Complexity, personification and repetition: aesthetic abstraction in international relations theory and game studies

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Preface

This dissertation was the outcome of a proposal approved by a review committee in December of 2020, and in many ways an extension of a major research paper written for my Master's degree in 2016. It was largely funded by the University of Ottawa. I'd like to acknowledge the guidance and feedback (not to mention patience) provided by my supervisor Prof. Mark Salter and other reviewers, in particular Prof. Miguel de Larrinaga and Dr. Francois Lozier. I'd also like to acknowledge the contribution of my friends, especially Benjamin Miller and Samuel Hacker, who were early sounding boards for most of this project. This dissertation would also not have been possible without the support (in basically every sense of the word) of my parents, Ken and Giselle Kishibe, or Meethu Ann George. Aside from these contributions the writing, research and argumentation are my original work (for better or worse).

Abstract

It is no longer a novel observation to claim that video games have become an increasingly ubiquitous and influential form of popular media. Along with this increased public presence, a relatively new and relatively small body of scholarly literature has developed around placing games within their cultural contexts ("game studies"). Given how frequently games make reference to key topics in the field (war, trade, civilization, etc.) what or how the study of video games might contribute to international relations (IR) continues to be a question worth exploring deeply. It is the goal of this project to undertake such a study, with the specific aim of addressing what contribution video games as aesthetic objects can make to IR theory. This project is particularly interested in how games about politics offer multiple ways to navigate their narratives, and how this open formal structure offers unique ways of thinking about politics through ludic representation. Framed on the one hand by efforts in IR theory to turn to interdisciplinarity (namely the "aesthetic turn") and theories in game studies literature outlining the aesthetic dimensions of the medium on the other (namely the neo-baroque and procedural rhetorics), it will do so by conducting a formalist analysis of several "political simulators" with an eye to investigating the multiple ways games depict their narratives, the possible conceptual relationship between traversing these open structures and what this understanding of play might mean in political theoretical terms.

Introduction

As video games have become an increasingly visible medium in both commercial and cultural terms, the past decade has seen a rising interest in both scholarly and non-scholarly analyses seeking to grapple with what influence gaming has or can have on an increasingly global audience. Forty-odd years on from their roots as a niche hobby of mostly younger boys, video games have become the subject of a world-wide industry with equally diverse communities of consumers all serving to turn both the production and consumption of games into high-profile cultural and political events. This has been particularly true in literary and media studies fields, where "game studies" have emerged as a distinct field of research on the ontology and epistemology of games as a cultural and philosophical object. International relations scholars have also noticed the increasing influence of this medium, particularly as games have become highly-consumed representations of traditional topics of IR research (i.e. war, trade, diplomacy, etc.) and traditional topics of IR research have begun including aspects of gaming culture as part of their concern (the American military starting e-sports teams, ISIS using video game footage for recruiting material, the WHO regulating video game addiction). While there is some precedent for bridging these two interests, these scholarly treatments of the political dimension of gaming have remained largely parallel and room for a systematic interdisciplinary engagement with what taking games as an artistic medium seriously might yield for approaching theoretical questions in IR in new ways. Framed by the aesthetic turn in IR theory, this dissertation seeks to expand on both IR interventions into art and art form as avenues for theorization and explore how an emerging medium like video games might fit into these lines of inquiry. Supplemented by game studies literature on procedurality and neo-baroque aesthetics establishing the nature of

ludic meaning-making, this dissertation will conduct a videogame formalist analysis of three games about politics in order to draw out how ludic representation might reframe recurring questions in IR theory.

Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to contribute to the aesthetic turn literature by fleshing out some examples of how playing games in a critical and serious way can shed light on a unique and increasingly popular mode of political representation. In seriously engaging with the video game as an aesthetic and philosophical object, this dissertation will thus explore how thinking about the functioning of politics (institutions, events, actors, etc.) can be fundamentally guided by the medium (through play, rules, interactivity, etc.). This study seeks to explore this connection in the form of a close analysis of three games commonly referred to as political simulators. The dissertation is broken up into six overall parts:

In the first section, this dissertation will examine the IR literature on incorporating art and art theories in IR theory. This means providing an overview of the "end of IR" arguments about critical reappraisals of mainstream IR theoretical approaches since the turn of the millennium, an overview of the "aesthetic turn" and various attempts to incorporate art theory into analyses of the international, as well as an overview of the "pop culture and world politics" agenda aimed at examining the role of pop culture in forming contemporary political life (among other things). In making the connection between aesthetics and thinking about international politics, this thesis is contextualized by the critical literature in IR produced by the arguments around the fallout of the Third Great Debate and 9/11, particularly those revolving around challenges to the traditional disciplinary boundaries established by 20th century social science rationalism. This is typified by

the “end of IR” argument that international relations have more broadly entered a prolonged period of theoretical instability even as international events become increasingly complex and heated, as well as the various “turns” towards interdisciplinary methods and topics IR scholars have embarked on to make up the difference. This thesis outlines how these arguments provide the theoretical framework for the treatment of art objects and art theory as subjects of international relations research. Within this critique of IR disciplinary boundaries this section also outlines the main arguments of the so-called “aesthetic turn,” or the engagement with art as both a material and theoretical critique of the Enlightenment rationalist assumptions underlining much of mainstream IR research most notably put forward by Bleiker, as well as examples of how aesthetic IR engagements have worked in different mediums. Finally, this section also situates the IR treatment of video games within the main arguments (with some examples) of how this engagement with aesthetics has been applied to popular art and media specifically. This section should give the theoretical basis for how the study of media and culture have been appropriated into IR; turning the focus of study away from the typical sites of agency in IR (namely states, men, and war) and towards the proliferation of possibilities opened up by interdisciplinary attempts to grapple with how art objects can be worthy of study (as products of international production chains or reflections of ideological tendencies) and how art theory can be appropriated to reexamine international phenomena from different theoretical traditions (such as Bleiker’s project of using poetry to oppose aesthetics to mimetics).

In the second section, this dissertation engages in a literature review of how games and video games specifically have been treated within existing IR literature as well as where room for a sustained theoretical intervention might exist. This means providing an overview of the role

game theory has played in IR theory as a heuristic for rationality as well as examining the different approaches thinkers in IR have considered with regards to video games while highlighting the opportunity for a more systematic engagement with scholarship on video games. This means providing an overview of the main arguments for the (perhaps infamous) use of game theory in IR. It also provides an overview of the extant IR research on video games, which while limited covers a broad range of topics within critical and pop cultural literature. While some of this research has touched on video games and even made connections to game studies, the focus of IR interest in gaming remains limited to finding reproductions of its own existing disciplinary interests. As Ciută argues, the attention paid to popular games about topics that are close to home, such as war, militarism, conquest and imperialism betray an assumption of knowledge superiority that ultimately comes down to chiding game developers for not accurately representing reality. However, this superiority elides the opportunity to engage with video game communities engaged in "a kind of 'every-day theorizing' carried out by non-academics 'in and through every-day practices'.[1]" In the context of the aesthetic turn this dissertation seeks to explore what unique perspectives games (and playing them) bring to thinking about recurring questions in IR theory. Rather than litigating their mimetic accuracy, this dissertation seeks to engage games on their own terms as aesthetic representations of politics intervening in the gap between reality and representation.

Third, this dissertation will define some theoretical concepts pulled from game studies and media studies more broadly that are crucial for understanding game aesthetics. This will be anchored in an overview of how games and play have been conceptualized in philosophy and the

[1] Ciută, "Call of Duty: Playing Video Games with IR," 204-205.

social sciences in the past, as well as providing an overview of how video games are construed as aesthetic objects through Bogost's procedural rhetoric and Ndalianis' account of the neo-baroque. To ground these discussions in social theory, this dissertation maps out some major examples of the use of games and game play in the social sciences, such as Wittgenstein's use of games to understand language functionally, Derrida's use of play as a critical heuristic tool, and crucially Huizinga's anthropological concept of the "magic circle" and the connection it makes between play and social life. These various understandings of games and play as tools for interpreting social phenomena in the humanities set the stage to unpack the first key approach to understanding how games work as such, namely the concept of procedurality in media studies (particularly as articulated by Murray and Flanagan) and Bogost's concept of procedural rhetorics in particular. This account of digital media (games especially) being expressive by virtue of the representative power of the digital processes (computer code, user interfaces, game rules, etc.) which make them up are useful for interpreting a game as an aesthetic object. In this light, games can be understood to convey meaning as expressive works with formal properties rather than just cultural objects embedded in broader social formations. This in turn provides the bedrock of a theoretical framework (from the side of game studies) for approaching games as a political medium capable of the aesthetic abstraction of events and ideas through representing them via interactive procedural systems. However, as Bogost points out while games might be primarily about their procedural elements, they are hardly reducible to them. While the broader deployment of games and the argument of procedurality in particular might give video games some coherent ontological basis, Bogost nonetheless argues that the interpretive power of procedurality is drawn from precisely when the hard-coded elements of games create the "procedural gap" of interacting with the real world, and as such interpretations of games also

encourages engaging with the cultural context of a given work. In addition to the formalist interpretations of procedural rhetorics, then, this dissertation also connects its analysis of video games to Ndalianis' concept of the neo-baroque. Grounded in the work of thinkers like Eco and Aarseth, Ndalianis argues that the structure of narrative in contemporary media is not only increasingly complex and non-linear in technical terms, but also increasingly embedded in economic and material networks (film studios, franchising, sequels etc.). The result is that an excess of paratextual and metatextual content technically separate from a work of art has become an integral part of form in contemporary media, evocative of the consciously ostentatious character of the baroque period. Ndalianis (among other writers) have included video games in this trend, both as highly complex cultural and technical works made up of reference, allegory and non-linear gameworlds, but also as parts of multimedia franchises connected to parallel works that spiral off into a greater whole. Between these two understandings of video game meaning-making (as formal works that express themselves through representative processes and as cultural objects through channeling a wider context of paratextual and metatextual material), this dissertation approaches video games as art works also capable of coherently intervening in Bleiker's aesthetic epistemological gap.

From this understanding of video games as aesthetic objects capable of expressing meaning, the fourth section approaches the study of this meaning and its implications for political thought. Some prior work in IR has been done to highlight how an IR scholar ought to study video games (particularly comments by Robinson and Berents and O'Brien), which tends to focus on taking note of the formal characteristics of a game (rules, written narrative, visual and aural elements) often with reference to procedurality. While useful, methods taken out of

game studies literature might offer the opportunity to comprehensively bring the different understandings of game meaning-making together on their own terms. Bleiker does something similar when they ground their analysis of the political character of poetry (filtered through a Kantian account of aesthetics-as-sublime) in the interpretive dimensions of the linguistic turn, arguing that the way poetic conventions complicate more straightforward linguistic conventions is itself a political mediation "between language and socio-political reality.[2]" For Bleiker, much of the value of studying poetry within an IR context is precisely methodological, as it encourages reading with an open-minded and imaginative sense of how poetry unsettles the usual flow of language. In a similar vein, where Bleiker relies on a distinct approach to poetry as an aesthetic medium this dissertation draws on the game studies literature on formalism (itself derived from Russian formalism) as a concrete understanding of how games formally work as art objects and queue aesthetic encounters for players. This dissertation relies on both the formal and affective/cultural dimensions of games as key to the experience of video game play, and thus key to understanding how games inspire distinct aesthetic experiences whose abstractions can reframe questions in IR theory. As writers like Mitchell and Van Vught argue, video games would benefit from returning to more closely examine the early Russian formalists (particularly Shklovsky) and reappropriate key formalist concepts like the 'de-familiarization effect' (or the conscious subversion of formal principles in a work) and the 'dominant' (or the identification of the mediating themes of a work). By emphasizing the role of a game's formal properties, both as they are reasserted and subverted, Van Vught argues that a video game formalism encourages the study of games that focuses on procedural limits of interactivity, but nonetheless also encourages

[2] Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (New York: Palmgrave Macmillan, 2009), 93.

contextualizing the play of these formal dimensions in the broader genre and literary categories they comment on.

Armed with this concrete understanding of how to analyze games as both procedurally expressive and works of neo-baroque excess, the fifth section of this dissertation applies these various lenses of game studies to three cases: Trans Fiction Systems' 1988 game *Hidden Agenda*, LRDGames' 2015 game *Rogue State* and Nostalgames' (formerly Kremlingames) 2021 game *Collapse: A Political Simulator*. These games are "political simulators," which this dissertation focuses on for a few specific reasons. While never as popular commercially as, say, first person shooter games, the political simulator genre is nevertheless a relatively old genre and procedurally often has the clear goal of recreating the logic of how a particular event or political process unfolds. As a result, political simulators are especially appropriate for this analysis both in covering a broad range of gaming conventions across time and also applying these conventions to thinking directly about politics. As they clearly consciously engage with the intersection between representations of political processes and gameplay (whether for pedagogical or entertainment reasons, or both) in a way that the typical military shooter does not. If nothing else, political simulators are not necessarily about war in a way military shooters almost exclusively are, while often sharing the outlandish pop cultural affectations that dance around the edges of video games as a whole (space, zombies, movie references, etc.). Despite these considerations, however, political simulators are understudied in IR video game literature, and thus are prime candidates for an extensive engagement with how thinking about politics and video games meet.

Informed by the engagement with concepts drawn from game studies, the last part of this dissertation will pursue a close analysis of how these games play, how a player encounters different facets of politics over the course of playing them, and highlight a few ways in which these games as aesthetic representations of the political offer unique ways to think about discrete questions in IR theory. Framed by the above theoretical engagement with play and meaning-making through game form, this dissertation ultimately finds three examples of dominant themes that emerge out of a formalist analysis of the three subject political simulators, namely; complexity, personification and repetition. Each of these themes are derived from observations about how the constituent parts of the subject political simulators interact as formal elements of a broader work, defamiliarizing and "making strange" what might be familiar about more typical abstractions of politics found in IR literature, from conceptions of time to the nature of theoretical abstraction to political agency. In this way, games and game studies present some novel ways of approaching thinking through issues in IR theory by reformulating them in ludic terms. When restaged as subjects of play, games open these issues up to examination in a different light where (for instance) certain ambiguities are central rather than marginal.

Chapter 1: The end of IR

Much of the present IR research into video games (as well as pop culture and aesthetics more generally) is contextualized by a dissatisfaction with the scope of more traditional or mainstream IR theory. This can be shown by following the line of argumentation in critical IR theory asserting an "end of IR." Typically cast as an opposition to the overreliance on quantitative research methodologies (and the ideological assumptions behind their rationalist

justifications) in realist and liberal schools at the turn of the millennium, the "end of IR" argument attempts to push the theoretical horizon for both what ought to be considered legitimate objects of study for international study fields as well as how to think about them. Emerging out of post-structuralist and feminist critiques of social science, the "end of IR" argument casts these fields as limited to analyzing the same handful of topics (i.e. states and statesmen) with the same handful of analytical tools (i.e. rationalism and statistics). This has both ignored past attempts to diversify the discipline and given rise to various "turns" towards interdisciplinarity as diverse communities of IR scholars have prodded at the edges of international studies or outright proclaiming its "end." In an attempt to contextualize the aesthetic turn as part of a broader disciplinary tendency towards an epistemological and ontological fracturing this chapter provides an overview of this argument, which while by no means a new argument is nonetheless crucial in establishing the foundations of the kinds of theoretical gaps into which the aesthetic turn intervenes, in particular the logic behind the epistemological and ontological challenges mounted by both the internal disciplinary critiques posed by the "end of IR" literature as well as the various "turns" that have emerged since the end of the Cold War, and suggest that a dialectical understanding of these theoretical tensions might hint at the role culture, and specifically play, can serve in better exploring them.

