robin Hunicke, founder of the *Funomena* studio and an active participant in the movement, this developer points to deep cultural impulses, such as American individualism, as an important factor in understanding the idiosyncrasy and particularity of this development scene. The desire to present an image of authenticity served to lend consistency to what was, for all intents and purposes, a rather motley collection of authors and developers from very different communities. Although the legitimization of this movement was given by the progressive insistence of the media, opinion leaders and marketing campaigns, some texts and activities are usually pointed out as exemplary or paradigmatic of this process. Among the most popular is *Indie Game: The Game* (Pajot & Swirsky, 2012), a documentary dedicated to follow the lives of various authors on the scene, but ended up focusing on three especially popular figures (Ryerson, 2014). Other broader and more inclusive examples of this trend are *Embed with Games*, by Cara Ellison (2015), the independent festival *Indiecade*, and the systematic collecting of opinion pieces like those managed by *Critical Distance* (<https://critical-distance.com/>). If we add to this the growing attention paid to the work of figures like Greg Costikyan, Ian Bogost and Gonzalo Frasca, it is understood that the legitimacy of the *indie* comes from a whole series of disparate elements but that, as a whole, point towards a fundamentally homogeneous view of the video game medium.

In short, what this massive intensification of the process of creating and promoting independent works reveals is an express desire to homogenize and converge the multitude of creative spaces that had been existing for years and direct them in a way that would increase their popularity and diffusion. In the case of the pages that already had a significant baggage of works and fan works, such as *Newgrounds*, their participation in this phenomenon consisted of promoting some of their most popular works, such as *Fancy Pants Adventure* and *Meat Boy*. Companies like *Kongregate* made a conscious effort by creating popularity contests that, following similar guidelines to *Indiecade*, tried to promote the games that stood out the most in a given month. Although many of the winning works followed the same design schemes that had been used for years, it also led some authors to innovate or subvert these schemes. Very popular examples of works that deliberately played with the public's expectations include *The Visit* (Hummel & Winter, 2012), which is presented as a prototypical platform game that subverts its premise the moment you jump on top of the first enemy. Another example of similar subversion includes *You Have to Burn the Rope* (Bashiri, 2008), which does not introduce its subversion until the end of the experience.

In many cases, the type of intentional alteration that is introduced in these texts (and that causes surprise and a sensation of novelty) is centered on a particularly generalized convention within the genre that the work appears to recreate and that alters it in such a significant way that it forces the player to pay attention to that subversion. In this sense, many of these games were pressured to introduce something new or break expectations that, in the context of the *indie* movement, guaranteed media attention. With this observation I do not mean to claim that the games included here were cynical at-

tention-seeking exercises. In fact, many of them were published at a time when coverage was especially low and marginal. In other cases, it is important to point out that the most awarded and celebrated works of the moment tended to come from established studios and with enough economic sustainability to distribute them on major commercial platforms, such as Xbox Live and Steam. This economic discrimination is what explains why, in documentaries like *Indie Game: The Movie*, attention was focused on works that were finished or about to be finished, orchestrated by charismatic directors who had already achieved popularity during the period of saturation of the medium.

Having pointed out this type of drift, it is understood that most of the award-winning and celebrated work of this period obeys design schemes and style conventions that recall the preferences of the communities that nurtured them in the first place, albeit in a more accessible way. Among the most notorious examples is the sequel to *Meat Boy*, *Super Meat Boy* (McMillen & Refenes, 2010) and which pays homage both textually and metatextually to its place of origin. Throughout the game, players progress through levels that present an increasingly complex series of challenges that require reflexes and precision jumping. At some points, it is possible to find secret levels that recreate visual styles from previous technological generations, such as the Nintendo Entertainment System. Others allow embodying (and eventually adopting as a substitute protagonist) the character of a parallel franchise. This makes *Super Meat Boy* a celebration of the artistic and cultural diversity that the *indie* movement represented, while also casting a nostalgic look at its original conception space. Another major point of divergence is the tools used to create the game and the aesthetic effect those tools have on the final experience. While the original

Meat Boy was conceived with Flash and necessarily required more restricted movement, the Unity Engine used for *Super Meat Boy* allows for more refined movement. Returning to the aesthetic conventions pointed out by Lamarre about animation, it seems that Team Meat has gradually moved away from the compositional space favored by so many early Flash games and has embraced a new aesthetic paradigm that rewards kineticism (2009, pp. 5 -6).

Broadly speaking, the shift from Flash-based games focused on multiplanar compositing and image processing to more versatile engine-based kinetic games can be seen in the history of Flash itself. A distinctive example from this era is *Canabalt* (Saltsman, 2009), which uses the then existing iteration of the engine to generate a sense of ever-increasing speed. Although games like this make us aware of the artistic potential that this tool still possessed years after its conception, the reality of the situation was that its presence was diminishing in favor of newer engines. But beyond that, what this process of hegemonization shows is an adaptation of the game possibilities present in these spaces towards distribution logics centered around a few platforms. The progressive filtering of commercial regulators in all these communities reveals two markedly overlapping trends: the rise of the platform as a fundamental filter of consumption in late capitalism (Joseph, 2018), and the submission of various spaces and communication channels to discovery algorithms that condition the possibilities of expression beforehand (Kline, 2014).

4. NEGOTIATION, REPRODUCTION, OR DISSOLUTION: THE FUTURE OF CREATIVE COMMUNITIES ON THE INTERNET

Although the simplification of consumption processes carried out in the virtual space by platforms like Steam reduces the range of artistic expressions to be used by independent authors, its imposition does not necessarily imply the extinction of Internet communities. To this day, it is possible to continue visiting *Newgrounds* or *Kongregate*, and the recent popularity of new spaces such as *itch.io* point to an increase in the diversity of the Internet, not the other way around. Where the impact of these platforms is most noticeable is in the type of content that these spaces favor. Even with the knowledge gained from visiting these pages for years, it is easy to get carried away by “recommended” and “popular” games on the main page. This tendency to “get carried away” by the alienation inherent in these patterns of consumption has been criticized for years from Marxist circles and is by no means a new observation. The particularity of our period lies in how its presence materializes in virtual space. Perhaps because their presence configures a considerable portion of the type of relationships that we build from technological media, these spaces have exchanged their original condition as generators of online culture for that of negotiators of that culture.

Beyond the efforts to preserve the content of these spaces, Internet communities have acquired new roles as negotiators of content and meaning. Although their perception as generators of popular culture is still maintained in some quarters, their conception as a reflection of the impulses and behaviors of fan culture has changed considerably since the optimistic predictions of Jenkins and the pessimistic ones of Azuma. On the one hand, it is possible to continue observing a trend towards the uncritical reproduction of consumption patterns that the dominant distributors encourage to follow. On the other hand, there is an evident effort to establish contours of self-expression. This trend, as other researchers have already observed (Annett, 2014), can be found in any corner of contemporary fandom, but in spaces that have managed to survive for years, it acquires a specific dimension. Whether that independence can give rise to subversive possibilities or an eventual mechanization of art, right now it allows for venues of expression that do not have to reproduce dominant patterns of consumption or an assumed target audience. Where this alterity is best embodied is in the dynamism of the most recently created websites, such as *itch.io* and the mobile gaming space, and it is no coincidence that they remain some of the most active in the video game space.

Although it is possible to continue accessing *Newgrounds* as if we were living in 2005, the historical pressures of recent years force us to be aware of the changes that have taken place. Its most dramatic form is the disappearance of

Flash and its eventual disconnection by Adobe (Fiadotau, 2020). Discussions around the event and about the need to preserve the works made with this engine caused an alarm that has spread to other communities. The fact that the video game industry has shown a complete lack of interest in documenting or preserving its past has increased the sense of urgency. The mass adoption of surrogate tools or the establishment of community archives like the *Flashpoint* initiative (<https://bluemaxima.org/flashpoint/>) may have served as a temporary corrective, but the question of their long-term sustainability remains. What will happen the day that *Flashpoint* can no longer be maintained or that the *Internet Archive* must close due to legislative pressure? Will it be possible to continue accessing works like *The Visit* with the same ease with which it can be done now? And although, in the end, most of these works come from enthusiastic and self-sufficient communities, can the same be said for works that communities have no interest in preserving? For the average user, these concerns may be a minor issue that only concerns a few fringe scenes. But ignoring the fact that these are fundamental protagonists of the formative era of the Internet and that for this reason alone their protection should be guaranteed, the lessons that we can learn about the way in which these communities reproduce themselves will be useful to all of us when it comes to our turn.

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The video game as a battlefield: Russia case study

El videojuego como campo de batalla: Estudio de caso de Rusia

O videogame como campo de batalha: um estudo de caso da Rússia



ARTICLE



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Abstract

This article analyzes the relationship between videoludic activities and the actors of the government of the Russian Federation using a holistic methodology based on social constructivism, neo-institutionalism and aesthetics. As a result, we can point to the use of video games as a tool of memory and soft power, whose objective is to build a narrative in accordance with the foreign policy of the country, reactionary to Western policies.

KEY WORDS

Aesthetic memory, Public diplomacy, Narrative, Russian Federation, Videoludic.

Resumen:

Este artículo analiza la relación del ocio videolúdico con los propios actores gubernamentales del Estado ruso empleando una metodología holística basada en el socialconstructivismo, el neoinstitucionalismo y la estética. Como resultado se aprecia el empleo del videojuego como una herramienta de memoria y *soft power* cuya intención es construir una narrativa acorde a la política exterior del país, reaccionaria a la occidental.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Memoria estética, Diplomacia pública, Narrativa, Federación Rusa, Videolúdico.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a relação do videolúdico com os próprios atores governamentais do Estado russo utilizando uma metodologia holística baseada no construtivismo social, o neoinstitucionalismo e a estética. Como resultado, aprecia-se o uso do videogame como ferramenta de

memória e *soft power* cuja intenção é construir uma narrativa de acordo com sua política externa, reacionária à ocidental.

Palavras-chave

Memória estética, Diplomacia pública, Narrativa, Federação Russa, Videolúdico.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE VIDEO GAME AS A POLITICAL BATTLEFIELD

The strategic discourse is composed of different practices and allows to represent the security policies, an important part of the identification discourse (Shapiro, 1990, pp. 330-331). Starting with this idea is not accidental, since it allows us to consider security as a component element of the identification discourse and to describe various mechanisms.