As Baele and Bettiza point out, the main context in which to understand the proliferation of interdisciplinary turns in IR is the "end of IR theory" largely held around the turn of the millennium. Framed by both long-running criticisms of more established disciplinary dogmas (namely the "Great Debates" and early turns towards linguistics) and discrete events (namely the fall of the Soviet Union and 9/11), the "end of IR" debates formally articulated both

epistemological as well as ontological critiques of mainstream IR theory that set the stage for the turn literature to take off.[3] As Sylvester argues, the theoretical challenges of the early critical theoretical turn in IR beginning in the 1980s "was less a mechanism of boundary marking for IR than an assault on all the markers of a narrow state-centric, elite-oriented, Great Power field[4]" and an opportunity for "[c]ritical theorists, post-structuralists, and feminists broadened IR to include more places, people, actors, processes, and ways of knowing than IR had heretofore contemplated.[5]" For Dunne et al., for instance, the prominence of alternative theoretical social science approaches in IR study even points to a breakdown in what theory itself is meant to be or do.[6] In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks Smith gave a concrete example of a fundamental reappraisal of IR as a social science capable of neutrally observing objective facts about politics when they asked whether rational choice theory worked "because it is right, or because it presents itself, and becomes accepted, as the truth." Smith thus questions the very integrity of the relationship between the underlying assumptions of IR theory and IR practice necessarily blurs the line between scholarship and the politics it claims to simply observe. For Dunne et al., this perspective even suggests the possibility of dispensing with IR theory altogether: "[n]ot only are some main- stream rationalists calling for a turn away from the `isms' but a post-structuralist-inspired textbook on IR also recommends that theories be set aside in favour of 20 salient questions about world politics…It is almost as though theory has gone into hibernation in the aftermath of the third/fourth debate, such that it is again possible to imply that IR academics can have unmediated access to a real world that exists independently of ideas, values, behaviours and

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[3] Stephane J. Baele and Gregorio Bettiza, "'Turning' everywhere in IR: on the sociological underpinnings of the field's proliferating turns," *International Theory* 13 (2021): 315.
[4] Christine Sylvester, "Whither the International at the End of IR." *Millenium* 35, no. 3 (2007): 553.
[5] Sylvester, "Whither the International," 553.
[6] Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen and Colin Wight, "The end of International Relations theory?" *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 3, (2013): 406.

experiences.[7]" Unsurprisingly, these questions about the ends and limits of IR also have ontological dimensions.

As Sylvester also points out, part of the claims that IR is at an end as a discipline has been spurred on by attempts to move past the discipline's traditional focus on particular objects of study. According to Sylvester, the theoretical challenges of the early critical theoretical turn in IR beginning in the 1980s presented criticisms of traditionally state-centric mainstream approaches motivated by a more expansive conception of what appropriate objects of IR study might be:

> The field of IR easily names and locates these and many other activities of an international relations where it is expected to be. Yet much of contemporary international relations eludes IR. We missed the Trabant army driving through the Berlin Wall, in part because the field did not imagine that average people doing average things could end a bipolar balance of power.[8]

Beyond a dissatisfaction with the ontological disciplinary limits of IR, the "end of IR" agenda also expresses a concern that the disciplinary focus on particular objects of study go on to also create the worlds in which those objects predominate. For instance, in Burke et al.'s call for a planetary account of politics "from the end of IR," IR's focus on "capitals and ministries, the weapons and militaries, the rituals of diplomacy and trade, and the United Nations' modernist headquarters in Manhattan[9]" elides "the real the planet now presses upon us – of industrialised and profit-driven human societies utterly and ever more dangerously enmeshed with the biosphere, the world of things, rivers, forests and animals, whose rhythms and survival are utterly marked by our processes and are ever more in doubt.[10]" As a result, the "end of IR"

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[7] Dunne et al., "The end of International Relations theory?" 415.
[8] Sylvester, "Whither the International," 551.
[9] Anthony Burke, Stefanie Fishel, Audra Mitchell, Simon Dalby, and Daniel J. Levine. "Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR." *Millenium* 44, no. 3 (2016): 504.
[10] Burke et al., "Planet Politics," 504.

research agenda sets up the "turn" agenda in offering an opportunity to examine alternative objects of research beyond the static focus of more mainstream approaches to IR.

These attempts at reworking (or abandoning) IR at a fundamental level, however, have also led to a sociological fracturing of the discipline. As Sylvester argues, the "end of IR" can be understood not only as a theoretical reality but also a concrete description of the state of the discipline. Pointing to the proliferation of specialized subsections for larger disciplinary conferences like the International Studies Association, Sylvester concludes that the theoretical fractures within IR caused by events like the end of the Cold War or 9/11 would go on to "form settled camps, each with delineated subject matter, key personages and texts, and range of camp-preferred theories and methods,[11]" where "the sheer proliferation of articulated and aggregated IR interests suggests that there is no agreement today about what constitutes the international and its relations and how to study them.[12]" While Sylvester acknowledges that this increasing lack of a formal structure to even mainstream schools of thought is a good inasmuch as it entails a democratization of the discipline, it has also entailed a professional siloing that produces "many camp monologues…being delivered simultaneously[13]" rather than an IR capable of comprehensively addressing an array of topics. Thus, the "end of IR" debate can be seen as not only a theoretical challenge to the foundations of the discipline, but also a sociological reality that informs the research agenda of the "turns."

[11] Sylvester, "Whither the International," 553.
[12] Sylvester, "Whither the International," 553.
[13] Sylvester, "Whither the International," 555.

It is in this context of questioning the foundational epistemological and ontological boundaries of IR that attempts to turn to both interdisciplinary approaches to theorizing about traditional IR topics as well as objects of study from other disciplines can be understood. Beale and Bettiza trace these turns to the linguistic turn in philosophy in the 1980s (itself a product of Rorty's work in the late 60s), which in turn prompted IR scholars to look to the role of language and discourse in their own research ultimately culminating in early articulations of constructivism and securitization theory in the mid-1990s.[14] The subsequent turns Beale and Bettiza identify (from the emotional, visual, practice and material) not only continue from the epistemological and ontological critiques raised by the "end of IR" agenda, but also raise their own concerns regarding theory and research practice in IR beyond positivist or rationalist approaches. For instance, in outlining the queer turn in IR Richter-Montpetit describes how trading the stability of both heterosexuality and cissexism as a default subject position that exists prior to politics for a contingent 'queer' political subject allows for an inquiry that begins with how "subject-making itself is a political process," and "trouble and destabilize – *queer* – 'regimes of the normal' ('normal' versus 'perverse') and show their contingent and thus *political* character.[15]" Hom describes the temporal turn in IR as an agenda that "engages time as a theoretical tool and political phenomenon in its own right," where "*critical IR scholars turn to time as a means of destabilising hegemonic foundations* – the international system, the logics of modernity, rationalist social science, to name a few.[16]" For Schindler and Wille, the practice turn is grounded in a critique of social practices, where by "unmasking the hidden workings of power,

[14] Baele and Bettiza, "'Turning' everywhere in IR," 316-317.
[15] Melanie Richter-Montpetit, "Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex (in IR) But were Afraid to Ask: The 'Queer Turn' in International Relations." *Millenium* 46, no. 2 (2018): 224.
[16] Andrew R. Hom, "Silent Order: the Temporal Turn in Critical International Relations." *Millenium* 46, no. 3 (2018): 305.

social critique aims to realize a particular vision of emancipation.[17]" For Chandler, the global turn consists of moving beyond traditional concepts of states and citizenship in recognizing that "[w]e no longer live in a territorialised world, where we are mapped in terms of bounded political communities with clear points of connection between states and citizen-subjects," due to "the remarkable shift in the speed and spread of economic and social communications and interactions, which is held to have negated previous frameworks of political theory and practices.[18]" In these ways "the turn" agenda clearly continues the epistemological challenge to IR's disciplinary boundaries established by the "end of IR" agenda.

In a similar way, the turns also reflect the ontological pursuit of new objects of research beyond the traditionally static focus in IR suggested by the "end of IR" agenda. Callahan, for instance, describes the visual turn as part of a "need to resist the rational methods and the linear teleological narratives that frame our understanding of ourselves and the world…and suggested that we look at poetry, art and film as alternative sources to understand international relations.[19]" Mac Ginty describes the material turn as a "debate on the dynamic relationship between agency and objects," where "the meanings of materiality are often mediated through human interaction that renders an object into a symbol or device for production, consumption, compliance, or resistance" which they use to frame their research on the role 4x4 vehicles play in the political economies of conflict zones.[20] Lapointe and Dufour give a further example in describing the

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[17] Sebastian Schindler and Tobias Wille, "How Can We Criticize International Politics?" *International Studies Quarterly* 63 (2019): 1016.
[18] David Chandler, "The Global Ideology: Rethinking the Politics of the 'Global Turn' in IR." *The Author* 23, no. 4 (2009): 534.
[19] William A. Callahan, "The Visual Turn in IR: Documentary Filmmaking as a Critical Method." *Millenium* 43, no. 3 (2015): 895.
[20] Roger Mac Ginty, "A material turn in International Relations: the 4x4, intervention and resistance." *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 5 (2017): 858.

goals of the historical turn, where "[o]ne of the theory's core contentions is that geopolitical relations among states are embedded in, and vary in relation with, social property regimes. Here, institutionalized patterns of political organization and their characteristics— imperial, hierarchical, anarchical, sovereign, levels of centralization, mode of taxation—are historicized in relation to the nondeterminist, yet noncontingent history of class relations in different social-property regimes.[21]" In a similar vein, Hamati-Ataya breaks the reflexive turn in IR down into both a self-awareness of a researcher's perspective as well as in "a more maximalist way as a methodological self-critique operating through an epistemic or theoretical 'bending back' of one's thought.[22]" As a result, the turn agenda also reflects the "end of IR" agenda's ontological pursuit for alternative objects of research.

In addition to extending the epistemological and ontological disciplinary critiques raised by the "end of IR" debates, Beale and Bettiza point out how the turns in IR even reflects a similar sociological pluralism. However, where Sylvester notes that the sociological end of IR had at least a democratizing effect for all of its overall theoretical incoherence[23], Beale and Bettiza argue that the sociological dimensions of the turn agenda reveal a tension between the often-radical ideological aims of questioning the fundamentals of the discipline and their ultimate effects. Citing Kristensen's sociological autopsy of IR, Beale and Bettiza point out that their work "clearly reveals a structure of the discipline solidly anchored in three major, central, and interconnected 'citation camps' corresponding to the realist, liberal institutionalist, and

[21] Thierry Lapointe and Frederick Guillaume Dufour. "Assessing the historical turn in IR: an anatomy of a second wave of historical sociology." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25, no. 1 (2012): 100-101.
[22] Inanna Hamati-Ataya, "Reflectivity, reflexivity, reflexivism: IR's 'reflexive turn' – and beyond." *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 4 (2012): 673.
[23] Christine Sylvester, "Experiencing the end and afterlives of International Relations/theory." *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 3, (2013): 613.

constructivist traditions, which still 'occupy a central role in the field'[24]" with a periphery of smaller camps of smaller critically-oriented communities "corresponding to tight-knit groups of scholars engaging with each other's work more than with the mainstream of the three major *isms*.[25]" Thus, the fractured camp structure Sylvester describes can be more specifically understood "as a conglomerate of 'different fields of forces'[26]" tenuously held together by a broad understanding of IR. For Beale and Bettiza, this bounded pluralism also suggests that the turns are attempts by critically-minded scholars to establish their credibility in peripheral fields of forces, which inevitably also means in the field of IR generally. The result is a dependence on the orthodoxy by the heterodoxy, which never quite manages to emancipate itself entirely from a field which is repeatedly declared over. As Beale and Bettiza point out, the supposed heresy of suggesting a turn is somewhat undermined by the fact that a turn can only be taken seriously by an already established scholar in already established methodologies or journals in already established institutions.[27] According to Beale and Bettiza, instead of undermining the hegemonic positions of IR the turns become "strong signals of criticality and claims that studying one particular object holds the key to oppose the mainstream, leading not only to the establishment of a range of new critical communities but also to increased competition and friction among them.[28]" This is obviously not to cynically suggest that the substantive epistemological and ontological criticisms raised by the turn agendas are invalidated as a result. But Beale and Bettiza's observations do hint that some alternative approach to 'another turn' may be required in order to frame an IR investigation into video games.

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[24] Baele and Bettiza, "'Turning' everywhere in IR," 329.
[25] Baele and Bettiza, "'Turning' everywhere in IR," 329.
[26] Baele and Bettiza, "'Turning' everywhere in IR," 329.
[27] Baele and Bettiza, "'Turning' everywhere in IR," 332.
[28] Baele and Bettiza, "'Turning' everywhere in IR," 324.

One alternative approach to thinking the relationship between video games as an art form and IR as a discrete discipline which includes its own ‘end’ is Ollman’s conception of Marxist dialectics, especially the way Ollman emphasizes the open character of contradictions as a key part of dialectical inquiry. According to Ollman, internal contradictions are one of the main conceptual relations that distinguish the dialectical method from commonsensical or otherwise non-dialectical thinking. Where an emphasis on social relations which are constantly changing is foregrounded, “paths of development do not only intersect in mutually supportive ways but are constantly blocking, undermining, otherwise interfering with, and in due course transforming one another.[29]” For Ollman, internal contradictions emerge in Marx’s work as one of the main ways of understanding how a set of relations change: “[t]he processes that compose any complex organism change at different speeds and often in incompatible ways. Viewed as internally related tendencies (i.e., as elements in each other and in a common whole) whose forward progress requires that one or the other give way, they become contradictions. The resolution of these contradictions can significantly alter the totality. Examining totalities for their contradictions is a way of looking for the sources of conflict, sources that may be apparent even before a conflict fully materializes.[30]” As such, Ollman argues that the immanent contradictions within a totality also offers Marx the opportunity to understand its potential futures, given shape by the existing or potential resolution of present contradictions.[31] In this light, Beale and Bettiza’s argument about the sociological relationship between IR and its own ‘end’ present a clear contradiction; fundamental (or apparently fatal) criticisms of the field’s epistemological and ontological

[29] Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 17.
[30] Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic*, 145.
[31] Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic*, 164.

foundations are being offered, but the articulation of those criticisms simply serves to reinforce the hegemonic practices and theoretical positions being criticized in the first place without any clear resolution of these criticisms. While it may be tempting to suggest another turn towards a concrete resolution that gives shape to the future of IR Ollman's conception of Marxist dialectics may offer an alternative in focusing on the contradiction itself.

With its focus on expanding the ontological and epistemological horizons of IR research, this "end of IR" argument clearly serves as the theoretical basis for extending the discipline into interdisciplinary explorations of the relationship between the international and culture. This is accomplished through a critique of the overreliance on quantitative research methodologies (and the ideological assumptions behind their rationalist justifications) in realist and liberal schools at the turn of the millennium, the "end of IR" argument attempts to push the theoretical horizon for both what ought to be considered legitimate objects of study for international study fields as well as how to think about them. Emerging out of post-structuralist and feminist critiques of social science, the "end of IR" argument casts these fields as limited to analyzing the same handful of topics (i.e. states and statesmen) with the same handful of analytical tools (i.e. rationalism and statistics). This has both ignored past attempts to diversify the discipline and given rise to various "turns" towards interdisciplinarity as diverse communities of IR scholars have prodded at the edges of international studies or outright proclaiming its "end." While connecting IR theorizing with video games could be justified by a straightforward "ludic turn," Ollman's account of dialectics offers an alternative for understanding how the internal contradictions of a mode of thought are constitutive of possible futures rather than failings that need to necessarily be overcome. In this sense, finding ways of playfully indulging in the paradoxical relationship

between the history and stakes of international relations as a discipline and the critical insights that highlight the failings of those disciplinary boundaries offers an alternative approach to conceptualizing the "end of IR." The suggestion here is that this indulgence can be literally found in the play of games and the playfulness of pop culture (something Ollman may have been aware of given their own involvement in the creation of the 1978 alternative to *Monopoly*, *Class Struggle*).

Chapter 2: The aesthetic turn

One starting point for expanding on this theme of play as a means of recontextualizing these tensions in contemporary IR theory is the way art and culture generally have been conceptualized as a part of the challenges presented by the "end of IR" turns. While culture has long been amalgamated into more traditional IR approaches (such as with discussions of soft power), perhaps the most notable of attempts to seriously engage with art as an IR topic in more interdisciplinary methods is Bleiker's conception of the aesthetic turn. Itself an argument grounded in a critique of Western reason, Bleiker provides a compelling explanation for how art and aesthetic theory provide useful companions to exploring the emotive side of political analysis that is often ignored by the emphasis on quantification demanded by rationalist research methods. This section will provide an overview of the epistemological and methodological critiques outlined by the aesthetic turn argument, as well as explore some of the artistic forms and theoretical approaches that have been invoked as having aesthetic insights useful for IR

analyses (namely the visual arts, literature and film) which could serve as models for how to think about what a similar interdisciplinary intervention into video gaming might look like.

Perhaps one of the defining aspects of Bleiker's aesthetic turn in IR is its foundation in an epistemological challenge to more established disciplinary approaches to knowledge claims in international politics. The aesthetic turn is grounded in a critique of what it claims to be an overwhelmingly positivist approach to IR research. However, rather than questioning this approach in order to broaden ways of recognizing the extent of state power Bleiker's aesthetic turn is instead interested in arguing for the capacity for art and media to provide unique aesthetic insights into international politics. Bleiker grounds this approach in a critique of "mimetic" knowledge claims, which attempt to render IR theories as close to exact replicas of how social phenomena work as possible.[32] For Bleiker mimetic approaches in IR often obscure their own basis in subjective conjectures or assumptions about international politics in the quest for some notion of objectivity.[33] While Bleiker does not necessarily go further in claiming that the facts and objects of IR research are, as a result, themselves suspect, Bleiker does push the notion that how IR as a discipline translates or represents facts ought to not be taken for granted.[34] The preponderance in IR of an Enlightenment-era idealization of reason over other human faculties that in turn informed the pursuit of scientific legitimacy after the Second World War served to strip the socially and historically contingent aspects of Hans Morgenthau's assessment of the rise of Nazi Germany or Kenneth Waltz' assessment of the Cold War into a universalized and ahistorical objective description of international politics.[35] For Bleiker, however, the objectivity

[32] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 20.
[33] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 34.
[34] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 24.
[35] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 24.

sought by a mimetic approach is almost impossible precisely when considered in terms of the kinds of abstractions made in works of art:

> Consider, by way of illustration, the similarities between the work of a painter and a social scientist. Both portray their objects through particular modes of representation. Even a naturalistic painting is still a form of representation. It cannot capture the essence of its object. It is painted from a certain angle, at a certain time of the day, and in a certain light. The materials are those chosen by the artist, as are the colours and size of the painting, even its frame. Recall for a minute the famous and much-discussed painting by the surrealist René Magritte: the one that features a carefully drawn pipe above an equally carefully hand-written line that reads 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' ('This is not a pipe'). What becomes obvious fairly soon – that the painting is not a pipe itself, but only an artistic representation thereof – challenges the very notion of mimesis. It draws attention to what, in Saussurian language, is called the arbitrariness of the sign: the fact that the relationship between signifier (the drawing of the pipe) and the signified (the pipe) is contingent on a range of interpretive steps.[36]

Bleiker even goes so far to say that a mimetic theory would not even be desirable, as a perfect representation "would merely replicate what is, and thus be as useless 'as a facsimile of a text that is handed to us in answer to our question of how to interpret that text'.[37]" Informed by the works of Kant and Deleuze, Bleiker posits the alternative to mimesis as a Romantic-era notion of the "aesthetic" as an attempt to give some privilege to the wide variety of other sensual forms of representation that may provide equally important academic insights other than those derived from the rational.[38] For Bleiker, the contemporary relegation of concepts like artistic taste and evaluation to being "of a purely private and thus subjective nature[39]" misses an opportunity to provide "an alternative to the deeply embedded modern assumption that our knowledge of the world is structured according to the objects we seek to know.[40]" Thus in ignoring the epistemological question about the relationship between representation and represented, mimetic

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[36] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 21-22.
[37] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 21.
[38] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 22.
[39] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 22.
[40] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 22.

tendencies in IR theory often end up entrenching particular subjective perspectives as objective at the expense of a range of other potential academic or ethical insights into international politics. The potential of those aesthetic insights is something the aesthetic turn explores in the methodological challenge it poses to traditional IR scholarship.

Following from an epistemological critique of established IR scholarship the aesthetic turn also offers a methodological challenge to IR study. While mimetic approaches to research not only entrench and thus mask their interpretive and subjective underpinnings, they also delegitimize alternative approaches to the study of IR that do not reflect a comparatively narrow emphasis on empiricism and reason as a source of knowledge. Bleiker does point out that the inclusion of artistic sources in IR is by no means entirely novel, attempts to do so aesthetically have certainly not been. While Bleiker notes that *Man, the State and War* is no stranger to literary sources, "Waltzian abstraction is obsessed with deduction, categorization and scientific legitimacy.[41]" At any rate, according to Bleiker subsequent IR orthodoxy has not seriously pursued this interest in the arts.[42] For Bleiker, however, the pursuit of artistic sources as an alternative means of understanding (and potentially subverting) previous analyses of international phenomena serves a key role in the aesthetic turn. Various art forms are often based in precisely the sensuous and non-rational experiential descriptions of history or international events that could be used to broaden the relatively limited notions of objectivity in IR scholarship.[43] The result, according to Bleiker, is an approach that evaluates the wide range of

[41] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 28.
[42] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 35.
[43] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 28.

subjective approaches to epistemology rather than assuming ontological characteristics of objects of study. As Bleiker explains:

> A brief illustration from the world of art may help: consider how Picasso's Guernica has given us insight into the Spanish Civil War and the human psyche not because it sought recognition and life-like representation. The significance of Guernica as a form of aesthetic insight and historical memory is located precisely in the fact that Picasso aesthetically engaged the very substance of politics: the difference between the represented and its representation. Guernica allows us to move back and forth between imagination and reason, thought and sensibility, memory and understanding, without imposing one faculty upon another.[44]

Subsequent arguments about the celebrations of military heroism in the music of Beethoven, the close relationship between popular memory of the Vietnam War and films like *Apocalypse Now* as well as the role literary fiction has played in justifying colonialism all seem to deserve some recognition of their impact on the study of IR.[45] Perhaps most importantly for this paper Bleiker even highlights the importance of inquiries outside the high arts into the fictional representations of politics in pop culture are capable of revealing something positive about the societies on which they are based.[46] Despite grounding itself in similar epistemological approaches to previous IR analyses of video games Bleiker's aesthetic turn also gives a means of developing a critical understanding of IR using artistic sources based on their unique capacity to provide alternative aesthetic insights. Thus, Bleiker's aesthetic turn offers both an ontological and methodological basis for approaching cultural or artistic sources as the possible bases for aesthetic insights into IR. This is due to their capacity to frame or translate information in ways other than more orthodox logocentric approaches in social scientific IR research. However, while Bleiker's aesthetic turn suggests a possible way to approach video games as a possible source of

[44] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 28.
[45] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 40-41.
[46] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 43.

knowledge in IR as somewhat independent artistic artefacts and outside of Der Derian's virtual theory, the question of how exactly an examination of video games can come about ought not to be taken for granted. Bleiker notes that a challenge in drawing aesthetic perspectives from artistic sources is meeting those sources in ways that do not simply fall back on simply privileging rationalist assumptions. Bleiker refers to the example of relying on musical insight or illumination, as "Both of these terms are inherently visual, reflecting a deep-seated assumption that our ideal experience, as Nussbaum stresses, 'must be a visual experience, that its illumination must be accounted for in terms of the eye'.[47]" Bleiker's own analysis of poetry as an example of aesthetic research begins with a similar line of reasoning in highlighting the way in which poetry directly engages with normal conventions of language and thus give a space for imagining alternative approaches to thinking about politics.[48]

While Bleiker's articulation of the aesthetic turn takes its own cue from poetics, IR literature has also sought other ways of getting beyond the ontological and epistemological limits of political thinking through other art forms. In addition to their own work on poetry, Bleiker also mentions approaches like those found in the visual arts as illustrative of the way aesthetic thinking explores the gap between events and abstraction. Sylvester fleshes this approach out in arguing that the kind of abstraction of form offered in the visual arts offer an analogy for the intentional dimension of theorization. Working off observations of a London National Gallery exhibition display of Cy Twombley's reinterpretation of J.M.W. Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire*, Sylvester makes a connection between the artifice of Twombley's highly abstract reinterpretation and the fact that Turner's own more realistically rendered work was a romantic

[47] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 63.
[48] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 84.

reimagining from second-hand sources. Sylvester likewise holds Waltz' work as an artistic abstraction informed by what details are left out (the social and political context of the 1960s in which they were writing) as what it aims to capture.[49] In Bleiker's terms, the result of theorizing phenomena is thus necessarily an aesthetic process even if it holds mimetic aims. As Sylvester argues, the result is that their 'camp IR' thesis can just as easily be put in artistic terms; like painted interpretations of a scene where "we end up with abstraction whether we want 'it' or not,[50]" it is perhaps less appropriate for IR to speak of theories that capture some literal fact of the matter as much as self-conscious abstractions capable of clearly situating themselves in a cultural and historical context as well as articulating bold new alternatives. According to Sylvester, while "IR claims neither art nor museums as traditional bona fides of international relations" art nonetheless sits at a nexus of different issues of disciplinary relevance ripe for reclamation within her "camp IR" thesis. Sylvester argues that seen as institutions of international acclaim and patronage, where millions of attendants are exposed to narratives about other parts of the world, examples like art museums are natural sites of "international relations.[51]" In this sense Sylvester clearly highlights a way in which art objects and art institutions demand an IR analysis to be better understood as both evolving museum practices "naïve about international power and politics[52]" and a locus of international affairs.

Similar to how writers have approached the implications of an aesthetic turn towards visual art, there have also been IR interventions into literature. Much like Sylvester's account of

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[49] Christine Sylvester, "Art, Abstraction, and International Relations." *Millenium* 30, no. 3 (2001): 539.
[50] Sylvester, "Art, Abstraction, and International Relations," 545.
[51] Christine Sylvester, *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect It*. New York: Routledge, 2009, 2.
[52] Sylvester, *Art/Museums*, 4.

art, arguments about the possibilities of literary abstraction also highlight the epistemological and ontological contributions of the aesthetic turn. For Moore, literature necessarily offers a different aesthetic approach than, say, visual arts by virtue of being necessarily interpretive. While interpretation (like Sylvester's abstraction) is the basis of any aesthetic analysis (like Bleiker's "gap between a form of representation and what is represented[53]"), for Moore written prose emphasizes the internal imaginary of a reader that nonetheless has a "different capacity or function – as part of a process linked to myth, story and narrative – which is more difficult to discern in other art forms either by looking at a painting, visiting an exhibition or installation, or viewing sculpture and architecture.[54]" Working from Gadamer's hermeneutics, Moore argues that literature expresses meaning through a "living" relationship between the intended meanings of a text and the context of its reception, producing a "different capacity or function – as part of a process linked to myth, story and narrative – which is more difficult to discern in other art forms either by looking at a painting, visiting an exhibition or installation, or viewing sculpture and architecture.[55]" A reader's own imaginative impulses, the cultural context they are reading in, and the cultural milieu a text was written in all work to produce a "counterplay" of interpretations which grapple with a topic without being reduced to the kind of mimetic rationality the aesthetic turn seeks to avoid.[56] As Moore puts it:

> The aim is to draw on the creativity of literature to keep questions open, to seek engagement without offering a conclusion, precisely because aesthetic enquiry is about discovering anew, rather than finding or establishing a finite and acceptable scientific truth. The open-ended nature of the dialogue proposed in Sniper is also designed to evoke emotional and ethical responses, plugging into intuitive beliefs about contemporary global politics, readily excluded by the focus on states.[57]

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[53] Roland Bleiker, "The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory," *Millenium* 30, no. 3 (2001): 510.
[54] Cerwyn Moore, "On Cruelty: Literature, Aesthetics and Global Politics," *Global Society* 24, no. 3 (2010): 317.
[55] Moore, "On Cruelty," 317.
[56] Moore, "On Cruelty," 317.
[57] Moore, "On Cruelty," 328-329.

As such, literature offers another distinct art-based approach to alternative claims about knowledge in the social sciences.

This ontological position that the interpretive meaning-making offered by literary forms also has some clear epistemological implications for treating literature as a site of international affairs. Holden provides an example of this in comparing disciplinary arguments in literary studies about conceptualizing the geographical boundaries of literature to the boundary discussions that, for instance, underpin contemporary critical IR. According to Holden, the conceptual tension found in debates surrounding the concept of "world literature," between both different interpretations of Goethe's original formulation and different attempts to manifest a world literature, echo the kind of post-disciplinary "end of IR" turns. Highlighting the use of the term as an attempt to establish a kind of universal canon of "great works" in largely American schools during the mid-century and later a systematic overview of literature around the world by the 1990s, Holden points out that paying attention to the details of disciplinary debates in literature reveal that similar political and intellectual forces to those shaping this arc are also poking at the edges of IR.[58] While post-Cold War globalization underpins contemporary world literature, post-structural and post-colonial criticisms of world literature have highlighted the geographical and linguistic biases as a concept taught to American students with material translated into English, which Holden likens to Sylvester's "camp IR" interdisciplinarity.[59] Holden goes further in arguing that beyond a likeness, disciplinary arguments in literature also expose the limits of interdisciplinary IR theorizing, particularly about aesthetics and culture. As

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[58] Gerard Holden, "World Politics, World Literature, World Cinema." *Global Society* 24, no. 3 (2010): 383-384.
[59] Holden, "World Poltiics,"384.

the boundaries of other discrete disciplines are also in flux, the accuracy of IR interdisciplinary analysis is as a result somewhat suspect, especially when critical IR increasingly lacks a clear referent.[60] In this sense the particulars of disciplinary debates about art offer an opportunity to reflect back on the theorizing done in IR, especially reflective currents of thought.

As Bleiker points out, another major avenue of aesthetic interventions in IR has been through film and film studies. Much like the abstractive qualities of painting and the interpretive processes at play in literary analyses, film form has also been argued to offer theoretical aesthetic alternatives to mainstream IR rationalism. Citing Deleuze and Mann, Shapiro argues that the mediating role a movie camera plays in determining what an audience sees potentially undermines the necessarily partial subjectivity of an individual observer. Rather than foreground one kind of "managed perception" such as "the mediating effects of measurement devices aimed at static data,[61]" for Shapiro the decentering effect of the camera appropriately engages with the very question of space and perception. The result "deprivileges the directionality of centered commanding perception; it allows the disorganized multiplicity that is the world to emerge.[62]" Shapiro argues that this decentering effect has a clear political value when it contextualizes the individuals who are a film's erstwhile subjects within the cinematic landscapes captured by a camera that are in turn informed by broader cultural, historical or political forces. Shapiro gives an example in their interpretation of *The Pledge*:

> Thus although much of the film focuses on the character Jerry Black, who is situated in time, first as an aging retiree, then as one partially stymied by the temporal rhythms of police investigations (once a suspect is selected, there is enormous pressure to close the case), and finally as one whose investigative opportunities are affected by seasonal changes

[60] Holden, "World Politics," 399.
[61] Michael J. Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 5.
[62] Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics*, 5-6.