Video games are a means of mass communication with their own cognitive consequences (Frasca, 2004, pp. 232-233) and act as fields of confrontation, as seen in the escalation of tension due to the nuclear crisis with Iran (Schulze, 2016, pp. 81-84). This medium draws the attention of governments and parliaments. Examples of this are the leaking of confidential documents due to the “veracity” of a battle tank in *War Thunder* (Matas, 2021) or when some members of the Bundestag resonated with China’s attempt to purchase the developer *Crytek*, company of interest to German defense for its simulation programs (Mössbauer et al., 2021).

Russia is studied for standing out from the US and China, due to its greater political relevance with respect to the States on the video game. This is attested to by members of the State Duma, such as Sergei Shirokov or Robert Shlegel who, in 2010, advocated the need for

patriotic games (Taranova, 2010). Not only the State Duma mentioned this need, but it is also a cross-cutting issue in the Executive. Illustrating the above, the Minister of Communications and Media, Alexei Volin, coinciding with the celebration of the 70th Victory Day, inaugurated a *World of Tanks* tournament (Wargaming, 2010) in the year 2015 saying:

World of Tanks is not only one of the most popular computer games, but also an important tool for the history and patriotic education of citizens. Soon half of the players will begin to show interest in the history of the Great Patriotic War. [...] Most of the victories in the game are carrying Soviet tanks (Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media [Minkomsvyaz], 2015)

In the Ministry of Defense, the video game was also called a “battlefield” through Andréi Kartapolov, Deputy Minister of Defense and head of the Main Directorate of Political-Military Affairs:

The *Metal Gear* saga is a special project of the US intelligence agencies to manipulate and alienate society against the authorities. Kartapolov argues that the next battle between the superpowers will be fought on the Internet and that games are yet another weapon. [...] Kartapolov has highlighted the use of these virtual weapons as the new ele-

ments of modern warfare. (Gonzalez, 2019)

Maria Zajárova, spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, testified about video games:

They started with the confrontation of man against monsters, alien creatures. Now, computer games directly distribute the roles between countries and peoples, in which characters with symbols of one nation must destroy people who in turn symbolize another state. [...] The modern entertainment industry teaches children, the younger generation, that this is normal. (Figuereido, 2019)

Two fundamental elements can be seen in the cited public statements: the values and the (neorealist) role of the State. First, the importance of values and the idealization of a glorious past is observed, which is presented to Russian citizens as the source of values to protect and is related to the Great Patriotic War as the main scenario, where the element of strategic communication transmits certain messages: the war as a founding pseudo-myth of the role of Russia and as a backbone of nationalism (especially through the army), the presentation of the western border of the Soviet Union, a hostile zone, as well as the vindication of its narrative against West; although this is related to the second position. What is described appears in series such as *Men of War* (2009-2019) or *Ilya Muromets* (777 Studios, 2014). In both examples there are elements that allow you to create a memory. But, in Figure 1, the continuity between the flag of the Empire and the current Federation transmits the history of the Empire and its achievements, legitimately, in an environment that transmits truth.

Figure 1

Ilya Muromets



Source: Taken from Steam (777 Studios, 2014).

Another trend extracted from the statements concerns the discourse of the international role of States in video games, where the special virulence of the “official” discourse stands out, opposed to the Western narrative. The most notorious case is *Syrian Warfare* [SW] (Cats who play, 2017) for having unleashed a great controversy, since there was even talk of a conspiracy by the Free Syrian Army against the game (Sputnik Editorial Office, 2017). It highlights the realism of the vehicles (of Russian origin) and units, which are reproduced thanks to a permit from the Armed Forces and shows the relationship between the industry and the State. (Moreno & Venegas, 2020). SW tries to achieve credibility by telling the story as it is, at least from the developers’ perspective. As a cultural product, it has a clear intention in the desired message (Suárez, 2021), such as reducing the enemy to a homogeneous block, represented as terrorists, which encompasses all opposition to the Syrian regime. But this game has a common message in national security strategies: the concept of security and the consequent peace, thanks to the above. Both *Syrian Warfare* and *Confrontation: Peace Enforcement* (Red Ice Software, 2008) or *Alpha: Antiterror* (MiST Land-South, 2005) share the narrative, in scenarios presented as plausible (in Figure 2 a mujahideen with pakol can be seen), of that it is Russia, through the Army, that provides security and peace. For example, the last title described as:

Terrorism. Its target is not the one who became the victim, but the one who survived. Their goal is not senseless murder, but well thought out intimidation of society. It is a war that cannot be lost. [...] You are a fighter of the special elite unit Alpha, created to fight against extremist gangs. Afghanistan, Chechnya, the Pankisi gorge, the caves of Tora Bora: wherever terrorism has found fertile ground, where fanatics have crossed the threshold of humanity [...]. (MiST Land-South, 2005)

Well, as has been seen, video games are an instrument (although to a certain extent wasted) used by the Russian strategic discourse and due to its simulation characteristics it attractively represents the hardest power, although framed in the soft power of a State:

The ability to establish preferences that are associated with intangible assets such as personality, culture, political values, and institutions and policies that are legitimate or have moral authority. [...] It is the ability to attract and always attract spoiled leadership. Simply put, in behavioral terms, soft power as attractive power. (Nye, 2004, p.21)

Figure 2

Muyahidín portrayed as a terrorist.



Source: (MiST Land-South, 2005)

Despite studying the concept of soft power in the case of the United States, Moreno and Venegas (2020, pp. 163-184), let us not forget that a similar concept derives from it with a certain nuance that makes it different. Public diplomacy contains an objective: public opinion, business and civil society, for which it projects its own values and positions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, 2020). It should not be ignored that the concept of public diplomacy is proactive and sustained over time, with an objective international audience and the ability to generate a certain environment, although it will not be effective if it is not integrated into a larger policy (Lord, 2009, pp43-60). For Lord, it has a marked cross-sectional character as non-state forces participate and contribute to national power (2009), in this case, the different developers. The dimension of public diplomacy with the greatest emphasis in this study is digital diplomacy defined as "The change management strategy through digital tools and virtual collaboration [...] with ICT and online communities" (Holmes, 2015, p.15).

Two dimensions that soft power and public diplomacy share stand out: the presence of political values and culture. Where do these values come from? How are cultural products [video games] impregnated with values, discourses and ideas defended and defined by state institutions? There are studies referring to how video games adopt military discourse (Venegas, 2021, pp. 185-190) but also the fact that exchanges between the different actors take place through specific mechanisms (Scharpf, 1997) and video games are cultural products developed by people who transmit their frames of thought, as Suárez (2021) indicates. These messages are transferred in an environment of multilevel power in which an attempt is made to impose a framework whose success depends on the power exercised by the actor through the creation and manipulation of images (Castells, 2009) integrated into the strategic discourse. The question that remains to be asked is: What are the main images and what implications do they have in the Russian strategic discourse?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. OBJECTIVES AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The general objective [OG] from which it starts is the analysis of the use of the video game as a political tool of the Russian State.

Three specific objectives derive from the OG: investigate the video game as an exercise in public diplomacy by the Russian Federation, delve into the role that the video game plays regarding an identity (integrated in the strategic discourse) and, finally, try to elucidate how the video game industry adopts a certain discourse emanating from the institutions.

Given the objectives to which we will respond and knowing the underlying complexity of video game analysis (replayability, simulation conditions, etc.) as a cultural product, the theoretical framework must be interdisciplinary and eclectic.

To this end, the theoretical framework adopted is based on the one hand, on the contributions of social constructivism, a theory of international relations that analyzes the intangible aspects of policies. The constructivist turn implies the analysis of the international context, as well as the interests found in the discourse and its power. The social-constructivist theory allows identifying the significant elements based on their own social and historical characteristics and the accent on the social group, appreciating ideas articulated with the discourse or indirectly through codes (Skolimowska, 2017 pp. 185-190). These ideas are based on identities (Ibáñez, 2015, pp. 189-218). This is important because these codes are reflected in sensitivities that predominate in certain societies, so the frame of reference conditions perception (Sequeiros et al., 2022); something that complements the textualization.

The intertextual allows the analysis of characteristic representations (Cornago, 2015) and enables the appreciation of political meaning through representative practices (Bleiker, 2001). It is appreciated thanks to the analysis of the “gaps” between meaning and signifier, lies in the importance of convictions and legitimacy (Bleiker, 2017) and gives the opportunity to analyze the video game as a form of aesthetic memory, plausible reproduction of images and their assimilation with other cultural products (Venegas, 2020, p.5).

Once the theoretical framework that allows analyzing the corollary of ideas and their representations in video leisure has been esta-

blished, institutionalism centered on actors is mentioned because this theory places its emphasis on the micro level, on the preferences of the actors and on how these are inserted in an institutional framework that affects and conditions them (Zurbriggen, 2006). It will be explored how the Russian video leisure is impregnated with the “official” institutional discourse in the aspects conditioned by the institutions.

Finally, theoretical contributions from game studies are needed, in which various elements such as procedural rhetoric are found, namely the construction of arguments through processes. Bogost (2007) with his procedural rhetoric highlights the importance of the study of mechanics in video games, expanded in the works of Oliver Pérez (2012), since he provides new dimensions of study: playful-meaningful, narrative and enunciative, something fundamental to understand video leisure from a holistic perspective. Finally, in a contribution intimately linked to international relations, we find several authors summarized in this idea:

The game provides a fertile ground to explore global politics every day. [...] The game aligns with and provides a useful vocabulary for theoretical traditions in IR [International Relations] that seek to explore modes of becoming that problematize and resist concrete being. (Hirst, 2019, pp. 7-10)

2.2. METHODOLOGY

As noted, game studies lack a uniform methodology, so in this research we assume the need to be eclectic and innovative to respond to the objectives set.

The methodology used is qualitative and semi-ludological elements from other authors are used but adapted to the problem studied. Added to the above are different specific me-

thodological contributions of the game studies already outlined. As well as elements of analysis of the aesthetic turn, attention is paid to the gap between signifier and signified, filled by specific political ideas, so representations are conceived as an act of power (Bleiker, 2001, pp. 512-513).

This methodology, inductive in nature, allows us to analyze through a semiotic framework the main relations of Russia's strategic discourse, made up of the discursive analyzes of official journalistic sources related to the Russian Government, *think tanks*, and those expressed in the enunciative narrative and significant aspects of the video games examined. While the semi-ludological elements facilitate the analysis of the cultural product examined (video games, variables corresponding to the memory, institutional and public diplomacy dimensions are coded in Table 1), the textualization complements the analysis and verifies it through the representative practices. Finally, the situational logic will be the method that allows us to observe the interaction mode of the institutional and videoludic system, although this logic will also be based on (neo) technonationalism (public and private cooperation in order to favor national interests) indicated by Yamada (2000).

The units of analysis [AU] that can be seen in the following section have not been chosen randomly. They respond to an inductive analysis and have been selected by territorial criteria (all the AUs have Russian or Ukrainian origin) because the objectives condition both the independent variable and the dependent variants. Another criterion to consider has been the adequacy of the AUs to the specific objectives. Although they are analyzed transversally, in 3 AU the external narrative is located (with its values and variations over time). In addition, there are 2+1 (the AUs located to the right of the table) whose message is primarily based on historical events

appropriated by the official narrative, with the exception of a third party (Ukrainian) that acts as a control unit. Special attention is given to enunciative-narrative elements.

The variables capture specific indicators based on methodology with the ultimate goal of responding to the proposed objectives. There is an interrelation between them as variables such as that referring to values, elements of aesthetic memory or the intention of truthfulness. They seek to respond to the more con-

crete specific objective of the identity; however, they are not watertight and are closely linked to their integration into other strategies (with a clear link to the objective on international positioning) or with narrative closeness and its benefits (that specifically seek to explore discourse adoption). This connection will be clearly seen in the following section.

3. RESULTS

Table 1

AUs and variables

Variables	Options	Syrian Warfare [SW]	Confrontation: Peace Enforcement [CPE]	Alpha: Anti-terror [AA]	Men of War [MoWAS2]	Strategic Mind: Blitzkrieg [SMB]	Ilya Muromets [IM]
Great Patriotic War	1.No 2.Yes	1	1	1	2	2	1
Nationalism through the army	1.Null 2.Low 3.Average 4.Quite a few 5.High	5	5	5	5	1	4
Aesthetic memory elements	1.Null 2.Low 3.Average 4.Quite a few 5.High	5	3	3	5	1	3
Presence of values defended in strategies	1.Null 2.Low 3.Average 4.Quite a few 5.High	5	5	5	5	1	5
Narrative proximity to institutions	1.Null 2.Low 3.Average 4.Quite a few 5.High	5	5	5	5	1	5
Truth intent	1.Null 2.Low 3.Average 4.Quite a few 5.High	5	2	5	4	2	5

Integration in other policies	1. Not integrated 2. Partially integrated 3. Integrated	2	2	2	3	1	3
Funding-benefits/public initiative	1. No/unknown 2. Funded-Benefited	2	1	2	2	1	2

Starting with the case of *Men of War*, this 1C video game saga was published while the State Duma established a round table on the role of games in the formation of values. Here, even the mechanics seem to favor an attempt at mimetic representation in a clear search for truth, something that can be seen, to cite an example, in the representation of the Red Army units. But the aesthetic elements go further, and Soviet symbols can be seen in the game interface. In addition, the mission design itself has a political meaning that transcends mimetic representation and conveys the ideas of official memory.

The “victory scenario” designed in the missions of the entire saga is double, so truthfulness is tried to be achieved through the pretend world, imitating historical events such as the Battle of Kursk and World War II is used as a legitimizing myth. The experience derived from the gameplay even with some variation is previously prescribed. Through the veracity in the representation, the nationalist message is transmitted (through the army). This can be seen in Figure 3, the flag, the Order of the Patriotic War (drop-down menu that allows obtaining better troops), the famous T-34 and even a guard transport, representation of an American M3A1 but without that name and with the

red star, perhaps in a subtle reference to The Law of Lending and Leasing. It should not be overlooked that the army still uses the red flag or the star as a cockade today. Another fundamental element of the nationalist message and that can be extrapolated to the security argument present in the strategic discourse is that in the world represented in the video game, where there is no trace of any civilian, the Red Army cannot, not even by mistake, commit crimes; something also present in SW, CPE or AA.

Figure 3

Batalla de Kursk en MoWAS2



The attractive power of the army is greater than the iconography since it allows to select units individually. This is common in most AUs, but specifically in *Men of War: Assault Squad 2* (MoWAS2) basic characteristics can be described: they will have typically Russian names and appearance: any other nationality that makes up the USSR/Russia will be ignored. This will generate a homogeneous block. Normally, the portrait will be a dark silhouette, anyone could be the soldier. The role of women is ignored. Lastly, any soldier will hold his position until he receives an order to the contrary. This is a feature in troop micromanagement in any RTS game. It plays a role as a narrative of the official history and reinforces the victory scenario, defensive in a double sense: Russia defends the world from the greatest evil, while transmitting sacrifice for the collective. The mechanics of the waves will force whoever defends outside positions to resist more, even if it supposes a greater complication.

This proximity to the values defended by politicians is also explained in terms of attractive power when used as narrative elements. The above allows us to compare the game with *Order 227*, aesthetically represented from a western perspective with executions within the Soviet side itself, something that led to the withdrawal of *Company of Heroes 2* (Relic Entertainment, 2013) (Otero, 2017).

MoWAS2 was published coinciding with the Crimean crisis and, as has been seen, in aesthetics and narrative they range from the speeches in the State Duma on historical memory (State Duma, 2020) to the values of the historical memory of the Valdai Club, where the conflict with western narratives is recognized (Barabanov, 2020).

Russian values cannot be understood without the process of renewal nationalism, in the Pu-

tin era the role of the USSR was redefined in World War II and in video games, for example, MoWAS2. The past of the USSR is appropriated by Russian nationalism and translated into "Russian values". They are articulated and legitimized with the symbols and the role of the army that act as guarantors of the status quo in the face of any attempt at revisionism (State Duma, 2020).

However, it is not integrated into the melting pot of public policies that support this memory, as can be seen from the fact that it is not part of the patriotic education project of the Ministry of Education or in the infinity of memory projects of the Ministry of Defense. There is a subordination of the industry (aware of the place it occupies within the situational logic) to the government as seen in Jenkins (2010). These positions become more palpable when techno-nationalist elements are added to that logic. Those video games that add the official narrative will tend to benefit, either economically or technically, or by avoiding a certain level of censorship. Examples of this style can be seen in the analyzed UAs, projects directly co-financed by the Russian Military History Society. This is a public entity that, in cooperation with private developers and publishers (especially 1C), gives rise to different video games such as the aforementioned *IM*.

The private initiative of companies directly or indirectly reinforces the official narrative thanks to a game of sums. The developers that adhere to the official narrative obtain benefits such as the development of military simulators (Jenkins, 2010), the purchase of developers by the SberBank (belonging to the Central Bank) (Tadviser, 2021) or, in different ways, technical support that favors the "veracity" of the visual representation. For example, access to historical documents as occurs in *IM* (Horth, 2014) or *AA*, which was advised by the CSN FBS of Russia, a

center on which the anti-terrorist units depend (Aleksándrov, 2005).

This relationship produces that the developers who adopt the official discourse suffer a double tension when they adopt their discourse and ideas that they directly or indirectly transmit embodied in the environment and the “arrangements”. The first conditions from the ability to force the removal of a game from the market through censorship to the condition of including or not this entertainment as an element of the digital economy program (Analytical Center of the Government of the Russian Federation, 2020). The second, the institutional arrangement, determines the constellations and modes of interaction by the de facto hierarchical-asymmetric relationship mode (presence of actors such as the Roskomnadzor, the Duma, the presidential office, the developers, the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media [MDDCMM], among others). The MDDCMM is essential in generating the majority of regulatory activity as well as recommending support through the inclusion of developer projects in the list of promising information technologies. Virtual worlds and augmented technology are collected in the “Information Security” project.

These previously described tensions are reflected in the constellation of actors, understood as the strategy of the actors, which will lead to an accommodation strategy. The actors must adapt to the environment. Here you can see the reactive response (considering it a narrative battlefield) that is generated by adding the control AU. The simple fact of playing by invading the USSR and violating that aesthetic memory linked to the official discourse results in the Kremlin itself classifying it as anti-Russian and even Nazi propaganda (Sputnik Editorial Office, 2020 in relation to Strategic Mind: Blitzkrieg), something that links a Ukrainian game with its

government (and legitimizes current actions through past images) by Russia considering Ukraine as a country ruled by Russophobic Nazis (Security Council, 2022, p2). Russian values are attractive as far as they are protective and they offer security within the veracity sought in aesthetic memory, to the point of accusing three young people of training to attack the FSB through the game Minecraft (Mojang Studios, 2011) (Aleksandrov et al., 2021).

Up to this point, the importance of aesthetic memory has been seen and this narrative should be read as a triumph of the nationalist school of international politics, since the identity politics that is embodied as aesthetic memory is a tool of the Russian international narrative.

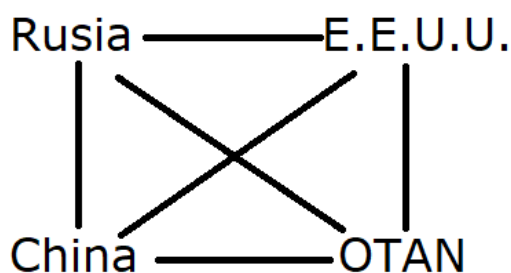
Russian foreign policy and its narrative are based on the Primakov doctrine and, therefore, linked to the prestige of being a great power in addition to its need for hegemony in the post-Soviet space in a multipolar world (Morales, 2018).

This can be seen from casual games such as *Modern Conflict* [MC] (Gaijin Entertainment, 2010), a game whose playable features can be translated into the semiotic framework of the Russian foreign narrative (Figure 4). Internally, the idea of Russia as a great power is presented by placing it in a direct confrontational relationship with the US, the current leading world power, while there is a relationship of denial between Russia and NATO, something very present in the Ukrainian conflict. Although it is not optimal in its foreign policy, Russia is not afraid of direct verbal confrontation with the US, as Putin himself, his ministers (especially Foreign and Defense) or some related media such as the Sputnik newspaper have stated on many occasions when defending the “uselessness” (Benítez, 2019) or the aggressiveness

(Reid, 2021) of NATO (especially due to the perception of threat in its expansion towards Georgia or Ukraine). This confrontation has led to the ridicule of North American war material, as happened with the recent trailer for *Battlefield 2042* (DICE, 2021), where, decontextualizing a scene from the trailer, they presented it as a ridiculous confrontation between a “useless” F-35 and a Su-57 (Sputnik Editorial Office, 2021). Finally, the relationship between Russia and China is complementary (strategic and of interest, present in the Primakov doctrine) since it denies the hegemony of the Americans and is contrary to NATO, thereby reinforcing the strategic multipolar element.