> (there are several seasonal tableaux that are interspersed in the imagistic mechanisms of the storyline), Jerry can also be viewed aesthetically rather than psychologically, because his movements in the institutionalized spaces of Reno–Tahoe reveal the existence of different dimensions of ethnic and geopolitical time. The area of the drama, now a white-dominated region of the West, is shown to be firmly linked to the U.S. nation in, for example, an Independence Day parade scene. However, there are also signs of the region's ethnohistorical past.[63]

Tellingly, Shapiro categorizes the different kind of subjectivities produced by this tension in film form as "psychological subjects" opposed to "aesthetic subjects;" in refusing to settle on the motivational forces of individuals as "static entities," the context afforded by the decentering effect of the camera instead allows an understanding of subjects as "beings with multiple possibilities of becoming.[64]"

Unsurprisingly, aesthetic IR interventions into film encompasses ontological arguments for expanding disciplinary analyses into particular films. This can be especially shown by the various interpretations of Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, which has been the source of multiple interpretations both about its relationship to the cultural-political context in which it was made and received, as well as the political implications of the content of the film itself. As Moore argues, readings of particular films like *Stalker* are revealing of the cultural underpinnings of Tarkovsky's work generally, which is in turn worthy of IR investigation due to "the scope of Tarkovsky's work, from the Soviet war genre to science fiction, as well as the tensions between the artist and the Communist system that he personified, his numerous reflections on film aesthetics, spiritualism, and Russian identity, and his reaction to the politics of aesthetics deployed by the Soviet authorities[65]" if for no other reason. In addition to the cultural insights

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[63] Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics*, 9.
[64] Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics*, 9.
[65] Cerwyn Moore, "Tracing the Russian Hermeneutic: Reflections on Tarkovsky's Cinematic Poetics and Global Politics." *Alternatives: Global Local, Political* 34, no. 3 (Jan-Mar 2009): 60.

Stalker reveals, Hozic's interpretation of the content of the film itself argues *Stalker* can be seen as a meditation on love as a kind of emancipatory subjectivity beyond the realm of politics. Hozic identifies a relationship between the Zone at the heart of the film as an Agambian landscape of political desire (replete with borders, border guards and men self-destructively pursuing their fantasies) and the eponymous character's wife, whom Hozic identifies as being the only character with no desire to enter the Zone beyond demands placed on her by the love for her husband.[66] In a move similar to Shapiro's shifting decentered camera, Hozic argues that the presence of a character who refuses the Zone and simply loves her husband even at the edge of the film leaves a kind of radical sublime possibility at the edge of thinking about politics.[67] Thus, between film form as a way of thinking about politics and particular films like *Stalker* to think about, film has been another example of aesthetic interventions in IR.

The aesthetic turn thus provides a theoretical approach for understanding how different forms of art and traditions of art theory can illuminate alternative ways of understanding political events and contexts. After engaging with art as both a material and theoretical critique of the Enlightenment rationalist assumptions underlining much of mainstream IR research most notably put forward by Bleiker, as well as examples of how aesthetic IR engagements have worked in different mediums, the possibility of a meaningful political engagement with video games as a medium hopefully takes shape. Whether in the visual arts, literature or film, artistic mediums are relevant as aesthetic mediums in the way they express meaning through form (as well as attendant traditions of thinking about those forms). As a result, in making political abstraction a

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[66] Aida A. Hozic, "Forbidden Places, Tempting Spaces, and the Politics of Desire." In *To Seek Out New Worlds*, ed. Jutta Weldes (New York: Palmgrave, 2003), 133.
[67] Hozic, "Forbidden Places," 133.

matter of form as much as anything aesthetic IR interventions directly address the political challenge Bleiker raises in highlighting the gap between phenomena and representation as the "very location of politics.[68]" A full accounting of this approach and its relationship to video games, however, can be further found in the pop culture/world politics agenda.

Chapter 3: Pop culture and world politics

Similar to how other aesthetic interventions posit that artistic works can either reflect or constitute the cultural attitudes that underpin the social worlds political agents act in, the pop culture and world politics (PCWP) agenda tries to apply this analysis to traditionally "low culture." Aside from the kind of knowledge about the world uniquely accessible through sublime aesthetics, so too are there overlooked or hidden insights about the mechanics behind IR in widely accessible and consumed contemporary culture both in how culture shapes and is shaped by world events. Of particular interest to this dissertation is how different approaches to media form have been mined for ways of thinking about the relationship between politics and culture. This section will provide an overview of the treatment of popular culture in IR, in how it is both informed by and informs contemporary politics as well as the analysis of digital technology and the use of pop culture as a pedagogical tool for IR classrooms, arguments which in turn sketch much of how video games have been treated in existing IR literature (as will be shown in a later part).

[68] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 14.

The first major path of IR interventions into pop culture emphasizes the role of culture in framing the context for contemporary politics. Similarly to how other aesthetic interventions posit that artistic works can either reflect or constitute the cultural attitudes that underpin the social worlds political agents act in, the pop culture and world politics (PCWP) agenda tries to apply this analysis to traditionally "low culture." Aside from the kind of knowledge about the world uniquely accessible through sublime aesthetics, so too are there overlooked or hidden insights about the mechanics behind IR in widely accessible and consumed contemporary culture both in how culture shapes and is shaped by world events. On the one hand much of pop culture clearly takes its cue from the news; as Hansen points out, while pop cultural artefacts (in their example comics like *Superman*, *Captain America*, or *Tintin*[69]) may not be explicitly political texts, they nonetheless "rely upon and produce particular representations of international subjectivity and practices of significance for world politics, including, for example, diplomacy and military intervention.[70]" However, as Nexon and Neumann point out in their sorting of pop culture into first and second order representations this reproduction of IR topics is also potentially mutually constitutive. In line with Bleiker's mimetic critique Nexon and Neumann argue that general knowledge of political events is similarly a matter of representations of those events, whether speeches by politicians or journalistic narratives seeking to directly represent a first-order "real world narrative" or second-order representations that deal with real world issues through a gloss of fiction. The result is that considering the role culture plays in international affairs almost demands a particular focus on popular culture given its ubiquitous role in shaping

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[69] Lene Hansen, "Reading comics for the field of International Relations: Theory, method and the Bosnian War." *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 3 (2017): 582.
[70] Hansen, "Reading comics," 582.

and being shaped by contemporary events.[71] As Crilley puts it: "(t)abloid hijinks, self-help books, casino and hotel empires, golf courses, beauty pageants, wrestling shows, and reality TV are what made Donald Trump a household name. Trump himself is the pop culture president writ large, as the political phenomenon of President Trump is inseparable from Donald Trump as a popular culture spectacle.[72]" Shepherd and Hamilton make a similar point in highlighting social media as a ubiquitous form that blurs the line between first and second order representations.[73] Not only is pop culture an obvious product of IR, but a cultural analysis of world politics thus reveals it as mutually constitutive of the events, attitudes and people that drive IR.

The other side of the cultural context arguments posed by PCWP is the way pop culture artefacts can be understood as political artefacts in and of themselves. Pop cultural artefacts are where IR happens in the sense that their constitution of a cultural context can inform the politics that happen in that context, pop cultural artefacts also simply are (or can be) interpreted as producing their own political messages regularly interpreted by large audiences. In one sense this is because while pop culture often takes its cue from the news, it also often explicitly positions itself as political. For Hansen, comic artists like Art Spiegelman are examples of low culture artists that tackle headily political themes and even accrue a reputation for expertise on those themes, which "raises the question of who become public voices of foreign policy authority, and how certain forms of knowledge become sociologically signified as having a status that may, in turn, allow someone to speak across a particular domain (Hansen, 2006; Lebow, 2007).[74] For

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[71] Iver B. Neumann and Daniel H. Nexon, "Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics," in *Harry Potter and International Relations*, ed. Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), .

[72] Rhys Crilley, "Where We At? New Directions for Research on Popular Culture and World Politics." *International Studies Review* 0 (2020): 2.

[73] Caitlin Hamilton and Laura J. Shepherd, *Understanding Popular Culture and World Politics in the Digital Age* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 5.

[74] Hansen, "Reading comics," 582.

Shepherd, meanwhile, pop culture narratives often take on a political dimension by virtue of their narrative themes regardless of their explicit intent. According to Shepherd, narrative provides a kind of cognitive crutch wherein "…our cognitive frameworks are (re)produced in and through the stories we tell ourselves and others.[75]" As a result the cultural forms in which we are inundated frame certain expectations about the way the world works and are not clearly separable from the way "(s)tories have a beginning, a middle and an end; stories have 'good guys' and 'bad guys', right and wrong.[76]" Turning to the genre tropes and physical performances of Joss Whedon's television work, they analyze the way their representations of gender and violence (particularly in light of Bleiker's approach to aesthetics) reveal that "we might learn as much – if not more – about political process and practice from popular culture as we do from political science textbooks.[77]"

Another major avenue of PCWP argumentation is the unique role digital technologies play in forming contemporary cultural contexts. Part of this formation is the way political agents directly engage with communication technologies generally and the Internet in particular, both in its direct impact on world affairs and its role in shaping contemporary culture. As Crilley points out, one focus of the PCWP agenda is the way politics or political identities are played out in the "everyday" forms of PCWP,[78]" and subsequently argues that the global scale of, say, social media platforms on the Internet make them an increasingly important dimension of grappling with how the personal may be political. Crilley gives the example of the massive proliferation of image archives enabled by Facebook as having a clear impact on cultural formations. While the

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[75] Laura J. Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture: Telling Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.
[76] Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture*, 4.
[77] Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture*, 8.
[78] Crilley, "Where We At?" 3.

millions of images regularly uploaded to Facebook are obviously largely personal collections, they nonetheless "serve to document personal and collective memories, build social relationships, and express identities, and are therefore important sites of politics.[79]" For Shepherd and Hamilton, these online media technologies are also crucial to understand given the influence they have over how knowledge of world events is actually conveyed to an emerging global public:

> Much of what we know about the goings-on in the world is now gleaned from online sources; many of the traditional sources of world politics knowledge, like documents, speeches and briefing papers, are available digitally whenever and wherever we may choose to peruse them. We turn to digital news sources for up-to-the-minute information by way of online newspapers, blogs, social media streams, live video and audio streams, podcasts and so on. However, we don't just use our computers and tablets and smart phones to access these serious sources; digital entertainment has thrived in the online world. We share links, images, stories and discussions with our friends and followers on social media; we have access to innumerable photographs, videos and music; we download games, movies, music and television programs along with podcasts, webcasts and apps.[80]

Of note is not only the proliferation of information afforded by contemporary digital media, but also the way in which the platforms blur the line between access to "serious" political knowledge and pop cultural trends. As both news about North Korean missile tests and memes about Kim Jong-un become part of the same stream of information categorically separating the "everyday" experience of international relations from the cultural contexts in which it is received a suspect task.

The direct fact that digital media technologies also regularly have a direct impact on contemporary world events supports this conclusion. Besides framing the culture in which information about the world is received, these technologies also frame many of the ways in

[79] Crilley, "Where We At?" 7.
[80] Hamilton and Shepherd, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 5.

which they happen. As Shepherd and Hamilton point out, even traditional political agents are not exempt from the blurring effect social media has on the distinction between "ordinary people" and everyone else. For Shepherd and Hamilton, pop cultural analysis already serves as a useful epistemological common denominator; regardless of one's relationship to IR knowledge (academic, practitioner or layperson), the common relationship to the movies means there's at least one interpretive vernacular. Similarly, when it comes to the popular cultures fostered by digital communication the traditional distinction between expert and layperson, as well as the way experts or practitioners traditionally shape world events, is also blurred.[81] Besides the epistemological currents suggested by the PCWP focus on digital technology, there is also the increasing fact of traditional IR topics increasingly taking place online. As Crilley points out, this online activity can range from the presence of non-state actors, the interference by state actors, to the rearticulation of sexism and racism into infrastructure of online services.[82] Both the interest in cultural formation and the technologies that frame those formations thus set the stage for the PCWP interest in pedagogy.

A third IR intervention into pop culture is evaluating the pedagogical value of how contemporary cultural formations impact world events and how they are understood. Perhaps the most direct articulation of this intervention is in the various attempts to use pop cultural references as teaching tools in IR classrooms. In defining the main dimension of a pop cultural IR research agenda Grayson et al. point out the simply practical opportunity afforded by paying attention to how contemporary events are engaged by mass audiences, particularly students. Given the increasingly visual character of how contemporary politics are communicated (from

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[81] Hamilton and Shepherd, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 5.
[82] Crilley, "Where We At?" 8.

"photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib to the spectacle of North Korean military parades[83]"), "it is important to provide students with skills that help them to see – as well as read – politics, so that they can appreciate that the visual is text and will possess the tools for considered analysis of it.[84]" Young et al. give a concrete example of this in their use of *Game of Thrones* to theme and design in-class simulations to teach major themes in international relations courses. As Young et al. point out, while *Game of Thrones* is ostensibly set in a fantasy medieval backdrop it nonetheless serves as a useful heuristic for its depiction of key concepts in IR theory, such as "the struggle female heads of state face when gaining power, how heads of state frame global concerns to their citizens, the different level of concern states have for human rights, and, especially, how difficult it is to achieve harmony in the international system.[85]" Crucially, Young et al. also integrated *Game of Thrones* as a theme for its popularity and how it could make themes in the simulation more familiar even to students who hadn't watched the show, which they ultimately found helped increase student engagement in courses where they introduced their simulation.[86] Brandle makes a similar argument in their justification for integrating pop cultural themes (namely selected games, Drezner's *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, and relevant science fiction movies) into their course design. For Brandle, pop cultural resources were similarly an opportunity to bridge gaps in engagement even among students taking IR courses as prerequisites, particularly when paired with more experimental active learning strategies.[87] However, the integration of pop culture into IR pedagogy also extends beyond being

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[83] Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies and Simon Philpott, "Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum," *Politics* 29, no. 3 (2009): 160.
[84] Grayson et al. "Pop Goes IR?" 160.
[85] Laura D. Young, Ñusta Carranza, and Michael Perrin, "Using Game of Thrones to Teach International Relations," *Journal of Political Science Education* (2018): 3.
[86] Young et al., "Using Game of Thrones to Teach International Relations," 3.
[87] Shawna M. Brandle, "Games, Movies, and Zombies: Making IR Fun for Everyone," *Journal of Political Science Education* 16, no. 4 (2020): 462-463.

tools in the classroom to being prompts for students to think creatively about international politics.

In addition to using pop culture as direct tools in the classroom, pop culture has also been argued to be valuable for aiding in spurring creative thinking about IR topics (including pedagogy) among students and teachers. Knutsen gives an example of this in analyzing the way *Harry Potter* reflects a long tradition of liberal thinking about education, and likens the way the students at Hogwarts learn about the world of the books to the way Reinhold Niebuhr emphasized the importance of liberal virtue in navigating world politics.[88] As Saunders points out, popular works in the science fiction genre have had a long crossover with world politics, reaching a peak "when the former B-movie-actor-turned-leader of the 'free world' began to label the Soviet Union the 'Evil Empire' while touting his 'Star Wars' Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).[89]" For Saunders, science fiction works have a complicated relationship with Western legacies of imperialism, pointing to interpretations of the treatment of space exploration as having "emerged as a response to the effective end of territorial conquest, i.e. the end of (Western) imperial expansion.[90]" Meanwhile, the speculative character of science fiction that distances a reader from the political allegories it may be employing (as opposed to more consciously topical works like *24* or the Bourne franchise) also makes room for much more critical engagements with these presentations of imperialism, "allowing students to interrogate the content at some distance and developing skills to address agency, representation,

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[88] Torbjorn L. Knutsen, "Dumbledore's Pedagogy: Knowledge and Virtue at Hogwarts," in *Harry Potter and International Relations*, ed. Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) 218.
[89] Robert A. Saunders, ""Imperial Imaginaries: Employing Science Fiction to Talk about Geopolitics," in *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods and Pedagogies*, ed. Federica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2015), 151.
[90] Saunders, "Imperial Imaginaries," 150.

intertextuality and discourse analysis.[91]" In a similar way, Hannah and Wilkinson argue that the invocation of zombie literature in IR pedagogy could do far more than reiterate current disciplinary understandings of what countries would do in a crisis. For Hannah and Wilkinson, taking the scale of a zombie crisis seriously is also an opportunity for students to examine the limits of both contemporary IR theory and the politics of popular fiction.[92] In this way, the way the PCWP agenda approaches pedagogy encompasses both practice and thinking about learning in IR.

It is in this context that the PCWP agenda imports pop cultural objects into IR analysis, both in informing as well as being informed by contemporary politics, outlining how the cultural dimension of digital technologies like social media play into these dynamics and the role pop culture plays in IR pedagogy. It is furthermore in this broader context of aesthetics more broadly and pop culture more specifically, namely as an epistemological, ontological and methodological critique of the rationalism underpinning more mainstream theoretical approaches in IR, that the existing treatment of games in IR can be explored both as partly reinforcing these critiques but also reifying the forces the aesthetic turn seeks to undermine.

Chapter 4: Game theory

While video games have thus far been marginal to IR scholarship, games as such have nonetheless had a much-touted role in IR thinking in the form of game theory. While game theory famously attempts to reify the kind of rational choice mimetics that Bleiker decries as

[91] Saunders, "Imperial Imaginaries," 152.
[92] Erin Hannah and Rorden Wilkinson. "Zombies and IR: A Critical Reading," *Politics* 36, no. 1 (2014): 11.

monopolizing the horizon of social science theorizing. Nonetheless, game theory provides an interesting starting point for considering how games as a form (different kinds of games designed for players to interact with) can be used to provide a coherent way to think about important topics in international relations (i.e. deterrence). This section will provide a short summary of how game theory provides this heuristic for rational choice theory by laying out the basics of Von Neumann and Morgenstern's original argument and the different ways rational choice has been adopted into IR thinking, and hopefully make clear that this conceptual invocation of "games" differs greatly from the kind of heuristic aesthetic engagement games attempted later on.

The earliest and most influential articulations of the use of game theory in social science is Von Neumann and Morgenstern's development of rational choice theory.[93] According to Von Neumann and Morgenstern, mapping rational decisions in a game format offers the opportunity to impose a rigour onto economic analysis that they repeatedly liken to the directness of physical science. In fact, Von Neumann and Morgenstern reject the argument that the foundation of economics in rationality can't be reduced to mathematical abstraction precisely on the grounds of how mathematics increasingly served as the basis of physics over the course of the 16th century.[94] For Von Neumann and Morgenstern, while economics is directly about "the very complicated mechanism of prices and production, and of the gaining and spending of incomes[95]" the discipline circumvents the enormity of the empirical challenge of addressing these issues by

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[93] S.M. Amadae, *Prisoners of Reason: Game Theory and Neoliberal Political Economy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 73.
[94] John Von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 2-3.
[95] Von Neumann and Morgenstern, *Theory of Games*, 8.

instead focusing on the "behaviour of the individuals which constitute the economic community.[96]" Ultimately, this analysis relies on a classical economics assumption that notions of utility that drive individual rationality are interchangeable with maximizing money (and thus quantifiable as a numerical value) and as a result sidestep prolonged qualitative discussion of the nature of human behaviour.[97] While Von Neumann and Morgenstern don't claim to provide a universal theory of economics, the resulting attempt to mathematize the rational pursuit of utility (particularly when it interacts with other rational actors in a social economy) explicitly seeks to provide an abstract conceptual framework that can plot out the decisions of actors acting "rationally" expressed by numerical values, where "the notion of rationality is not at all formulated in an unambiguous way. Indeed, a more exhaustive analysis reveals that the significant relationships are much more complicated than the popular and "philosophical" use of the word "rational" indicates.[98]" From this abstract account of rationality, Von Neumann and Morgenstern develop a "games of strategy" approach to conceptually explain the interaction between rational agents in a social economy.

In attempting to avoid the apparent conceptual gaps in qualitative accounts of rationality by way of numerical abstraction, Von Neumann and Morgenstern argue that the maps created by the various decisions available to rational actors as they interact in a social economy can be plotted in a way that resembles the moves in a game. For Von Neumann and Morgenstern, however, the game analogy does not produce a total explanation of rational behaviour.[99] Rendered as numbers, the use of both statistical probability and the possibility of irrational

[96] Von Neumann and Morgenstern, *Theory of Games*, 8.
[97] Von Neumann and Morgenstern, *Theory of Games*, 9.
[98] Von Neumann and Morgenstern, *Theory of Games*, 9.
[99] Von Neumann and Morgenstern, *Theory of Games*, 30.

behaviour make the quantified values of utility and rationality more contingent descriptors of rational behaviour. This becomes especially obvious when trying to grapple with the interactions between multiple actors as they attempt to find ways to cooperate with or coerce their fellow players so as to maximize their gain in a market. As they put it:

> At this stage the reader will observe a great similarity with the everyday concept of games. We think that this similarity is very essential; indeed, that it is more than that. For economic and social problems the games fulfill – or should fulfill – the same function which various geometrico-mathematical models have successfully performed in the physical sciences. Such models are theoretical constructs with a precise, exhaustive and not too complicated definition; and they must be similar to reality in those respects which are essential in the investigation at hand.[100]

Ultimately, Von Neumann and Morgenstern argue that the kinds of games this numerical expression of the pursuit of utility try to outline have a simple thesis; namely "the statement of how much the participant under consideration can get if he behaves "rationally.[101]"

This numerical abstraction of rational behaviour has famously been used as a heuristic for explaining competition between actors in international relations. As Axelrod points out, central problems in IR theory such as the security dilemma are handily captured by games like the Prisoner's Dilemma; where the pursuit of self-interest between two countries can be best served through cooperation (as in, say, harmonizing free trade or disarmament policy), the incentives to maximize gains while minimizing losses from other players present confrontation as more rational solutions (i.e. maintaining trade barriers or escalating weapons development).[102] For Axelrod, game theory usefully captures these problems by reducing different cases to "what is

[100] Von Neumann and Morgenstern, *Theory of Games*, 32.
[101] Von Neumann and Morgenstern, *Theory of Games*, 33.
[102] Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 4.

common to these situations without becoming bogged down in the details unique to each.[103]" As Snidal points out, much of this importation of game theory into IR is predicated on rational behaviour as foundational to the achievement of the interests of international actors. Whether through competition or cooperation, for Snidal the decision matrices produced by experimenting with base assumptions about the value of preferences and payoffs of different actors as they interact (as well as "nonstrategic" rationales for actors making maximal choices independent of other actors) are key to the predictive power of game theory. As Snidal puts it:

> The assumption of strategic rationality is fundamental to a game-*theory* interpretation of international politics. Individual actions and collective outcomes are understood in terms of states' strategic pursuit of self-interest. The development of institutional arrangements such as regimes is explained in terms of efforts to overcome problems of collective action by altering the "rules of the game." The prospects for further cooperation as well as the dangers of increased conflict can be investigated in terms of the strategic possibilities facing states. As is often the case in theoretical enterprises, the stronger the (rationality) assumptions made, the richer the interpretation provided by game theory. Conversely, if the rationality assumption is seriously circumscribed by (say) bureaucratic, psychological, or organizational factors, the same models need to be interpreted differently.[104]

In addition to these basic assumptions of rationality, as will be shown game theory also appears in IR literature as a means of testing different kinds of games as assumptions about basic game formats (such as the Prisoner's Dilemma) are also experimented with.

From this setup of games as an abstract analysis of rational behaviour, game theory as articulated by Von Neumann and Morgenstern has also been imported into IR as a theoretical tool. Axelrod gives the vaunted example of the Prisoner's Dilemma as a game that handily captures the escalatory incentives embedded in an interaction between rational actors without

[103] Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 7.
[104] Duncan Snidal, "The Game Theory of International Politics." *World Politics* 38, no. 1 (Oct. 1985): 40.

some external controlling force and instructive for IR scenarios such as the security dilemma. However, Axelrod's argument about cooperation emerging out of iterated games of the Prisoner's Dilemma also highlights how differences in the basic assumptions that go into reconstructing the agents and preferences pulled out of a historical example can change the trajectory of what rational behaviour might look like. For Wagner, for instance, simply changing the order of turns in a game (so one player goes first as opposed to both players going at the same time) opens up the typical 2x2 box of the Prisoner's Dilemma to a branching decision tree as particularly the second player has more potential choices in total to strategize around.[105] Snidal also argues that the value of game theory to IR theory is principally in its capacity to reinterpret empirical evidence rather than generate descriptive models of political events. For Snidal, beyond the analogical descriptive theories that are possible to articulate in game theoretic terms (like in the game theoretic reconstructions of cooperation problems in Snyder's *Conflict Among Nations*), the abstract simplicity of game theory is also useful for generating theoretical models for what to expect of rational actors given particular preferences and payoffs,[106] where "the analysis moves beyond metaphor and analogy to models and theory.[107]" Citing Axelrod, Snidal argues that iterated games are examples of a game theory approach with predictive power capable of systematically theorizing about the dynamism of rational action as choices are made over time and how actors adjust their behaviour to maximize payoffs, an important tool for theoretically articulating how (for instance) cooperation between states can emerge from competition.[108]

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[105] R. Harrison Wagner, "The Theory of Games and the Problem of International Cooperation," *The American Political Science Review* 77, no. 2 (Jun. 1983): 333.
[106] Snidal, "The Game Theory of International Politics," 44-45.
[107] Snidal, "The Game Theory of International Politics," 44.
[108] Snidal, "The Game Theory of International Politics," 51.

In addition to its adoption as a heuristic for rationality in IR schools of thought, game theory nonetheless has also been criticized for perpetuating the mimetic methodological limitations the aesthetic turn attempts to expand on. Amadae argues that game theory played an early role in shaping rationalist thinking in emerging fields of interest for international relations after the Second World War as it grappled with security issues which more traditional military experts had little in the way of practical experience with (namely nuclear deterrence). According to Amadae, for civilian and military defence strategists leading into the Cold War (namely figures like Kahn and the RAND Corporation as well as Schelling in Eisenhower's State Department) rational choice theory as expressed by games like the Prisoner's Dilemma or Chicken shored up a coherent, predictable and scientific approach to warfare within which otherwise abstract theories for nuclear competition could be articulated.[109] However, for Amadae this account of rationality extended its influence beyond military applications as it became all too useful for another emerging set of intellectuals (Amadae gives Buchanan as a prime example) articulating a social order based on the radical (and rational) individualism of what would become the neoliberal turn.[110] For Amadae, however, the rise of rational choice theory and its attendant game theory has nonetheless been an imposition on the world rather than a strictly empirical analysis of it, and one whose abstractions were tied to a distinctly political project:

> At this stage in the 1970s, neoliberal theorists understood their challenge to be to accept the worst but still try to find a way to reconstruct the positive system of classical liberalism in the hope of building a mutually prosperous basis for capitalism and democracy. The eventual end of the Cold War seemed to offer this prospect. All that was needed was for the baby boom generation to rise to the occasion of this optimistic future symbolized by the Apollo 11 lunar landing on July 20, 1969. Yet instead, the optimism soon faded. President Richard Milhous Nixon mired the country in impeachment proceedings as a result of his paranoid excesses, destroying the public's faith in government. The "three strikes" penal reform initiative resulted in a mass incarceration state. The peace dividend

[109] Amadae, *Prisoners of Reason*, 77-78.
[110] Amadae, *Prisoners of Reason*, 182.

> that was supposed to follow the Cold War never appeared, giving way instead to successive wars and mounting debt. As a result, the third wave of post–World War II neoliberal cynicism exudes a pessimism that the world could ever be otherwise: limited resources and the selfish gene are the realities with which we are confronted, and satisfying desire as best as we can, in the present moment of this life, is all that remains of the existential significance of human subjectivity and life experience.[111]

For this analysis, it also worth pointing out that Amadae highlights how game theory has its roots in the actual games of European chess culture during the 19th century (where the concept of a "science of strategy" is described as being an influence for Von Neumann).[112] Thus, while games have long been part of the firmament of IR thought an aesthetic challenge to predominant rationalist thinking in more traditional approaches may benefit from a more critical engagement with the scope of writing about games that provides room for alternative approaches and perspectives in abstractions about politics.

Thus, game theory is an example of how rules and player interactivity (if in a limited form) can be used to filter a broader theoretical framework for rethinking particular questions in IR theory, which this section showed through short summary of how game theory provides this heuristic for rational choice theory by laying out the basics of Von Neumann and Morgenstern's original argument and the different ways rational choice has been adopted into IR thinking. Ostensibly game theoretic models don't resemble what might typically be considered a game given they generally aren't played for leisure, and ultimately serves to reify even in abstraction the very theoretical issues the aesthetic turn is meant to get around (i.e. empirically recreate the decision matrices facing a political actor). However, Güner gives an example of how game theory might serve as aesthetic representation when they approach games as a model for

[111] Amadae, *Prisoners of Reason*, 286.
[112] Amadae, *Prisoners of Reason*, 74.

mediating disparate or even conflicting "mental pictures.[113]" In this sense, the picture of game theory presented here can be understood as an important example of thinking about how games can be thought of as aesthetic abstractions. Both games played for leisure (and video games in particular) as well as games as theoretical abstractions have also been treated in IR scholarship.

Chapter 5: IR and video games

In addition to the adoption of game theory as a heuristic for understanding rationality in international relations, video games themselves have also been treated in IR literature. Within the broader framework of the "end of IR" arguments about the fracturing of the discipline and the aesthetic turn towards cultural objects as sources for theoretical inspiration and alternative modes of theoretical abstraction, as well as the smaller subset of IR literature dealing with popular culture, any engagement with video games must also reckon with the existing work done on games in IR. As will be shown, while much of this scholarship has focused on the role video games play in reinforcing the relationship between cultural imaginaries and real-world structures of power (namely the American military) existing IR writing on games also point the way towards what a positive aesthetic engagement with video games might look like. This can be shown by providing an overview of IR works on video games, namely Der Derian's conception of the media-entertainment network, as well as other attempts to meaningfully engage with games (including pedagogically), and ultimately pointing to how a deeper and more

[113] Serdar Ş. Güner, *Art and IR Theory: Visual Semiotic Games* (Cham: Springer, 2023), 129.

interdisciplinary examination of video games can more meaningfully explore the possibilities of what alternative abstractions of political systems might have to say.

The first (but perhaps least relevant to considering games as aesthetic works) approach to integrating video games into larger IR literature is through pedagogy and an ongoing interest in using games broadly and video games in particular as teaching tools. In the late 1980s Frantzich and Purkitt[114] (as well as Hart[115]) included an early version of this argument by including political simulations in their overview of the use of early computer technology in political science, noting that while simulation research had developed questions about the usefulness of digital simulations as research tools by the mid-1970s they nonetheless emphasized their potential as educational and policy-planning tools. While Frantzich and Purkitt highlight alternatives like pure computer simulations (which students simply watch) and multi-group simulations, they also point to "computer-based" simulations like Chris Crawford's *Balance of Power* or Bright Ideas' *War or Peace!* as potential tools for teaching general concepts of strategy or playing around with approaches to policy.[116] Of note in these early analyses is the importance given to interactivity; as Lewis later notes in their overview of political simulators for pedagogical use notes, "[n]o computer program can contain onscreen the information found in a few chapters of a book, nor should it attempt to. But courseware does have a truly interactive nature, unlike filmstrips, audio cassettes, film or videotape. The student is in active mode, and in control, yet can derive about the same level of information from a program as from the

[114] Stephen Frantzich and Helen Purkitt, "Computers in Political Science," *Social Science Microcomputer Review* 5, no. 4 (1987): 485.
[115] Jeffrey A. Hart, "Computers in Political Science," *Social Science Review* 6, no. 4 (1988): 515.
[116] Frantzich and Purkitt, "Computers in Political Science," 497.

audiovisual media.[117]" More recently, Asal has argued that simulations confer a number of pedagogical advantages in the classroom also revolving around encouraging student initiative and interactivity:

> In addition to their direct educational benefits, simulations have several important side benefits. Simulations can empower students by allowing them to take the initiative (Ellington et al., 1998:7) and creating an environment of peer-based learning (Ruben, 1999). Also, by creating a situation where the students are the center of activity and the prime movers, simulations give the professor the opportunity to observe how the students interact and to identify students who are natural leaders, students with potential that need to be coaxed, and students who are struggling. These things are more readily apparent during a simulation than while the students are "performing" for the professor in a frontal assessment.[118]

Carvalho, meanwhile, has experimented with using the educational simulator *Statecraft* in classrooms and found that the potential for engaging students with simulation aids was limited by how interactivity is contextualized by more traditional approaches to teaching (i.e. clashing with the rote memorization usually required for tests).[119] Either way, there is some precedent to a long-running discussion in IR literature about the use of games and simulation as teaching tools. Beyond being a sizeable part of the thought in IR literature on games, however, this line of inquiry is important to highlight as it already problematizes the kind of one-to-one relationship to empiricism this dissertation is ultimately trying to move past; as aesthetic works, games (and simulations in particular) are not simply interactive reproductions of real life. Of greater interest to this dissertation is what epistemological value interactivity (and play more broadly) might have.