Figure 4

Semiotic framework of Russian geopolitics.



Regarding videoludic soft power, the semiotic framework allows Russia to be replaced by the concept of “international security – humanitarianization”, China as a “security complement” as opposed to “insecurity”, which would replace the US and the “dying” or “aggressive”, which would replace NATO. The video game is no stranger to this substitution.

Public/electronic diplomacy and soft power in Russia have the peculiarity of being an internal and external aspect whose purpose is to consolidate the elite, as indicated by María Pérez (2020, p. 5). Georgia was the turning point when trying to integrate both tools in the “information war” and the video game was no exception.

In *CPE*, one of the main vectors is satirically shown: the Caucasus, a war that served the Kremlin (mixing means of soft and hard power) to break the NATO belt in its neighborhood. It showed the hybrid intervention instruments and reinforced its influence on the GUUAM (Gándara, 2018 pp. 45-65). It was conveyed with a colorful and burlesque aesthetic (as seen in Figure 5) “that should not be taken too seriously” (Dyomkin, 2008). However, the war started because of Georgia and the obscurantist nations that make up NATO, mainly Russophobic Poland and Ukraine. Therefore, the Russian strategic discourse is reinforced by threatening both this country and the values contained in state doctrines, by trying to justify the Russian presence in the Caucasus like Medvedev, as peacekeepers, showing even in the date of publication a great synchrony with the political needs.

Figure 5

Cover: CPE



Source: Red Ice Software, 2008.

The best example of integration between foreign policy, public diplomacy and soft power is in the last battlefield: Syria.

In *SW* is found (in an effort to attract a foreign public) the principle of bilateral relations within a multipolar system, a source of security. The message that is transmitted is to combat international terrorism by providing physical security and humanizing the mission. All this will be done by allowing the expansion of Russian capabilities and supporting the Syrian regime with a faithful defense of the unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation [MAE], 2016). Russia will be the player's only true support in a hostile environment and suits the official narrative that western countries never participated against "terrorism in Syria". However, the Russian interest in the involvement of terrorism in its territories of the Caucasus and the post-Soviet space of Central Asia is undeniable.

The principles, previously stated, can be seen as transverse axes of the aesthetics of figures 6, 7 and 8. Figure 8 stands out: a "standard soldier" with a certain heroism, transmits the Russian vision of the world, Russia is that soldier who gives security and food.

As has been seen, these video games transmit codes that could be condensed into the idea that the world is threatening and interferes in Russia's affairs with new weapons: space and information (President of the Russian Federation, 2021). Therefore, these games must present elements of the Gerasimov-Primakov doctrine, such as the importance of Russian leadership in the post-Soviet space and, therefore, the constant criticism of NATO's expansion attempts (visible in *CPE*). Another fundamental idea in *SW* is the expansion of Russian capabil-

ities, especially hard power and the defense of multipolarity (Rumer, 2019, pp. 3-9), a space in which information and cyberspace are valued as a battlefield by being able to erode political leadership and public opinion through them (Colom, 2018, p. 30). Another fundamental idea that the control AU demonstrates is the use of aesthetic memory and its "truthfulness" component as legitimizing elements of the current decisions that affect Russia's foreign policy.

Figure 6

Humanitarian aid



Source: RuplyTV

Figure 7

Aleppo, help has arrived



Source: Augusto Ferrer-Dalmau

Figure 8

Syrian Warfare



Source: (Cats who play, 2017)

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In short, the strategic discourse of the Russian Federation uses video leisure as a political tool of the State. For Russia, as seen above, security is an integral part of its narrative, so actions in foreign policy will tend to be legitimized on the grounds that they offer security and a legitimate challenge to the unilateral regime.

For this, an entire aesthetic memory has been built that is instrumentalized both for internal and external public opinion, and cases such as calling a government “fascist” are found at the headquarters of the Security Council of the United Nations, something that they had previously done with a game that “violated” the official aesthetic memory. This veracity of created images also brings it closer to the Chinese nationalist construction detailed by Moreno (2021, pp. 49-77), to the victimization of the country (Sino-Japanese War and World War II) because of a historical event that is mythologized through the official narrative. It is associated with specific values and is currently used to legitimize actions in the foreign policy of these States.

This instrumentalization and, consequently, the reactive element in case of denial of the official narrative shows the importance of the codes that are transmitted in an internal logic of social cohesion and at the same time, in the search to apply the external doctrine. This can be understood considering the specific approach of Russian soft power as indicated by María Pérez (2020, pp. 4-7), also included in the national security strategy (2021), the information security doctrine of the Federation Russia (2016) and the conception of foreign policy (2016).

The transmission of these codes is favored by the accommodation strategy of the industry that is located between the acceptance of the narrative and self-censorship, something that Castells (2009, pp. 354-365) has already studied in reference to traditional media. The accommodation of the media is essential to understand the use of video games as a tool of soft power. The literature that develops the role of video leisure on this problem is extensive (Moreno & Venegas, 2020; Moreno, 2021; Venegas, 2021; Schulze, 2016; Goodfellow, 2016). Underlying all of them is the idea that aesthetics and values are associated with their codes through an idealized militarization and normally in a Manichean manner. Throughout this text it has been stated that Russia, especially regarding its security and identity, acts as a paradigmatic case.

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ESTUDIOS E INVESTIGACIONES

Scrubbing up on-line: How best practice hospital websites can drive medical tourism

"Scrubbing up on-line": cómo los sitios web de hospitales con mejores prácticas pueden impulsar el turismo médico

"Scrubbing up on-line": como boas práticas de websites hospitalares podem impulsionar o turismo médico

9

ARTICLE



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Abstract

This study explores how health institutions (i.e. hospitals) communicate through their corporate websites to convey reliability and credibility in order to establish relationships with users in the field of medical travel. The 10 world's leading medical tourism hospitals have been selected based on the International Medical Travel Quality Alliance (2019) ranking and their strategic online communication analyzed by applying framing theory. Methodologically, a content analysis was conducted of both websites and subsites which aimed specifically at medical tourists. We conclude that hospitals are in an embryonic phase in their communicative management model with their public in the field of medical tourism since they disregard the potential role of public relations. This article provides valuable and helpful information for both tourism and communication practitioners in medical tourism.

KEY WORDS

Health communication, Medical tourism, Public relations, Health tourism, Strategic communication.

Resumen:

Este estudio explora cómo las instituciones de salud (es decir, los hospitales) se comunican a través de sus sitios web corporativos para transmitir confiabilidad y credibilidad a fin de establecer relaciones con los usuarios en el campo de los viajes médicos. Los 10 hospitales de turismo médico líderes en el mundo han sido seleccionados en base a la clasificación del International Medical Travel Quality Alliance (2019) y su comunicación estratégica en línea analizada mediante la aplicación de la teoría del encuadre. Metodológicamente, se realizó un análisis de contenido tanto de los sitios web como de los subsitios que estaban dirigidos específicamente a turistas médicos. Concluimos que los hospitales se encuentran en una fase embrionaria en su modelo de gestión comunicativa con su público en el ámbito del turismo médico ya que desconocen el papel potencial de las relaciones públicas. El artículo proporciona información valiosa y útil para los profesionales del turismo y la comunicación en el área del turismo médico.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Comunicación sanitaria, Turismo médico, Relaciones públicas, Turismo sanitario, Comunicación estratégica.

Resumo

Este estudo explora como as instituições de saúde (ou seja, hospitais) se comunicam por meio de seus sites corporativos para transmitir confiabilidade e credibilidade a fim de estabelecer relacionamentos com usuários no campo de viagens médicas. Os 10 principais hospitais de turismo médico do mundo foram selecionados com base no ranking da International Medical Travel Quality Alliance (2019) e sua comunicação estratégica online analisada

pela aplicação da teoria dos quadros. Metodologicamente, foi realizada uma análise de conteúdo de sites e subsites voltados especificamente para turistas médicos. Concluímos que os hospitais estão em fase embrionária em seu modelo de gestão comunicativa com seu público no campo do turismo médico, uma vez que desconsideram o papel potencial das relações públicas. O artigo fornece informações valiosas e úteis para profissionais de turismo e comunicação na área de turismo médico.

Palavras-chave

Comunicação em saúde, Turismo Médico, Relaciones públicas, Turismo de saúde, Comunicación estratégica.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Shanghai Declaration (2016) emphasized that health and wellbeing are essential for sustainable development, being especially significant their role in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (WHO, 2018). In a world as globalized and connected as the current one, these challenges take a new global dimension often forgotten: the growth of medical tourism. According to the Medical Tourism Association (MTA, 2019), medical tourism is “where people who live in one country travel to another county to receive medical, dental and surgical care.” Due to globalization, a growing number of patients are using the Internet and related technologies to gain access to health information and medical services (Kangas, 2010; Liu et al., 2020; Lu & Zhang, 2019; Lunt et al., 2012; MacReady, 2007; Snyder et al., 2011). As the World Health Organization (WHO) states, it is envisioned that medical travel will expand globally in the next decade (WHO, 2015). In the European Union, health tourism “is growing faster than tourism in general (...) largely due to

an ageing population and the patients right to be reimbursed in all EU countries regardless of their nationality” (Weston et al., 2019, p. 30; Ferrer-Roca, Weston, Guia, Mihalic, Blasco, Prats, Lawler, & Jarratt, 2020). Therefore, studying this increasing phenomenon is relevant, not only because of its potential to help implement the SDGs (Ferrer-Roca, Guia & Blasco, 2020).