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[117] Jeremy R. T. Lewis, 1989, "Political Science Courseware: A Comparative Analysis," in *85th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association* (Atlanta: American Political Science Association), 2.
[118] Victor Asal, "Playing Games with International Relations," *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 3 (2005): 362.
[119] Gustavo Carvalho, "Virtual Worlds Can Be Dangerous: Using Ready-Made Computer Simulations for Teaching International Relations," *International Studies Perspectives* 15 (2014): 550.

Beyond pedagogy, perhaps the most influential concept in much of the existing IR literature on video games is the military-entertainment complex, or what Der Darian refers to as the military-industrial-media-entertainment network (MIME-NET).[120] Among IR scholars who write about the impact of video games, however, Der Derian's systematization of the MIME-NET in a proposed "virtual theory" is particularly influential. For Der Derian, the increasing influence of digital technology on political or military planning served to increasingly thin out the practical and theoretical boundaries between planned virtual simulations and the much less predictable realities they hope to capture.[121] According to Der Derian, this dynamic is by no means new, as "the telephone in the First World War provided generals with the means and the arrogance to send hundreds of thousands of soldiers to their deaths from the relative safety of their chateaux headquarters,[122]" and indeed the very nature of empirical social science often fall into a similar trap as "positivist approaches—assuming that words transparently mirror objects, facts reside apart from values, and theory is independent of the reality that it represents—produce a fairly hermetic world-view with little room for the interpretation of accidents.[123]" However, for Der Derian the speed, ease of access to and widespread nature of digital technologies distinguish themselves from prior technological developments or systematic modes of thought.[124] The resulting harmony between commercial and state interests as both seek to pursue the opportunities to satisfy financial, entertainment or strategic needs provided by digital advancements set the stage for a dangerous kind of arrogance to permeate approaches to warfare

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[120] Der Derian, "Virtuous War/Virtual Theory," *International Affairs* 76 (2000): 786.
[121] Der Derian, "Virtuous War/Virtual Theory," 772-773.
[122] Der Derian, "Virtuous War/Virtual Theory," 771-772.
[123] James Der Derian, *Virtuous War*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 205.
[124] Der Derian, *Virtuous War*, 207.

as virtual simulations and widespread media depictions attempt to eliminate the worst elements of war and endow conflict a kind of virtuous character.[125] The result, according to Der Derian, is the synchronicity of the MIME-NET in virtuous war as an extension of state power.[126] It is within this conception of the increasing identification with civilian media and military interests, then, that much of the IR scholarship on video games takes place.

It is within this framework of the increasingly mutually reinforcing relationship between military and commercial media development that much of the existing scholarship on video games and IR takes place. These authors have commented both on how the production of video games as well as the themes found in video games have reflected the influence of militarization. Indeed, part of the formulation of Der Derian's virtual theory involves playing successive rounds of the shooter *Doom* retooled for use by the Marine Corps,[127] and notes that the virtual identification of MIME-NET is clear in commercial military video games, where "the developmental lag between the real thing and its simulation has just about disappeared. From the F-16 to the F-117A, the M1A2 tank to the Bradley armored vehicle, the Aegis cruiser to the latest nuclear aircraft carrier, the video-game version arrives on the shelves almost as soon as the weapon system first appears.[128]" Robinson is partly an exception in using Weber's work on the way popular culture can reveal the foundations of IR theory as a means of interrogating themes of American exceptionalism in military shooters like *Medal of Honor* or *Call of Duty 4*.[129] However, even Robinson has explored the militarization of video games through Bogost's

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[125] Der Derian, "Virtuous War/Virtual Theory," 772.
[126] Der Derian, *Virtuous War*, xx.
[127] Der Derian, *Virtuous War*, 89.
[128] Der Derian, *Virtuous War*, 90.
[129] Nick Robinson, "Have You Won the War on Terror? Military Videogames and the State of American Exceptionalism," *Millenium: Journal of International Studies* 43 (2015): 454.

framework for the way in which games can mount implicit persuasive arguments such as the sanitized portrayal of war in *America's Army* or the portrayal of violence as a necessary response to the war on terror in *Army of Two* often serve pro-military themes to players[130] while pointing out that games that are openly critical of military violence are either few in number or relegated to the far smaller independent game development scene.[131] Power invokes Der Derian in describing how military-themed shooters like *America's Army* serve to extend a romanticization of war that allows players a chance to exert a fantastical sense of control over complex historical military engagements wherein war and in particular the American military is portrayed in a sanitized benign light.[132] Deterding is similarly concerned with the increasing integration of military and media in military simulations (particularly for video games), and traces the tradition of strategy games and the link to the military-entertainment complex to the use of some of the earliest war games like *Kriegsspiel* as a training tool for Prussian army officers during the 1820s.[133] For Stahl the close identification video games often thematically make with current affairs, such as the news-like shooter *Kuma/War* or the much-touted military recruitment tool *America's Army*, often entail implicit ethical arguments that portray military action as an ultimately desirable or more effective solution to international issues and work to thin the line between a critical citizenry and an impartial soldiery.[134] Other authors in Huntemann's collection

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[130] Nick Robinson, "Videogames, Persuasion and the War on Terror: Escaping or Embedding the Military Entertainment Complex?" *Political Studies* 60 (2012): 510-511.
[131] Robinson, "Videogames, Persuasion," 515-516.
[132] Marcus Power, "Digitized Virtuosity: Video Games and Post-9/11 Cyber-Deterrence," *Security Dialogue* 38 (2007): 285.
[133] Sebastian Deterding, "Living Room Wars: Remediation, Boardgames, and the Early History of Video Wargaming," in *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*, ed. by Nina B. Hunetmann and Matthew Thomas Payne (New York: Routledge, 2010), 23.
[134] Roger Stahl, "Have You Played the War on Terror?" *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23 (2006): 125.

Joystick Soldiers such as Nieborg,[135] Nichols[136] and King and Leonard[137] have also written on the intersection between militarization, American power and military shooters made in the United States, while Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter have similarly explored the production and presentation of games within the context of American military imperialism.[138] More recently, Hirst has explored the different ways the proliferation of gaming among American military personnel has been adapted into military culture (both as reproductions of state power and sites of organic resistance),[139] while Żmuda[140] has examined the place of digital autonomy in gaming in broader discourse around military technology. Thus, much of the existing literature on the relationship between IR and video games has thus far largely focused on the way in which video games play a role in the larger MIME-NET and often serve as extension of state power.

A third (and perhaps most fruitful for this dissertation) approach to accounting for video games in IR literature tentatively attempts to treats games as artistic projects that produce their own potential arguments about the nature of international politics, particularly in an express effort to get beyond the scope of worldwide blockbuster shooters with explicitly military themes. Salter, for instance, describes the way in which games as diverse as *Diplomacy*, *Civilization*, *America's Army* and *Grand Theft Auto IV* each use the constraints of a game world to impose

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[135] David B. Nieborg, "Training Recruits and Conditioning Youth: The Soft Power of Military Games," in *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*, ed. by Nina B. Hunetmann and Matthew Thomas Payne (New York: Routledge, 2010), 53.
[136] Randy Nichols, "*America's Army* and the Video Games Industry," in *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*, ed. by Nina B. Hunetmann and Matthew Thomas Payne (New York: Routledge, 2010), 39.
[137] Richard C. King and David J. Leonard, "Wargames as a New Frontier: Securing American Empire in Virtual Space," in *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*, ed. by Nina B. Hunetmann and Matthew Thomas Payne (New York: Routledge, 2010), 91.
[138] Dyer-Witheford, Nick, and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 118.
[139] Aggie Hirst, "Videogames Saved My Life": Everyday Resistance and Ludic Recovery among US Military Veterans," *International Political Sociology* 0 (2021): 10.
[140] Michał Dawid Żmuda, "Autonomous weapons of pleasure: Media archaeology of automated killing in military and gaming technologies," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 64 (2023): 142.

particular imagined geopolitical realities on a player wherein the authority of the state is often central and the embodied nature of violence is often absent.[141] While not dropping the theme of militarization, Schultzke hints at this when they chastise prior treatments of games as ideological vessels distorting the nature of combat to make it more palatable despite being necessarily challenged by the nature of the medium. For Schultzke, the fact that games have to be played effectively makes their meaning or consumption inherently collaborative and as a result cannot be pre-emptively fit into an existing ideological structure.[142] Schultzke argues that even ideologically charged games like *America's Army* or *Special Force* (developed and published by Hezbollah in 2003) essentially end up staging their own ideological struggles for meaning as people interact with them, becoming "'imaginative maps' to be manifest within virtual spaces, transforming ideological abstractions into more concrete experiences that are enacted by players."[143] Ciută makes a similar argument in their own repudiation of the topically narrow and even prudish "dark premonition of the potential effects of video games"[144] IR appraisals of the ideological underpinnings of military shooters tend to prescribe when he outlines the necessity for exploring the diversity of games and gaming communities outside typical Western markets and without the typical IR disciplinary lenses.[145] Hayden, meanwhile, provides perhaps the most concrete attempt to demonstrate how games can potentially theorize on their own terms when they read depictions of various theoretical IR perspectives into the science-fiction game series *Mass Effect*. For Hayden, the interaction between play and the encoded assumptions about "how

[141] Mark B. Salter, "The Geographical Imaginations of Video Games: *Diplomacy, Civilization, America's Army* and *Grand Theft Auto IV*," *Geopolitics* 16 (2011): 381.
[142] Marcus Schultzke, "Military videogames and the future of ideological warfare," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19 (2017): 616.
[143] Schultzke, "Military videogames and the future of ideological warfare," 617.
[144] Felix Ciută, "Call of Duty: Playing Video Games with IR," *Millenium* 44, no. 2 (2015): 207.
[145] Ciută, "Call of Duty: Playing Video Games with IR," 204-205.

the world "works"[146] implicit in the procedures, mechanics and rules that define the game a player plays essentially constitute a kind of rhetorical argument in attempting to simulate the range of political possibilities in a story/simulation. In their own words:

> A politically driven video game like Mass Effect does not only distill ideas from IR as in Lord of the Rings, but also presents international politics through the creation of "possible worlds" created as a consequence of choices made within the game, each reflecting the consequences of carrying out a politics defined by a realist, liberal, or constructivist view of statecraft (Zakowski 2014, 59).[147]

Notably, for Hayden this approach to examining games offers both a pedagogical value as well as an analytical opportunity to draw out key assumptions in IR disciplinary thought.

While these many of these authors have also explored both the critical possibilities of questioning American militarism in these games and examined other games (such as O'Brien and Berents' analysis of online games about human trafficking[148]), as Ciută points out this particular emphasis falls into a trap of limiting the possibilities of both what games offer IR research and what constitutes IR research. As they put it:

> As can be seen, the interface between video games and IR *seems* to require a broad view of IR. Yet aesthetic IR has until now focused very narrowly on blockbuster warthemed games, a double filter based on the best-selling popularity of these games, and a foreboding of their role as vectors of pernicious ideologies of violence and militarisation. Both justifications are problematic in their representation of IR as well as video games. On the one hand, *blockbuster* games represent but a narrow slice of the output of the video games industry. The numbers argument – we study them because they sell hundreds of millions of copies (which they do) – is always susceptible to the charge that it mirrors the familiar concern of IR with great powers alone, or that even such wide audiences are unevenly reached and therefore aesthetic IR ends up studying once again first world cultural artefacts with no actual global significance. But the political, global, and everyday significance of

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[146] Craig Hayden, "The Procedural Rhetorics of *Mass Effect*: Video Games as Argumentation in International Relations," *International Studies Perspectives* 18 (2017): 177.
[147] Hayden, "The Procedural Rhetorics of *Mass Effect*," 177.
[148] Erin O'Brien and Helen Berents, "Virtual Saviours: Digital games and anti-trafficking awareness-raising," *Anti-Trafficking Review* 13 (2019): 83.

> video games lies in their huge number and diversity, rather than the market performance of even exceptional products.[149]

In particular, Ciută argues that as complex media that present rules to play with, video games potentially "*are IR theory*" in the sense that their representations of politics constitute "a kind of 'everyday theorizing.'" Thus, while "strategy and shooter games provide obvious material…so do games where combat is absent, or is an optional but not necessary dimension of play (Ciută, 2016).[150]" As Ciută points out, this argument is based on understanding games as rules-systems common in game studies. Hirst in particular has perhaps explored this avenue in the most direct way, and has argued for the theoretical role play (in particular Derrida's conception of freeplay) can serve in producing meaningless, creative and even radical ways of thinking that necessarily resists the theoretical homogenization of hegemonic theory or orthodoxies in its attempt to generate new ways of conceptualizing a regime of knowledge.[151]

Chapter 6: Games and play

While games thus have been dealt with in IR literature, delving into what games as an aesthetic form have to contribute positively to IR analysis like Bleiker's account of the aesthetic turn also means expanding on aesthetic theory that has attempted to grapple with games as an artistic form. This is crucial to any interdisciplinary engagement with video games specifically as arguments in game studies are fundamentally tied to different traditions of understanding how play as a concept has been deployed to understand human sociality. As a result, these

[149] Ciută, "Call of Duty: Playing Video Games with IR," 204-205.
[150] Ciută, "Call of Duty: Playing Video Games with IR," 204-205.
[151] Aggie Hirst, "Play in(g) international theory," *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 5 (2019): 901.

conceptions of play and games form the basis of gaming form, itself a key part of this dissertation's approach to understanding video game aesthetics. This can be shown by exploring key concepts in the field of game studies, namely how different game studies thinkers have articulated how play, interactivity and procedurality help understand how games convey meaning. This section will provide an overview of some treatments of games and the concept of games in different fields that have become influential in game studies, namely Huizinga's concept of the magic circle, Wittgenstein's language-games and Derrida's concept of play, each of which provide a basis for understanding how games as a concept and a social activity articulate meaning.

One early (and fundamental, for theorizing about games) conceptualization of play as a source of social meaning comes from Huizinga's description of play as a fundamental force in generating human culture, which along with Caillois' *Man, Play and Games* Juul points out as being formative for game studies. For Huizinga, while play is central to the development of culture it is paradoxically an ordering process that is not itself rational. Huizinga complicates the common sense opposition between seriousness and play by giving an account of human social order which is centered around the activity of play, which for Huizinga is not reducible to any particular biological or psychological imperative. For Huizinga, as a phenomenon found in nature undertaken by both animals and children the concept of play can't be taken as a primarily rational activity, especially given that the 'fun' of play gives it a kind of self-justifying quality which can't be reduced to "purely mechanical exercises and reactions.[152]" For Huizinga, while "this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening" which fundamentally defines the

[152] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Routledge: London, 1949), 3.

experience of playing games gives it a kind of "totality" that operates beyond any particular historical logic it is nonetheless an "absolutely primary category of life" which permeates human society.[153] According to Huizinga, this self-indulgent reimagination of reality into second-order images which work according to their own rules (likened to a "magic circle" of ritual) is the template for foundational cultural forms "rooted in the primaeval soil of play.[154]" Huizinga gives the example of language, where "[b]ehind every abstract expression there lie the boldest of metaphors, and every metaphor is the a play upon words,[155]" as well as myth, where "[i]n all the wild imaginings of mythology a fanciful spirit is playing on the border-line between jest and earnest,[156]" as examples of this dynamic that subsequently serve as the "great instinctive forces of civilized life.[157]" This irrational, self-referential activity is also necessarily temporally and spatially limited as it is removed from the flow of "ordinary" life, and Huizinga ultimately likens this irrational but ordering process to a ritualistic magic circle:

> Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is "over". It plays itself to an end. While it is in progress all is movement, change, alternation, succession, association, separation. But immediately connected with its limitation as to time there is a further curious feature of play: it at once assumes fixed form as a cultural phenomenon. Once played, it endures as a new-found creation of the mind, a treasure to be retained by the memory. It is transmitted, it becomes tradition. It can be repeated at any time, whether it be "child' play" or a game of chess, or at fixed intervals like a mystery. In this faculty of repetition lies one of the most essential qualities of play. It holds good not only of play as a whole but also of its inner structure. In nearly all the higher forms of play the elements of repetition and alternation (as in the *refrain*), are like the warp and woof of a fabric. More striking even than the limitation as to time is the limitation as to space. All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round,

[153] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 3.
[154] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 5.
[155] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 4.
[156] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 5.
[157] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 5.