Public relations applied to tourism and health represent a field of study which has kept many authors engaged in the past twenty years (Carretón & Feliu, 2011; Castillo-Esparcia & López-Villafranca, 2016; Fernández & Carretón, 2011; Fernández-Cavia & Huertas, 2014; Fernández Souto et al., 2016; Huertas, 2008; Marca et al., 2017; Oliveira, 2017; Oliveira & Huertas, 2019). In these studies, the analysis of the public and institutional strategic communication are considered essential, whereas public administration, international, national and local private companies interact, in order to organizing and designing common strategies to boost and promote this sector (Costa-Sánchez & Míguez-González, 2018; Huertas, 2008;

Heras-Pedrosa, 2018; Lunt et al., 2012; Marca et al., 2018; Marca-Francés et al., 2019; Mason & Wright, 2011; Mason et al., 2011; Oliveira, 2017). In addition, the dialogic communication that new technologies allow between health organizations and medical tourists entail direct implications for public relations (Capriotti et al., 2016; Heras-Pedrosa, 2018). This is the dimension explored in this study: how health institutions, specifically hospitals, communicate through their corporate websites to convey reliability and credibility in order to establish relationships with their potential medical tourism users.

Investigating medical travel is not an easy field of study (Helble, 2011; Kelley, 2013). There is no consensus regarding an international term which defines the people who travel abroad to receive medical treatment. Therefore, this leads to a lack of common methodology when collecting data, as it comes from different locations around the world. As a consequence, the calculation of the value of the world market of medical tourism is quite controverted. Some authors suggest medical tourism is a business which could have reached 16.7 billion dollars in 2018 (Mordor Intelligence, 2019), while others state that it is a 60 billion dollars a year business (MacReady, 2007). Nevertheless, it is important to note that pre-COVID tourism was the second fastest growing industry in the world (3.9%), while the third one was health (3.1%) (WTTC, 2019). It can be stated that tourism and health are very profitable strategic sectors worldwide.

The Internet plays a crucial role in public relations (Capriotti et al., 2016; Christ, 2007). For these authors, websites are institutional communication tools that enable dialogue. Such formula has been achieved after more than 20 years of progress, moving from only being informational and monological to becoming “instruments of social communication that

promote dialogue” (Capriotti et al., 2016, p. 1). Its relevance in any communication strategy is significant when the aim is to lead new users to a brand, product or institution, as well as whenever an interaction is required, namely, to establish a dialogue between these, direct or potential users, and the brand or institution.

Due to the nature of the service provided, medical institution websites are the display to make those facilities visible both at locally and internationally (Inci & Sancar, 2017; Lee et al., 2014). As Más Bleda and Aguillo (2015) state, part of the success of social websites as new communication media shall be attributed to their capacity to promote research, but also to their capacity to provide metrics capable of measuring the impact of their social influence.

Previous studies have focused on how hospitals communicate (Costa-Sánchez, 2012; Medina Aguerrebere, 2012; Santellán et al., 2021), including their social media management and engagement (González et al., 2021). A review of the literature conducted by Santellán et al. (2021) concludes that there are four main axes of communication for good hospital communication: communication tools, communication strategies, communication characteristics, and digital skills.

It should not be forgotten that medical organizations, besides being vital services providers, have an evident interest in conveying reliability and credibility to draw new patients. Therefore, they need to be strategic in the elaboration of the messages that appear on their websites (Mason & Wright, 2011). More and more people are looking for information online, not only in terms of medical tourism, but also information about health in general (Jun, 2016), and even more after the COVID-19 outbreak. Thus, the messages obtained through the websites of official institutions can play a relevant

role when it comes to choosing a destination for medical tourism.

In addition, most countries receiving this sort of tourism are not developed countries. Hence, medical tourism can contribute to increase the level of life of the locals by providing, for instance, incomes that could allow them to have access to education or better medical services; similar to the case of cultural tourism with the intermediation of the corresponding government (Wineaster, 2015).

In this context, this study aims to examine the information shared on the websites of the top 10 medical tourism hospitals. It seeks to observe how hospitals manage their official websites to convey trust, that is, how they highlight reliability and credibility, relevant relational components to attract potential users of medical tourism from other countries. This relationship contributes to building the reputation of health centers with their public and generates reliability for patients, users and medical tourists.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Mason and Wright (2011, p. 164), the Framing Theory offers a “useful theoretical framework for investigating medical tourism websites” since, as Entman (1993, p. 52) states, it helps selecting “some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation”. In other words, framing refers to “how the media report on a topic or present an issue, thereby influencing public perceptions and opinions about the issue” (Park & Reber, 2010, p. 40). As expected, media assign certain meanings to issues “highlighting some aspects

of the information while omitting others” (ibid.). And, consequently, this influences how people think and act regarding certain topics (Capriotti & Losada-Díaz, 2018; Lu & Zhang, 2019; Luarn et al., 2015; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). Therefore, this methodological view facilitates the analysis of the online dialogue established by the hospitals of the sample with their international public and, at the same time, it allows us to observe whether this communication gives reliability and credibility to the medical institutions of the study.

The studies conducted until now about communication and health, and some directly related to medical tourism, have used Framing Theory (Bardhan, 2002; Lee et al., 2014; Mason & Wright, 2011; Park & Reber, 2010). On the one hand, because media (i.e., websites of the hospitals) are a convenient and reliable source of information about health. On the other, because they have “a significant impact on the public understanding of health issues, as well as on their health-related behavior” (Park & Reber, 2010, pp. 40-1).

Therefore, this study applies Framing Theory in its analysis following the research of Mason and Wright (2011) and Lee et al. (2014). Mason and Wright (2011) used it to examine how tourism websites inform in terms of an array of items: appeal, risk, convalescence, accreditation and interactivity and their sample was selected from a randomized search on the Internet. On the other hand, Lee et al. (2014) also used Framing Theory to analyze the communicational features used on the website of intermediaries.

Thus, our study is interdisciplinary in the areas of tourism, communication, health, and innovation. First, it provides an analysis based on public relations in an area that, in general, is examined from a marketing perspective which misses some of the nuances, in both language

and meaning (Topler, 2017) of the public relations discipline. Second, it provides valuable and helpful information for tourism and communication practitioners in medical tourism, which is even more relevant after the global COVID-19 pandemic. Third, it does not use a randomized sample, nor it focuses on the websites of intermediaries, but instead it analyses the online strategical communication of the 10 main world medical tourism hospitals (81 sites) according to the international ranking of the Medical Travel Quality Alliance (MTQA, 2019). The results should allow to understand how the content items published on the medical websites analyzed collaborate to generate reliability among the potential hospital users (Viñarás-Abad, 2013). In this way, we will check if the contents of the websites: 1- choose to provide a wide scope of information about the capacity of the institutions; 2.- create communication channels which allow bidirectionality, and 3.- select spokesmen who generate credibility.

3. METHODOLOGY

The general objective of the study is “to determine the main communication elements used on the websites of the leading medical tourism hospitals in order to attract potential international users”. Considering the theoretical approach and in order to achieve it, two research questions were formulated: *What kind of communication resources do the main 10 hospitals of medical tourism use on their websites?* and *What are the resources available on the websites of the hospitals to convey reliability and credibility to potential users around the world?*

Before collecting data, we defined the home website as the main unit of analysis, as well as the subsections specifically aimed at international visitors. Initially, it was discovered that the home page offered limited information for

medical tourism. Therefore, we focused our analysis on the sub-websites which specifically addressed medical tourists or offered relevant information to this sort of patients. In total, 81 pages were analyzed according to the following table:

Table 1

Hospitals and number of websites analyzed

Ranking	City, Country	Name of the hospital	Number of websites analyzed
1	Beirut, Lebanon	Clemenceau Medical Centre	6
2	Istanbul, Turkey	Anadolu Medical Centre	13
3	Amman, Jordan	The Specialty Hospital	5
4	Hamburg, Germany	Asklepios Klinik Barmbek	5
5	Bangkok, Thailand	Samitivej Hospital	15
6	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Prince Court Medical Centre	7
7	Toronto, Canada	Shouldice Hospital	5
8	Singapore	Cleneagles Hospital	12
9	Tel Aviv, Israel	Loewenstein Rehabilitation Hospital	5
10	Prague, Czech Republic	Pronto Therapy Centre	8
		Total	81

Source: Own elaboration, ranking from Medical Travel Quality Alliance (MTQA, 2019).

The Medical Travel Quality Alliance ranking (MTQA, 2019) was selected to identify the sample and access the data of the 81 websites and subsites analyzed of the 10 leading medical tourism hospitals of the world. The MTQA is an independent international organization that develops and promotes the highest standards

Table 2*Variables analyzed*

Research Questions	Variables	Dimensions
<p>1. What kind of communication resources</p> <p>- Textual</p> <p>- Communication Resources: Video, Audios, Photographs, Hypertexts (links)</p> <p>do the main 10 hospitals of medical tourism use on their website?</p>	Languages	What languages are used to provide information related to medical tourism on the websites of the hospitals selected, as well as whether they explicitly offer multilingual translators for their patients.
	Assistance with the travel	Whether they offer travel-related services, such as accommodation assistance with the hotel and/or visa, air ambulance, pick-up and transport to the airport, and whether tourism visits are also organized or whether specific packages of health and leisure are offered for patients and/or caregivers.
	Communication channels available (unidirectional and bidirectional)	In what way can users contact the hospital: email, online forms, telephone, whether there is a section for international patients and/or a department of public relations for foreign patients, online chat, blog, podcast, videos, and whether there are social networks like Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn or Instagram.
	Credibility and reliability	Whether an official logo of the hospital can be seen whether they are accredited or have an international certification of renowned medical quality, whether they are specialized in a specific medical procedure and explain it clearly, and whether they share testimonials of actual patients.
<p>2. What are the resources available on the websites of the hospitals to convey reliability and credibility to potential users around the world?</p> <p>- To keep a dialogue with users:</p> <p>Virtual visits</p> <p>Newsletters</p> <p>Links to share</p> <p>- To convey reliability and credibility</p>	Benefits	Whether general benefits of medical tourism are mentioned: fewer expenses, quality service, opportunity to travel, customized service, professional medical experience, cutting-edge technology, or less waiting time.
	Risks	Whether hospitals mention the potential post-surgery complications, the risk associated to the procedure and the legal proceedings.

Source: Own elaboration base don Capriotti, Carretón and Casteillo (2016), Mason and Wright (2011), and Lee et al. (2014).

of excellence in delivering treatment and care to medical tourists. It was created in Budapest in 2009 during the 2nd European Congress on Health Tourism as a response to the vast requests from hospital managers and facilitators of medical travels for a better understanding of

the protocols of special healthcare and the management of medical travelers.

The pattern of analysis used to determine the results in terms of strategic communication was a content analysis based on an ad hoc model created using three preceding studies. The

study was conducted between May and August 2019. In order to analyze the typology of communication resources used by hospitals, there is partial use of the method Capriotti et al. used in 2016 when they tested the level of interactivity of the websites of the most relevant art museums of the world. The variables of analysis associated to the healthcare field were based on the ones developed by Mason and Wright (2011, p. 171) and Lee et al. (2014, p. 643) in their studies about the framing of medical tourism websites.

Table 2 below shows how variables were used to answer each research question. Each dimension was coded either as 'present' or 'absent' (Tabla 2).

This is an exploratory study since it has analyzed 81 websites of the 10 leading hospitals worldwide in the field of medical tourism, as mentioned earlier, but it was not able to comprise the perspective of the users of the medical service.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding available media to interact with their patients, 90% (n=9) of the centers analyzed have an email address available for queries, and 70% (n=7) have an online registration form. Those which do not have an email, offer an online form and 60% (n=6) have both communication methods to ensure direct contact. All hospitals provide a contact phone number for consultations and 70% (n=7) have a specific section of services for international patients. However, only the Jordan Hospital (10%, n=1) has a public relations department addressed to both Arab and foreign patients (Figure 1).

It is interesting to note that none of the health institutions analyzed create podcasts and only 20% (n=2) of hospitals have a blog (Beirut and Singapore) and an online chat for direct queries

Figure 1

Department of Public Relations for Arab and Foreign Patients



Source: The Specialty Hospital in Amman, Jordan.

(Thailand and Singapore). The latter allows a bi-directional and immediate interaction between the patient and the hospital. On another note, it is also remarkable that none of the hospitals take into consideration the cultural specificities of their potential users, thus, do not adapt their communication strategies accordingly.

Regarding credibility and reliability, the results indicate that all hospitals analyzed (100%, n=10) have an official logo that is clearly identifiable on their website. In addition, 80% of healthcare institutions (n=8) are specialized in a medical procedure in particular and it is clearly explained. For instance, Anadolu Medical Centre of Istanbul (Turkey) specializes in oncology, the Hospital of Amman (Jordan) specializes in kidneys and cardiovascular diseases, Shouldice Hospital of Toronto (Canada) specializes in hernias and the Proton Therapy Centre of Prague (Czech Republic) in cancer. Furthermore, 70% of hospitals (n=7) have an accreditation or a renowned international certification and 80% (n=8) share testimonials of real patients. In most cases, the testimonials are recorded in videos (70%, n=7), and in one case (Proton Therapy Centre, Prague, Czech Republic) are only textual (10%, n=1). On the other hand, the lack of videos on websites is noteworthy. The compendiums of the presence in the press tell users of any institution about its quality or its renowned nature, just to mention some examples. In this case, only Gleneagles Hospital of

Singapore offers a compilation of its appearances in all sort of media (10%, n=1). However, in half of the cases (50%, n=5), hospitals have a news section, but these are press releases written by the hospital.

In terms of the emphasis on the benefits of the medical procedures, as expected, all hospitals emphasize their quality and customized service, and indicate the high professional experience of their doctors (100%, n=10). Half of hospitals analyzed mention the cutting-edge technology used in their surgeries (50%, n=5). However, less than half mention travel opportunities (40%, n=4) as a benefit to choose their hospital for medical treatment. Also, less than half emphasize the fast service as a benefit with hardly any waiting list (40%, n=4) and the lower costs of their medical procedures compared to other places around the world (10%, n=1).

Messages focusing on medical risks are a minority. Less than half mention the possible post-surgery complications (40%, n=4), the potential legal problems are only mentioned in 30% (n=3) of the websites, while none of them mention the possible risks of the procedures (n=0). In relation to the post-surgery services, which are a crucial element that may lead to a decision in this field of study, only 20% (n=2) of hospitals analyzed offer clear information about the post-surgery process after intervention. These were the hospitals on Canada and Czech Republic. The case of the Proton Therapy Centre in the Czech Republic is noteworthy since it is the only one that clearly offers a special and thorough service on how to monitor a post-surgery process remotely.

In this way, despite the great potential that corporate websites have to generate reliability and credibility towards potential patients, hospitals are missing the opportunity to create a communicational strategy for this purpose based

on a core element of public relations: risk management, whose relevance has been recalled by the global COVID-19 pandemic. They do not publish information, nor offer specific contact details given the case a post-surgery communication is needed, which would often be conducted in a remote manner (usually, patients return to their place of origin once they have received treatment, hence it is indispensable).

On another note, only a third of hospital websites analyzed introduce the destination from a tourism perspective. Therefore, hospitals in general choose to implement an individualistic communication strategy of their own business brand, instead of using a more cooperative communicative effort among all tourism organizations located in the same destination (Huertás, 2008; Fernández-Cavia & Huertas, 2014). Thus, they are missing the opportunity to generate synergies with local tourism companies, which aligns with the conclusion reached by Juan and Yingchuan (2020) in their study about the impact of the great sports events in local public. Regarding reputation, only one hospital, Gleneagles Hospital in Singapore, offers a compilation of its presence on both national and international media. The fact that healthcare centers do not include their media presence as a sign of recognition and prestige is noteworthy, as well as not using it as an element to generate engagement with users or to entice new future patients.

From a communication perspective, 30% of the websites can be identified as high quality or professional websites (n = 3), as they offer a very good communicative online strategy. On a second group, we find those that can be considered as intermediate level websites, which offer good communication tools but have potential to be improved. These represent the majority of the case studies analyzed (60%, n = 6). Finally, there is one website (10%, n = 1) that has

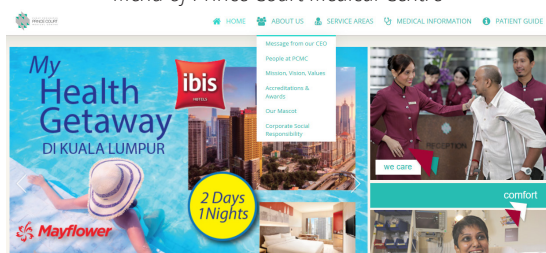
high deficiencies and has fewer elements that generate confidence based on the proposal of Viñarás-Abad (2013). This is the Asklepios Klinik Barmbek hospital in Hamburg, Germany. Their website is presented in German and offers an English subpage for international users, which is difficult to locate. In addition, it is the only one that does not offer email as a means of communication and does not have an international patient services section or public relations department. Neither does it inform about the destination or offer help to organize the trip.

Contrarily, the Prince Court Medical Centre of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, is the medical center which best fosters its communicational relationship with its international patients considering the services associated to public relations. First, its website is directly presented in English and the public relations department offers “tailored” care. For example: “If you prefer, we can also create a tailor-made program to suit any specific need.” It promises assistance in terms of tourism organization of the trip, thus offering steward services for international clients and, in addition, it provides all the standard communicational protocols as shown on Figure 2 of the menu where the hospital introduces itself.

It is interesting to note that the 10 best hospitals worldwide in this field opt for the website as the main communication channel with their public, and that the common element for contact is still the telephone. The use of networks which would allow to consolidate bidirectional interaction with users, thus increasing a level of reliability of hospitals with their public (Capriotti et al., 2016; Costa-Sánchez & Míguez-González, 2018), is certainly restricted. Moreover, it indicates that healthcare centers use somewhat disparaged communication elements. In this sense, all hospitals use graphic resources (pictures) to share their content (Capriotti & Losada-Díaz, 2018; Luarn et al., 2015), but no case showed immersive videos of “360° visit”, nor surveys for users to express their level of satisfaction with the service. Remarkably, only three of the 81 sites studied allowed to share content and none considers the cultural specificities of the potential users in order to adapt their communication strategies accordingly.

Figure 2

Menu of Prince Court Medical Centre



Source: Website of Prince Court Medical Centre of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The evidence of the touristic offer supported in collaboration with the International Hotel chain Ibis is noteworthy.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has explored how health institutions (i.e., hospitals) communicate through their corporate websites to convey reliability and credibility to establish relationships with users in the field of medical travel. The Framing Theory has illustrated that, in general, the main healthcare centers analyzed miss the opportunity to properly use the many possibilities of their corporate websites to build a reality that adds value, imprints personality and helps to make them unique and distinguishable. Although in some cases hospitals do use simple infographics to make a complex surgical procedure accessible,

like the Jordan-based Specialty Hospital. The dialogue between centers and patients could be better implemented, as well as the cultural specificities of the potential users could be considered. Such dialogic elements would contribute to improve awareness and to disseminate their singular values in a professional field which is quite competitive. This study indicates that hospitals are undergoing an embryonic phase in the communicative management model with their publics in the field of medical tourism, a field which may entail an opportunity for public relations professionals specially after the global COVID-19 pandemic.

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Who is afraid of the big, bad wolf? Representation of childhood fears through independent video game *Fobos*

¿Quién teme al Lobo Feroz? Representación de los miedos infantiles a través del videojuego independiente Fobos

Quem tem medo do lobo mal? Representação dos medos da infância através do videogame independente Fobos

10

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Abstract

Video Games, as cultural media, and a form of artistic expression, allow their users to approach topics of all kinds; from something concrete, like a historical conflict or a literary character, to abstraction, like a philosophical

current. Throughout this text we will deal with childhood fears, and we will analyze the indie video game *Fobos*, highlighting the way in which its features as a digital fictional product, its approach to the relevant topic and how it relates to children's literary imaginary turn this game

into an optimal piece to work childhood fears from school.

KEY WORDS

Video games, Childhood fears, Children's and young adult literature, *Fobos*, School.

Resumen:

Los videojuegos, como medios culturales y de expresión artística, permiten la aproximación de sus usuarias y usuarios a temáticas de toda índole; desde algo concreto, como un conflicto histórico o un personaje literario, hasta lo abstracto, como una corriente filosófica. A lo largo de este texto trataremos los miedos infantiles y analizaremos el videojuego independiente *Fobos*, incidiendo en el modo en que sus características como producto de ficción digital interactiva, su enfoque de la temática en cuestión y las relaciones que establece con el imaginario literario infantil lo convierten en un título óptimo para trabajar los miedos infantiles desde la escuela.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Videojuegos, Miedos infantiles, Literatura infantil y juvenil, *Fobos*, Escuela.