> hallowed, within which the special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.[158]

A concrete example that Huizinga gives of the role play has in originating and structuring cultural practices is in aspects of law. Specifically, the institutionalization of competition (or "agon") in different social forms channels the play-form into tradition. For Huizinga, legal courts (as well as their historical precedents in honour duels) as delineated places where competing litigants "betray a sportsmanlike passion for indulging in arguments and counter-argument[159]" in order to declare some kind of victory. Indeed, according to Huizinga the extension of law to the international realm (and ultimately to society as a whole) belies an attempt to extend the agonistic competition of play to governance itself.[160] Whatever the particular merits of this analysis (especially for a broader discussion about IR), of note is the way Huizinga's conceptualization of play as bounded, self-referential and adopted as a ritual over time gives a baseline approach as to how play can be understood to give meaning in a cultural context. The way play requires the limits and mutual acknowledgement of game rules to achieve the kind of ritualistic absorption critical to Huizinga's conceptualization has also served as the basis for later attempts to understand how different kinds of games translate the seriousness of play into aesthetic or philosophical experiences.

Beyond the social phenomenon of games, Derrida's argument about the role play serves in problematizing structural analysis in the social sciences offers another approach for understanding the relationship between play and theory. Specifically, Derrida argues that play highlights the "structurality of structure," or the critical awareness of the contingency of attempts

[158] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 9-10.
[159] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 77.
[160] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 100.

to totalize theory. Derrida argues that the modern structural approach to thinking is grounded in a center, or a "point of presence, a fixed origin" that serves as a genealogical root and main point of reference for a broader epistemological system. Specifically, while this center "permits the play of elements inside the total form," it is also meant to close off the "transformation of elements" that would undermine a structural approach to knowledge.[161] However, citing modern critiques of metaphysics (namely Nietzche, Freud and Heidegger) Deirrda argues that the "rupture" of deconstructive interpretation reveals gaps in attempts to totalize knowledge. For Derrida, these fundamental gaps in a regime of knowledge present a kind of absent centre that subsequently produce various attempts to account for it that despite making some creative addition inevitably fail: "One cannot determine the center, the sign which *supplements* it, which takes its place in its absence—because this sign adds itself, occurs in addition, over and above, comes as a *supplement*. The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified."[162] Derrida describes this process as the "play" of elements within a structure of knowledge, where the impossibility of totally categorizing a phenomenon like language leads to a proliferation of symbols that try and fail to cover this gap.[163] As Hirst points out, the result is a meaningless, creative and even radical sense of play that necessarily resists the theoretical homogenization of hegemonic theory or orthodoxies in its attempt to generate new ways of conceptualizing a regime of knowledge.[164] According to Derrida, as an interpretive heuristic play creates a tension between the desire for a

[161] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 352.
[162] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 365.
[163] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 365.
[164] Hirst, "Play in(g) international theory," 901.

concrete original truth that can't be played with, and a creative sense of play that hints at future possibilities in thinking unmoored from quests for original truths:

> Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center. And it plays without security. For there is a sure play: that which is limited to the substitution of given and existing, present, pieces. In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to genetic indetermination, to the seminal adventure of the trace. There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology-in other words, throughout his entire history-has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play. The second interpretation of interpretation, to which Nietzsche pointed the way, does not seek in ethnography, as Levi-Strauss does, the "inspiration of a new humanism.[165]"

While distinct from Huizinga's anthropological account of play, Derrida's concept of play nonetheless offers a creative heuristic for understanding how play has been and might be understood as a theoretical tool. This sense of creative tension within knowledge structures is useful in thinking through how games express meaning despite being structured activities.

More mechanically, one early attempt to use the structure of games (as opposed to play) to derive meaning from human affairs is Wittgenstein's concept of language games as a philosophical method. Rather than focus on a unifying concept underpinning language as a concept (as Huizinga does with play), Wittgenstein's language games instead stress the actual uses and relationships between concepts. For Wittgenstein, games serve as both an analogy for

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[165] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 369-370.

how the uses of language in particular circumstances relate to each other as an overriding concept and as a way of understanding how languages fundamentally work. Rather than focus on some complete commonality that defines all language, Wittgenstein instead considers different usages of language related in a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail,[166]" much in the same way boardgames, ball games or Olympic games are commonsensically related while obviously being radically different activities. In addition to understanding the function of language through games as an analogy, Wittgenstein's language games also reframe the basic functions of language itself as a series of games. Rather than focusing on how these games directly attempt to teach the discrete meaning of a language, Wittgenstein instead focuses on the function of words in discrete situations. In a hypothetical language based around naming different kinds of stone blocks, for instance, the context of a stonemason teaching their apprentice which kinds of stone to bring them is key in delimiting how those words take on a particular meaning in their use (which may or may not be appropriate outside of that context). Given that the use contexts of language-games are as numerous different kinds of games, Wittgenstein goes so far as to say that "the meaning of a word surrounds the working of language with a haze which makes clear vision impossible.[167]" Of note here is how games not only appear as a metaphor for how language works in different contexts, but also appear as the actual function of language where teachers and pupils take turns naming objects. The result is that while Wittgenstein uses games as a kind of structured analytical tool they also nonetheless introduce an "agentive component…as the source of meaning[168]" for how language works.

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[166] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1958), 32.
[167] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4.
[168] Torres-Martínez, "Complexes, rule-following, and language games," 70.

These early attempts to incorporate games and play into different social and philosophical traditions are important precedents for the field of game studies, where arguments like some of those highlighted (the social dimension of games, the "magic circle," the critical meaning of play, games as a structured semiotic tool) serve as the basis for debates about the ontology of play in contemporary game studies. As Juul argues, by the early 2000s serious attempts to grapple with video games in particular as aesthetic objects in the early texts of game studies began to proliferate. Juul breaks the early game studies debates down between the distinction between narratological and ludological approaches to analyzing video games.[169] According to Juul, early narratological treatments of video games tended to consider "games as storytelling systems" which "often overlaps with the prescriptive idea that video games (or "interactive narratives") would be better if they were like stories.[170]" Juul counterposes this position with the integration of game studies into ludology, which positions video games in broader study of games as distinct cultural activities largely defined by the rules and mechanics of play around their narratives (a position Juul ties back to Huizinga, among others). Juul develops this into an analytical tension between game ontologies and game aesthetics, given that the attraction of playing video games is not neatly reduced to the challenge of their rules:

> Why are video games fun? One idea states that the all-important quality factor of a game is its gameplay, the pure interactivity of the game. In other words, that the quality of a game hinges on its rules, on the game-as-rules rather than on the game-as-fiction. In the words of Sid Meier, designer of Civilization and other classics, a game is a series of interesting choices (Rollings and Morris 2000, 38). By which Meier means that the high-quality games are the ones whose choices provide high-quality mental challenges for players. While this is a compelling idea, a closer examination reveals many games that are considered enjoyable even though they do not provide any mental challenges. I believe that there is

[169] Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 21.
[170] Juul, *Half-Real*, 21.

> ultimately no one-sentence description of what makes all games fun; different games emphasize different types of enjoyment and different players may even enjoy the same game for entirely different reasons.[171]

Juul fleshes their own argument about this debate in game studies into the difference between the "real" dimensions of a video game (namely its rules) and the fictional worlds they purport to represent.

For Juul, games are defined by the tension between the rules that govern how players interact with them and the fictions which are often used to justify them (a tension Juul likens to the relationships between how the pieces in chess move and what they look like). Juul emphasizes the primacy of game rules as their distinct feature, as whether dictated by computer programs or by human referees game rules serve as a kind of "state machine" which interprets and gives meaning to a player's input. Where a player could do any number of things with a chess piece, it is "the rules of chess that allow the player to perform a checkmate-without the rules, there is no checkmate, only meaningless moving of pieces across a board.[172]" However, for Juul games are also supplemented by fictional worlds and narratives meant to stand-in or provide room for interpretation as to the meaning of play within a game. Juul argues that while a game's fictions are often elaborate to the point of being nonsensical in order to accommodate the different ways that time is experienced during play (in other words, the game rules), games nonetheless rely on fictional worlds or supplementary stories to make sense of their rules (often as representations of some other activity).[173] While a game's fictions may or may not align with its rules (i.e. not explaining them properly, or not providing a convincing representation), one

[171] Juul, *Half-Real*, 25.
[172] Juul, *Half-Real*, 50.
[173] Juul, *Half-Real*, 85.

way a player makes meaning of a game lies somewhere in the tension between these two elements. This can be shown when Juul discusses violence in video games:

> It would be a misunderstanding to see a game as an expression of the players wanting to perform the in-game actions in reality. Games-like stories-are things we use to relate to death and disaster. Not because we want them to happen, but because we know they exist. Consider the game Burnout 2. Burnout 2 can be played in a special crash mode, where the object is to drive into a busy intersection at full speed in order to create the largest pile-up possible. It should be obvious that we do not play this game because we want traffic accidents, but because we know they exist and because we want to consider the possibility of death and destruction. The audience of a movie does not automatically assume that the protagonist does good, and neither does the player of a video game believe that the protagonist of the game does good. A game is a play with identities, where the player at one moment performs an action considered morally sound, and the next moment tries something he or she considers indefensible. The player chooses one mission or another, tries to complete the mission in one way or another, tries to do "good" or "evil." Games are playgrounds where players can experiment with doing things they would or would not normally do.[174]

The result is a conception of games which foreground the act of play and player interactivity, which produces meaning within a ludic narrative as a player explores the tension between the rules and fictions of a video game.

Thus, games and play have been treated as serious philosophical heuristics for interpreting social activity and philosophy. This can be seen in an overview of some treatments of games and the concept of games in different fields that have become influential in game studies, namely Huizinga's concept of the magic circle, Wittgenstein's language-games and Derrida's concept of play, each of which provide a basis for understanding how games as a concept and a social activity articulate meaning. These conceptions of play and games form the basis of game studies which in turn offers some crucial concepts for understanding game form. When considering how games represent ideas as modes of aesthetic abstraction, a key part of this

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[174] Juul, *Half-Real*, 121.

dissertation's approach to understanding video game aesthetics, thinking of the medium in these terms helps flesh out the basics of understanding games as meaning-making works. This is more concretely explored in the game studies literature on procedurality.

Chapter 7: Procedural rhetoric

Out of these understandings of games and play (as magic circles, language games, and deconstruction), the field of game studies has attempted to outline a relatively coherent body of literature on gaming which in turn provides any interdisciplinary engagement with games an understanding of how games as aesthetic meaning-making objects work. As Bleiker points out, any interdisciplinary IR project is going to be somewhat limited[175] and in a similar spirit this dissertation's engagement with game studies literature will focus on key useful terms rather than be exhaustive. In this vein, the first major concept from game studies borrowed for the purposes of understanding how games express meaning in this analysis is procedural rhetorics. Perhaps most famously articulated by Bogost, procedural rhetorics broadly refer to the way the coded systems of a video game a player interacts with (namely its rules) constitute arguments by representing a facsimile of social processes. This section will provide an overview of this argument, from the basic notion of procedurality in game studies, to Bogost's argument for the expressive power of procedurality, to Bogost's account of procedurality as well as other uses of procedural rhetorics.

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[175] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 174.

One way of understanding how games impart meaning is the game studies concept of procedurality. As Kaltman argues, procedurality as a narrative term refers to the expressive use of computer processes as they are manipulated by users.[176] According to Kaltman procedurality was derived from programming languages that allowed users to define the contours of what they wanted a machine to do, or "understand how to organize instructions to solve specific problems.[177]" As Kaltman points out this way of understanding digital interactivity was taken up by literary approaches to digital media as a heuristic for understanding the possibilities of interactive narrative. Kaltman traces part of this appropriation to Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, where procedurality is one of the four principal characteristics of digital narrative environments that emphasize their interactive character. Using how the 1966 ELIZA experiment contextualized user inputs to formulate replies as an example, Murray highlights how the rules governing the program created the parody of a detached Rogerian therapist by focusing on keywords in a sentence rather than its overall meaning. The resulting illusion was "the result of Weizenbaum's adroitness in formulating rules of discourse that are based on the ways in which a therapist would behave:[178]" For Kaltman, this conceptualization of the role rules and procedures play in coding forms a "core competency in designers and creators, a literacy of procedural power and systemic representational schemes[179]" that serves as useful method for both creating and deconstructing the representational dimensions of digital media.

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[176] Eric Kaltman, "Procedurality," in *Debugging Game History: A Critical Lexicon,* ed. Henry Lowood and Raiford Guins (MIT Press, June 2016), 369.
[177] Kaltman, "Procedurality," 370.
[178] Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 73.
[179] Kaltman, "Procedurality," 371.

For Bogost, procedurality forms the basis for how computer programs can be expressive. Following from Murray, Bogost argues that while procedurality mainly follows from a user manipulating the "rules of execution" and the algorithmic way in which computers work these algorithms take on an expressive quality inasmuch as they represent real-world processes. For Bogost, procedurality in computing is analogous to social procedures like bureaucracy in that the emphasis is on the way individuals interact with the intersection of various scripted policies or rules. In the way examples like store policies offer opportunities for customers to negotiate purchasing or returning items, the algorithmic nature of procedurality opens avenues for action through the imposition of constraints on behaviour. According to Bogost's example of store policy, whether governed by the implicit rules of "buyer beware" or through negotiating some new return policy social life is structured by some rational order whereby "[w]hen we do things, we do them according to some logic, and that logic constitutes a *process* in the general sense of the word.[180]" For Bogost the connection between social code and computer code is most appropriately found in representation, as unlike a straightforward textual description procedural expression significantly represents processes "*with other processes*.[181]" In Bogost's words:

> These abstract processes—be they material like watch gears or cultural like crime—can be recounted through representation. However, procedural representation takes a different form than written or spoken representation. Procedural representation explains processes *with other processes*. Procedural representation is a form of symbolic expression that uses process rather than language. Diamond and Levitt make claims about procedural systems like history and crime, but they do not inscribe those claims in procedure—they write them, just like I wrote the description of product returns above. In fact, each and every analysis of videogame-based procedural rhetoric I will perform in this book necessarily *describes* the function of processes. These written descriptions attempt to explain the procedural ones, which are made up of rules rather than letters.[182]

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[180] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 7.
[181] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 9.
[182] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 9.

For Bogost, computer programs and games in particular are prime media for procedural expression, as computers are capable of executing many complex rules quickly (more so than, say human referees). Bogost subsequently argues that this procedural expression is also persuasive, and pairs it with a particular argument about rhetorics.