Resumo

Os videogames, como meios de expressão cultural e artística, permitem a aproximação de suas usuárias e usuários a temas de todos os tipos; do concreto, como um conflito histórico ou um personagem literário, ao abstrato, como uma corrente filosófica. Ao longo deste texto trataremos os medos infantis e analisaremos o videogame independente *Fobos*, enfatizando o modo como suas características como produto de ficção digital interativa, sua abordagem do assunto em questão e as relações que estabelece com o imaginário literário infantil tornam-se um ótimo título para trabalhar os medos infantis desde a escola.

Palavras-chave

Videogame, Medos infantis, Literatura infantil e juvenil, *Fobos*, Escola.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since they first appeared, video games entered the entertainment industry with great force. Thanks to their ability to adapt, both in terms of hardware and themes based on the interests and accessibility of their audience, they have become a leisure alternative suitable for both young people and adults.

Over the years their popularity has also increased, and they have gradually entered different paradigms, many of which, such as health, business and professional training, are completely removed from leisure. As Moreno Cantano and Venegas (2020) point out, "their transversal,

mutable, constantly updated character, have turned them into a permeable 'being' that play an increasingly leading role in political, economic, cultural and educational agendas" (p. 2). This feature, together with others such as their interactivity and immersive capacity, make video games an ideal means to bring all kinds of scenarios, problems and realities closer to their users.

These three features – their mutability and adaptive capacity, their popularity as a leisure alternative, and their possibilities in non-leisure areas – make video games an excellent means of representation. From our artistic and educational perspective, they are an ideal medium to

approach with young people an issue whose importance tends to be minimized: fears and how to face them.

In this study we will carry out a theoretical review of children's fears and the way in which they have traditionally been represented in children's and young adult literature (hereinafter, CYAL), one of children's main means of approaching reality. Second, we will discuss some defining features of video games understood as an artistic and expressive medium and as a product of interactive, digital fiction: the participation, interaction and immersion of the player are of special interest to develop a methodology that allows us to work on childhood fears with children and young adults through the attractive medium of video games. Third, we will present *Fobos*, a video game developed as part of a university project that uses the figure of the Big Bad Wolf and takes a tour of some of the CYAL classics, focusing on fear and how to face it. We conclude by relating *Fobos* to the literature previously discussed and justifying the potential of this video game to work on the fears of children and young adults.

1.1. FEAR AND ITS PRESENCE IN CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Fear is something that is present in our lives from childhood to adulthood, although its causes vary depending on our development and our experiences. It is therefore not surprising that it is a common and recurring topic in the creation of stories in general and in literature in particular. In this study, we will focus on how this is reflected in CYAL.

Although every culture has developed, over time, different stories of oral tradition, legends and popular works in general, there are some elements that are common to all of them (Coo-

per, 2000), such as settings (an old castle, a dark forest, a cave) and characters (witches, evil stepmothers, fairy godmothers). Some of these elements are very recurrent, immutable, so it is easy to identify them in numerous works in which other aspects, such as the main characters and the environment, do change. A clear example of this is the Big Bad Wolf: the quintessential, evil antagonist of childhood. This is the creature that tricks Little Red Riding Hood in order to eat her and her grandmother; the one that blows down the houses of the Three Little Pigs to, once again, eat them; and, also, the one that torments the Seven Young Goats that have been left alone at home. The Wolf is thus one of the most representative symbols of childhood fears in literature. It is also inevitably associated with forests, places where it is easy to get lost, as happens to Hansel and Gretel, and where there are all kinds of dangers, such as entering the house of a witch (for example, Baba Yagá in Slavic folklore) or discovering, as did poor Snow White, that a hunter plans to attack. All these situations, so familiar to most young readers, are some of the first encounters with anxiety, insecurity and fear in fiction. And the fact is that CYAL is so broad and, above all, so accessible to boys and girls that it is difficult to find any area or theme that is not reflected in some work. This makes it easier for us to address these questions with children in a simple and, thanks to the nature literary texts, pleasant way – especially those that are painful to deal with in a direct way, such as death or illnesses; or that can be complex and controversial, such as questions related to religion or affective-sexual education; or that are simply somewhat abstract, such as growing up or, in our case, fears. There are many works that address such issues, be it directly, as for example in the illustrated album of Margarita del Mazo *¡A mí no me comas!* (You are not going to eat me!) (2011) or placing fears as one of several

themes in the work or as a means to deal with another in a veiled way, as happens in *De verdad que no podía (I really couldn't)* (2001), written by Gabriela Keselman and illustrated by Noemí Villamuza.

After this brief incursion into CYAL and the presence in it of symbols associated with fear, it is time to ask ourselves what fear is exactly. According to Vivas et al. (2007), it is an “emotional warning signal that physical or psychological harm is approaching. Fear also involves insecurity with regards to one’s own ability to withstand or handle a threatening situation” (p. 25). As previously mentioned, fear is not an emotion that disappears with age. What happens is that, in general, we learn how to face it. Reyes et al. (2017) state that there is no correct way to face fear, but rather that any type of strategy will help: from avoiding conflict to emotional relief via third parties to facing it directly. These learnings begin in childhood, because something so natural and spontaneous as running next to an adult in search of protection, hiding or looking under the bed to make sure nothing is there are clearly childhood strategies to combat fear.

It may therefore be appropriate to help children to gradually get used to these kinds of situations as they happen. To do so, as Vallières (2009) suggests, we can use stimuli that frighten them in an indirect way from, for example, stories and movies and, we can add, video games, media that provide a safe environment to come into contact with and experience the situation in question.

1.2. VIDEO GAMES AS A NARRATIVE MEDIUM AND ENVIRONMENT FOR EXPERIMENTATION

Not only do video games, like stories, picture books or movies, offer a safe environment to experience situations that can cause fear and anxiety, as well as many other emotions, they also have many other features that make them a suitable medium for other purposes, including the creation of stories.

Videoludic works of fiction – a term we can understand as a synonym of video games – “present elements typical of narrative texts: characters, development of action, contextualization in time and space, and a powerful communicative intention” (Serna-Rodrigo, 2020). Moreover, these are not isolated and superficial stories that seek only entertainment. In many cases, video games have found inspiration in literature, which make it common to identify characters, places or situations which have already become part of our cultural baggage. For example, *Child of Light* (Yohalem, 2014) presents a classic story structure based on the hero’s journey and cites different, very well-known characters from universal literature, such as Hamlet, Dorothy, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White’s stepmother.

Video games also involve direct interaction with the players (Marín, 2015), making it easier for them to play a more active role. As Méndez (2021) puts it, this enables

the user to become completely immersed in the story and feel the character’s actions as if they were his/her own. That is why video games are an ideal medium for recreating reality and transmitting messages to the user, delving into various social problems. (p. 317)

If we extrapolate all the above to the field of education, we can appreciate the potential benefits that video games would have if, correctly selected, they were used in classrooms together with stories, novels and movies.

2. METHODOLOGY

Taking into consideration the approach of Prensky (2001), in which he stated the need for a pedagogy adapted to a new student profile defined by their familiarity with computer language, video games and the Internet, Zepeda et al. (2016) suggested three aspects to consider when providing new methodological proposals: this new student profile's taste for instruction within playful environments; their search for immediacy; and the importance they give to feeling constant progress – preferably based on attaining rewards. Under this premise, it seems clear that play-based learning and, within that, video games, is a highly efficient methodological style, especially from the perspective we offer in this work: bringing students into contact with an abstract and sometimes forgotten theme, namely fear.

We now describe how *Fobos* arose and how we decided to use it as the method with which to analyze the topic of educational games. *Fobos* was created in order to look at childhood fears from a fresh and innovative perspective. Video games are an expanding field that is increasingly popular among all ages, but especially among the younger generations. In addition, their simple mechanics, humor and constant references to characters from CYAL make them even more attractive to use in the classroom. *Fobos* also follows the classic structure of stories, simple and complete in itself (Lluch, 2003): initial situation, action and final situation. The narrative thread is based on conversations, which justifies and facilitates the use of a less

complex language that can make it easier for younger players to understand, although there are some textual interventions typical of omniscient narration. All of this has another positive implication, namely, as Colomer and Durán (2000) point out, that the act of telling stories through audiovisual media makes it easier to gradually become familiar with the literature and to gradually have access to ever more complex literary works.

Fobos began as a university project in the Arts degree at the Open University of Catalonia. It became imperative, therefore, to perceive video games as an artistic discipline, not just as a product and even less as mere entertainment. As with any work of art, it was necessary to take into account the context, endow it with a discursive intention and build it upon all the resources it offers as a specific medium. Furthermore, given that it generates an explicit relationship with traditional tales, the need to add a didactic and narratological perspective became clear. This, of course, was not the only thing that was taken into consideration. The most important thing and what in the end led to *Fobos* becoming a video game and not a comic or picture book, were the peculiarities of video games themselves, some of which we have already commented upon. For example, the active role that this medium demands of its players and that enables them to embody the main characters and feel more intimately the situations and experiences portrayed in the game. Another reason was the fact that the game provides a safe space in which it is possible to fail and constantly repeat puzzles and levels until a specific goal is reached. This gives *Fobos*, in particular, great pedagogical potential since it enables autonomous learning based on trial and error, always maintaining a motivation driven by the desire to complete the adventure. Finally, it should be noted that turning *Fo-*

bos into a videoludic fiction story links it directly with technology, which is a highly motivating element (García et al., 2014) for the general student profile we currently find in our classrooms.

The main theme of *Fobos* is fear in a very general sense. It does not seek to show specific conflicts or complex realities, but rather something much simpler: to suggest ways of managing this emotion from the dichotomy between facing fear or feeling from it. The simplicity of this approach influences its educational purpose and, at the same time, allows it to adopt an approach that is very close to that of classic tales. In short, it involves a relatively simple story that, among other things, teaches a lesson; but it is here where everything changes with respect to traditional formats. The readers can no longer be limited to a passive role in which they can only see the consequences of decisions made by a character to whom they are, to a certain degree, indifferent. On this occasion, thanks to the particular features of video games that we have been highlighting throughout the text, the players put themselves in the shoes of the main character and decide how to act.

We therefore believe that *Fobos* constitutes a valid methodological procedure for the goal pursued. But its creation also raised new questions that could both enrich this goal and help the development of new research possibilities. For example, what impact might this interactive quality of videogames have on children? Is it possible to give *Fobos* a pedagogical use based on this trait? Does bringing a video game into the classroom generate more interest in a particular topic?

Reflecting on what to do with this video game once it was created opened the door to numerous possibilities. Thus, once it was decided

that *Fobos* would become a video game, it was time to give shape to it.

3. RESULTS

Taking the above into consideration, the development of *Fobos*¹ reached its most formal aspect: its conversion into a functional program that allowed its users to interact with it as with any normative video game. To do this, RPG Maker VX Ace and a free engine – Arc Engine – were used, which allowed it to become a standard platform game. From this, other sections were completed taking into account the technical and computer characteristics: the images and animations were adjusted to the resolution of the program, and music was composed in a simple format that allowed it to be repeated –MIDI– throughout the game. Moving beyond these perhaps more technical questions, the content of *Fobos* will now be detailed, focusing on what really makes it a great product for the purposes discussed in this text.

First of all, it is worth pointing out the main theme of its story. *Fobos* is based on the famous story of Little Red Riding Hood, widely known by the general public and whose characters and events people are familiar with. Taking advantage of this fact, *Fobos* seeks to draw the attention of its players by offering a new rendering of the story in two ways: telling it through a less conventional means than written text; and by rewriting it using irony and humor. It is usual, given the taste for immediacy of children and adolescents today, to start the game with action and ignore the dialogues. This is why *Fobos* tries, from the start, to attract attention to itself: it offers an initial text (Figure 1) that quickly

¹ *Fobos* can be downloaded for free via the following link: https://mega.nz/file/RwskiC6B#EpGdV2BkiLzRMI2oc8Rz_O2WAF4ycZ1gXCJDJJxqFiI

opens a mystery (what has happened to Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother?) and places it in a contemporary context (the granny in question, for example, is a dab hand at social media).

Figure 1



In addition, once this introduction is over and the player has taken over the controls, he/she is immediately faced with a clean and clear setting, full of concrete elements that quickly encourage him/her to explore (a frog with a crown on a trunk, a note left on the ground, and so forth), which avoids excess information that could overwhelm players or cause them to not know where to go. Another noteworthy feature of *Fobos* is that, while Little Red Riding Hood is its backbone, it also makes use of numerous characters from popular literature, who offer brushstrokes that reformulate their own stories in order to get into the main theme, fear, through different reflections. An example of this are the clues provided throughout the game, which are none other than texts written by the famous Fearless John. While in the original story he is characterized precisely by never having found anything that can frighten him, in *Fobos* we realize that what happens is just the opposite. Some aspects of the story have been changed, and reading between the lines of his messages and what other characters tell us, it

is easy to see that, in the forest where *Fobos* takes place, Fearless John is truly scared (Figure 2).

Figure 2



It is also noteworthy that these notes that Fearless John has left along the way are dispersed throughout the different level, so players need to explore them if they wish to read them all. This is a secondary option and not a requirement to complete the game, but it enriches the experience. From an artistic perspective, it forces players to interact with their environment, to explore it, to mentally reconstruct the character that has written these messages, and so on. From a more educational point of view, it helps to work on patience and conveys the value of commitment in order to complete a task. Furthermore, although we will delve into the gameplay of *Fobos* later, it encourages players to try the different directions that the game allows them to take, suggesting that it might be interesting to break the dynamic of going only to the right ('forwards' according to the conventionalisms of video game platforms) and moving towards the end of the game. In addition, as there is no time limit or number of lives and, despite the brevity of the game, several save points, players can investigate and explore different options.

As already mentioned, humor plays a fundamental role in this game. This is not a resource that is used lightly; rather, *Fobos* uses it to develop its own discourse and help generate reflections on fear. Thanks to this, it is particularly enjoyable to play, as well as making it easier to provoke that counterpoint that was sought with respect to the original stories. In this regard, a number of questions in relation to the game begin to arise: What is it telling me? Why is the story different from the one I know? What relationship does this character, who belongs to another story, have with the main plot? Why is what it is telling me funny? Asking and solving these questions while playing is one of the bases of *Fobos*. All these elements have special importance within the game, not only due to their narrative load but, especially, because of what they mean from the interactive point of view. The characters address themselves directly to the person who is playing and, based on their actions (addressing them or ignoring them, exploring or not certain areas), they will change their dialogues. This breaking of the fourth wall, so typical of video games, favors immersion and also appeals to a sense of responsibility, which is also very interesting from an educational point of view.

In terms of gameplay, *Fobos* stands out for its simplicity. It's a platform game with very conventional mechanics: side scrolling with an option to jump and a button to interact with the game's elements. This approach is intentional since it has sought a gameplay that is established in the sector and is stimulating and familiar to regular players, which makes it easier to focus attention on other aspects of the story. In addition, the way of moving the main character is directly related to the main dichotomy of *Fobos* in terms of how to deal with fears: face

them or flee; which, in parallel, establishes an association between moving towards the left (backwards) and towards the right (forwards). This aspect is directly linked to the main scenes of the game: the confrontations with the Big Bad Wolf, which symbolizes fear itself. It is gigantic, aggressive-looking with very sharp teeth and many eyes that are fixed on Little Red Riding Hood. This appearance, surreal and imposing, seeks to make whoever is playing feel vulnerable on seeing him, which is why – together with the fact that the only gameplay options that *Fobos* gives consist of moving – the automatic reaction is to flee (move from left to right), seeking to move forward in the hope of reaching safety or losing sight of the wolf.

This escape can be done relatively simply since the obstacles on the way are easily surmountable. However, what *Fobos* seeks is not to defend that flight is the only possible solution to fear, but that we have the option of facing it. That is why, normally, the wolf will chase us at the same speed that Little Red Riding Hood runs; but just by turning around, the gameplay will change: the wolf will move back very slowly as soon as we make eye contact. If we resume our flight, it will chase us again; if we get too close, we will lose the game; if we keep our distance and move slowly towards it, it will end up leaving. These mechanics symbolize three ideas. First, that facing fear can be positive; we can simply examine it cautiously (turn round to look at the wolf), without exposing ourselves to danger. Second, that throwing yourself headlong at him, recklessly, is not the best solution. Finally, the importance of cultivating patience; because a fear is not overcome suddenly, there is no magic formula for it. It requires care, prudence and a period of time that, on occasions, we cannot control (the game presents a certain

rhythm and it is necessary to adapt to it). This can be uncomfortable, annoying and exasperating; it can take whoever is playing out of their comfort zone. This is something that fears also cause, but the message is that, sooner or later, this fear will go away.

In short, *Fobos* allows (at first even pushes) the option to flee. It is not something that is penalized because it is an alternative that we have in reality when facing a fear or conflict in general. It is a natural, even comfortable, response, and it avoids us being in a position of immediately deciding what we are going to do. The game also aims to focus on the importance of overcoming, no matter how long it takes to achieve it; the person who manages to face the wolf earlier is just as valid as the person who does not dare to do so until the end. Although it is true that in the final level there will come a moment when there is no longer an option of escaping, so that the only options available for the character will be to face the wolf or end the game. This seeks to symbolize extreme situations, the fact of finding oneself, literally, between a rock and a hard place. Although we have not thought about how to beat the wolf until now, the game itself gives us a decisive clue on how to do so.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Game-based learning constitutes, without doubt, an active methodology that responds to both the profile and the interests and tastes of children and adolescents today. It provides a playful environment for learning, implements achievement with immediate feedback and rewards, and makes progress visible, among many other aspects. Video games, as mentio-

ned throughout the text, are situated within this same methodological line, plus they also give rise to new possibilities thanks to some of their inherent features. For example, their direct link with technology, their intrinsic narratives typical of a multimodal text and, especially, their nature as an artistic medium, open to any kind of theme and representative intention.

In education, games have traditionally played an important role, although their presence, which is strong in early childhood education, fades during primary education and disappears in the final years of compulsory secondary education. From our perspective, we seek to defend the role of games – video games in this case – beyond the earliest ages, since they provide a safe environment for trial and error (Brull & Finlayson, 2016) and free expression. Furthermore, they can increase motivation and sometimes even manage to make students more interested in completing the proposed task than in finishing the class (Fernández et al., 2016). Of course, it is important to take care of which video games we take to class. This could open the door to another avenue: the educational interest involved in developing independent conventional video games that could both be interesting to the students and enable them to come into contact with different realities. We could place *Fobos* in this line.

In fact, we wanted this game to leave behind theory in order to test its performance in an educational environment. Thus, *Fobos* was taken to classrooms of the first and second years of compulsory secondary education at the Col·legi Santa Teresa de Jesús, in Tarragona. To do this, a small workshop² divided into

2 Comments about the workshop can be found on the school's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/545243635611440/posts/2195437033925417/?sfns=scwspmo>

three parts was designed: a brief presentation of the game by its creator; a game time of half an hour (the time needed to complete it, even if you wanted to explore, look for notes and so on); and a short reading comprehension questionnaire that would give rise to shared feedback and a discussion that were very interesting. As this was an unstructured dynamic with a small sample, we did not want to present it in terms of research and results for this article, although we intend to do so soon in order to obtain valuable data that can enable us to continue refining both *Fobos* and any activity that we might derive from the game. What we can say is that the workshop was very well received in terms of motivation and interest and, based on the debate, we were able to assess how the students perceived and got involved in the activity. The most notable aspect was the ease with which the symbolism of the game was interpreted, since most of the group understood both the theme of the video game and the role of the wolf and the reason for the mechanics selected to work through it. The proposal, however, is not limited to carrying out this activity; we are also working on the design of materials for didactic proposals related to the curriculum of the different educational levels and that are part of the prospective of this line of research.

In conclusion, video games are not only an ideal means of artistic expression for the representation of any theme or symbolism; they are also a versatile resource for today's classrooms. They adapt to the new student profile and are open to a wide variety of proposals and dynamics that will promote motivation and learning. In this regard, we believe *Fobos* is a promising alternative and opens the door to new lines of research and didactic proposals that might be interesting to explore. We also believe in the potential that the creation of new video games along the lines of *Fobos* could have: video games that take advantage of the medium's intrinsic features in order to, without being instrumentalized, facilitate the introduction of complex, delicate and/or abstract topics in the classroom.

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