In order to flesh out the expressive capacity of procedurality, Bogost also develops an account of procedural rhetorics. For Bogost, procedural expression is one in a long line of rhetorical forms traced back to Aristotle with the express purpose of persuasion. According to Bogost, the procedural rhetoric argument builds on arguments about visual or digital forms of rhetoric in marshalling elements of both, but differs in arguing for ideas "through the authorship of rules of behaviour, the construction of dynamic models.[183]" Whereas classic oral rhetoric relies on directly rational arguments, contemporary efforts to identify the rhetorical capacity of different mediums (like written, visual or digital forms) emphasize the role of technique and particular modes of inscription in expressing an idea as opposed to simply impressing it on an audience. Rather than aim at a binary goal of success or failure in convincing an audience, more contemporary approaches to rhetoric privilege "the more general notion of elegance, clarity and creativity in communication.[184]" In this way, Bogost argues that procedurality is expressive in that it marshals particular procedural **forms** (ranging from coded representations of physics to common features of user interfaces like scrollbars) into procedural **genres** (like shooters, platformers or strategy games) and in doing so expresses ideas through representative processes. Bogost gives the example of *The McDonald's Videogame* in explaining how procedural rhetorics

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[183] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 29.
[184] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 20.

work.[185] While Bogost's account of procedural rhetoric is primarily focused on persuasion and demonstration, critiques of procedural rhetoric have also tried to expand procedural analyses beyond persuasive rhetorics.

While procedural rhetorics continue to be an influential analytical framework in game studies, Bogost's association of procedurality to persuasive rhetoric is not the only approach. For Matheson, while persuasion is a key part of rhetoric it nonetheless limiting to conflate the two. Working from Lacan's account of symbolic order, Matheson argues that procedurality is a useful heuristic for not only exploring how digital works invoke particular rhetorical acts to persuade audiences, but also for analyzing how video games create or engage with the broader symbolic contexts that frame these acts. Using the example of the nuclear war simulator *First Strike*, Matheson argues that the procedurally repetitive nature of the game (as the game meant to be replayed several times) is not only a particular rhetorical point about the inevitability of failure in nuclear deterrence policy but also a reflection of a broader cultural inability to contemplate the end of civilization inscribed in attempts to impose some illusory sense of theoretical control over nuclear weaponry.[186] Matheson's argument for testing the horizons of meaning procedural rhetorics are capable of identifying is thus useful in pointing to other arguments in game studies about the limits of procedurality as an analytical tool.

It is from this framework of procedural rhetoric that Bogost analyses video games as media capable of expressing meaning. For Bogost procedural rhetorics are particularly appropriate for understanding video games since unlike other digital media that may use

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[185] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 29-30.
[186] Calum Matheson, "Procedural Rhetoric Beyond Persuasion: *First Strike* and the Compulsion to Repeat," *Games and Culture* 10, no. 5 (2015): 476.

computer algorithms to make artefacts (such as word processors or picture editing software), video games uniquely require computing machinery to exist. Bogost's understanding of video games via procedural rhetorics is particularly concerned with subjective and interpretive results of play. For Bogost, a procedural representation is also characterized by the interactive opportunity a player has to explore the myriad ways a set of rules or constraints can be manipulated or reconfigured. In Bogost's own words:

> For example, many players and critics have celebrated Grand Theft Auto *III* (*GTAIII*) as a game that allows the player to "go anywhere, do anything." This sentiment is flawed for several reasons. First, the game does not actually allow the player to "do anything"; rather, in the words of one reviewer, "*GTAIII* let you do anything you wish, within the parameters of the game." The "parameters of the game" are made up of the processes it supports and excludes. For example, entering and exiting vehicles is afforded in *GTAIII*, but conversing with passersby is not. This is not a limitation of the game, but rather the very way it becomes procedurally expressive. Second, the interactivity afforded by the game's coupling of player manipulations and gameplay effects is much narrower than the expressive space the game and the player subsequently create. The player performs a great deal of mental synthesis, filling the gap between subjectivity and game processes.[187]

Bogost gives a possible example of what procedural rhetoric could describe in the hidden ideological underpinnings of political life. For instance, Bogost suggests that video games are examples of complex collections of computational processes that combine to create representations of the logic that drives political action. For Bogost the strict constraints that games like *America's Army* places on players that entail in game punishments for deviations from either the American army's rules of engagement or the chain of command, the use of a persistent "honour" score to incentivize the completion of missions by those standards and the general lack of any particular geopolitical relevance to the missions players are expected to

[187] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 43.

complete all contribute to underlining the portrayal of the American army as an apolitical entity that rewards service for following orders rather than a moral stance on a particular conflict.[188]

For Bogost, the procedural meaning generated by the constraints on user interactivity in games is also interpolated by through the concept of "simulation fever" and its related "simulation gap." Citing Derrida's comments on the essentially arbitrary character of archivization, Bogost argues that that the necessarily limited nature of any given digital simulation (like a video game) reveals their subjective nature.[189] Like Bleiker's aesthetic reflections of reality, the gap between what a simulation includes or excludes in its representation of reality produces a discomfort in observers that for Bogost constitutes an opportunity for subjective reflection. Also citing Huizinga, Bogost argues that this "simulation gap" that connects a player's experience in games to the real world offers a kind of critical meaning-making in destabilizing both the apparent abstractness of game spaces and the player subjectivities that inevitably clash with a game's procedural representations. While games and play are distinct kinds of social activity, they nonetheless are products of and can influence the social world around them. As Bogost puts it:

> Crawford's definition can also be read more subtly. Games provide safe ways to experience reality, but that safety is not necessarily preserved once the game ends and the player slips through the gap in the magic circle, into the sincerity of his or her own mind. Games do provide a protected space, in which players are spared all the physical consequences of their actions. But for the magic circle to couple with the world, it must not be hermetic; it must have a breach through which the game world and the real world spill over into one another. The residue of this interaction infects both spheres, causing what I earlier called simulation fever, the nervous discomfort caused by the interaction of the game's unit operational representations of a segment of the real world and the player's subjective understanding of that representation. Huizinga lamented the fact that play in modern society has become relegated almost entirely to sport, a field of mere distraction. The idea

[188] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 75.
[189] Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 108.

> of simulation fever insinuates seriousness back into play and suggests that games help us expose and explore complicated human conditions, rather than offering mere interruption and diversion.[190]

Additionally, as Bogost points out, the breach in Huizinga's magic circle account of games is often a two-way process. While the coded rules that govern ludic representations are subject to the real-world ideological biases of their designers, they can also more often than not provoke real world reactions (such as the controversies surrounding the *Grand Theft Auto* series[191]).

While an influential heuristic in game studies, the concept of procedural rhetoric is not without its critics. One of the more notable responses to procedurality in game studies is Sicart, who argues that procedurality essentially reproduces a kind of instrumental Enlightenment rationality that closes off the subjective experiences of play. Working off of Horkheimer and Adorno's account of instrumental rationality, Sicart argues that procedurality leans too heavily into the ludological approach to gamer studies when it locates rhetorical expression primarily in a game's rules. While Sicart acknowledges that this approach may be useful for supplementing an understanding of why players play games, procedurality goes too far in identifying play with procedural meaning. Procedural analyses of games treat play instrumentally when the expressive meaning both analysts and designers are meant to focus on are the hard-coded rules players merely enact in order to discover what a game might really be about. For Sicart, procedurality thus too easily forecloses a game ontology focused on play, which game rules frame more than encapsulate: "the meaning of a game cannot be reduced to its rules, nor to the behaviors derived

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[190] Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 136.
[191] Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 136.

from the rules, since play will be a process of appropriation of those rules, a dialogue between the system and the player.[192]" As Sicart puts it directly:

> The allure of proceduralism, then, comes from its quasi-scientific discourse, from its efficient, postmodern argument that ties technology, systems and reason together, justifying the existence of games as a serious medium for expression. However, this is achieved by means of ignoring players and play as a source of rituals and aesthetics, as a form of expression and exploration, as a way of experiencing values as much as adopting values. Instrumental play exists, and on occasions is useful to understand particular behaviors of players. But justifying the aesthetic, political and ethical capacities of games by means instrumentality leaves aside the complexities and nuances of play as appropriation, and of players as co-creators of the ludic experience.[193]

This criticism of procedurality as too structural a game ontology has its own critics. Wright has argued that this criticism of procedurality partly misses the point of Bogost's arguments about procedurality in overlooking the role subjective interpretations of rule rhetorics (like simulation fever) play in generating meaning in gameplay. For Nelson, Sicart's criticism does not reject procedurality as such but rather criticize especially didactic engagements with procedural rhetoric which foreground straightforwardly moralistic game rules over player interactivity (a criticism Nelson also points out that could be levelled at any medium).[194] However, Sicart's argument nonetheless points to the limits of procedurality alone in deciphering aesthetic meaning in video games, and suggests some engagement with a supplementary treatment of games, play and culture might also be necessary.

Thus, while by no means without its critics procedural rhetoric is one avenue of game studies which provides a clear heuristic for understanding how video games convey meaning,

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[192] Miguel Sicart, "Against Procedurality," *Game Studies* 11, no. 3 (2011). https://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap
[193] Sicart, "Against Procedurality."
[194] Mark J. Nelson, "Sicart's Against Procedurality: A reply," accessed November 2022, https://www.kmjn.org/notes/sicart_against_proceduralism.html

namely through the expressive representational power of computer processes. This approach is key to understanding the kinds of arguments that games make from the so-called "ludological" angle in game studies (or a rules-forward analysis of game aesthetics), and highlights the importance of rules and unit procedures to interpreting video game narratives. This was shown from the basic notion of procedurality in game studies, to Bogost's argument for the expressive power of procedurality, to Bogost's account of procedurality as well as other uses of procedural rhetorics. However, as has been pointed out procedural rhetoric by no means encapsulates the entirety of how different theoretical approaches in game studies have interpreted video games as aesthetic objects. Beyond the hard-coded "ludological" features of a game's rules, games studies also derive meaning from games through their relationship to culture more broadly.

Chapter 8: The neo-baroque

In addition to procedural rhetoric, another approach to understanding how video game aesthetics function can be found in Ndalianis' account of the neo-baroque. An analysis of how the material and technical circumstances of the production of much of contemporary media mirrors the indulgent character of art from the baroque era, the neo-baroque serves this dissertation as an important "narratological" (understood in game studies as approaches to game analysis that prioritizes largely everything other than the ludic) companion to procedural rhetoric. While proceduralism offers a concrete understanding of how games convey meaning through the coded material making up their rules and unit procedures, Sicart is not wrong to highlight the limitations of a procedural analysis. As an assemblage of all kinds of audio, visual and narrative

components, the experience of playing games is clearly not reducible to the relationship between player and game rules. As a result, some theoretical approach to contextualizing video games as producing meaning in a broader cultural context is necessary, a role the neo-baroque is uniquely fitted to do. Rather than limit game analysis to internal formal elements, the neo-baroque argument brings together a range of narrative analyses embedded in a context of proliferating meaning which will be key for supplementing the procedural rhetoric approach in identifying and interpreting relevant game elements. This section will provide an overview of the neo-baroque and its relationship to digital media like video games, as well as related concepts like Eco's use of the labyrinth as a heuristic for narrative openness and Aarseth's description of ergodic literature.

According to Ndalianis, the baroque artistic sensibility of "extravagance, impetuousness, and virtuosity"[195] that cut against the Enlightenment neoclassicist emphasis on discipline or reason continued to have a historical legacy (largely through artistic movements in Spain and Latin America) well into the 20th century. For Ndalianis the baroque has come to be defined by "a refusal to respect the limits of the frame that contains the illusion"[196] that insists on opening up the traditionally discrete boundaries of classical storytelling (such as clear beginnings and endings) in favour of open narrative formats that "draw the audience into potentially infinite, or at least multiple, directions that rhythmically recall what Focillon labels the "system of the series" or the "system of the labyrinth."[197] In contemporary media, Ndalianis argues that the baroque insistence on ignoring narrative boundaries in particular artistic forms (such as the

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[195] Angela Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque, Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 7.
[196] Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque*, 25.
[197] Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque*, 25.

increasingly blurry distinction between theme park rides or movie special effects) is compounded by the reality of media production, which due to the demands of both technical extravagance and global capitalism leans towards seriality both in sequels and in products across different formats. As Kirkpatrick describes, "Neo-baroque worlds are assembled from multiple sources, each of which involves a series of laborious processes in which we chip fragments of meaning away from a larger source that remains enigmatic and distant."[198] Beyond this argument about intertextuality, however, Ndalianis goes on to argues that the sheer complexity of baroque and neo-baroque works is itself a kind of stylistic flourish that they refer to as "virtuosity." The overwhelming nature of Renaissance mural paintings (typified for Ndalianis by the "Allegory of Divine Providence and Barberini Power" by Pietro da Cortona) are part of a "virtuoso performance that serves a propagandistic function in honoring both artist and patron,"[199] the size and scope of which includes a whole host of allegorical and conventional references with no single clear pattern of how an observer is supposed to approach them. For Ndalianis, the result was meant to instill a sense of awe or wonder not only from the affect engendered by the work itself but also at the skill of its creator (particularly with respect to past and contemporary artists). Thus, the contemporary neo-baroque is no less concerned with virtuosity, where part of the pleasure of watching a film like *Jurassic Park* is indulging in the excessive character of the illusion it produces as the latest technological advancements in computer-generated images and theme-park animatronics are used to create the illusion of life-like dinosaurs.[200] Similarly, Ndalianis argues that video games like the shooter *Doom* develop their own sense of virtuosity not only in the intertextual references baked into the game (to other horror or science-fiction

[198] Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic theory and the video game* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 173.
[199] Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque*, 88.
[200] Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque*, 169.

properties, or even the development team) or the hypertextual character of its narrative (where the labyrinthine structure of any single level can be navigated at the discretion of a player), but also in their relationship to the evolution of developer id Software's games across time (from two-dimensional *Mario*-esque games like *Commander Keen* to the three-dimensional contemporary shooters like *Quake*).[201] Thus, according to Ndalianis, to understand a video game as a part of the neo-baroque is to appreciate the challenge of deciphering an excess of meaning and ultimately "discover order within their intricate web of connections and allusions."[202]

One of the major conceptual references Ndalianis makes in describing how a neo-baroque analysis works concretely and thus crucial to understand as part of the aesthetic meaning-making of video games is Eco's concept of literary works as labyrinths and "open works." According to Eco, cultural analysis (as well as semiotics more generally) reflect the ontological assumptions of their era. As a result, the latter half of the twentieth century saw a gradual shift in art towards a format prioritizing openness and interpretation over pedagogical works with fixed meanings. Much in the same way that Einsteinian relativity suggested a scientific epistemology based on the subjective experience of otherwise general physical laws Eco suggests that the tendency towards openness in art similarly foregrounds how a work is received as much as the intent of an artist. Eco describes the "work in movement" as an essentially incomplete one which author offers to readers, and while they may be "the one who proposed a number of possibilities which had already been rationally organized, oriented, and endowed with specifications for proper development" it is ultimately for those at the end of an "interpretive dialogue" to make sense of

[201] Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque*, 105.
[202] Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque*, 106.

those possibilities.[203] This openness can be understood as a concrete analysis in the way Eco writes about labyrinths.

For Eco, this articulation of openness in literature mirrors the way they describe rhizomatic labyrinths as a way of understanding contemporary semiotics. According to Eco, in many ways the epistemological shift indicative of the open work has been embedded in contemporary structures of knowledge, which Eco likens to the difference between a tree and a labyrinth. Analyzing the differences between medieval and modern encyclopedias and dictionaries, Eco argues that classical models of organizing knowledge relied on categorizing phenomena according to some prearranged epistemological hierarchy with a focus on its empirical properties (namely some hierarchy of essence laid out by Pliny or some relationship to scripture laid out by Augustine). When laid out in a hierarchical structure, these categorizations form (albeit increasingly complex) trees as they break down into more specific categories.[204] However, for Eco the decline of these epistemological hierarchies also requires a different approach to conceptualizing knowledge given that the increasingly complex attempts to account for greater understandings of the world (particularly since the Enlightenment) make the exclusions hierarchical epistemologies make.[205] Citing Deleuze and Guattari, Eco argues that a more appropriate model for conceptualizing a universal body of knowledge is a rhizomatic networked labyrinth that trades the "notion of an ordered and self-contained cosmos[206]" with a "definition of every concept (represented by a term) through its interconnection with the universe

[203] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 19.
[204] Umberto Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation*, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 27.
[205] Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth*, 30.
[206] Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth*, 52.

of all the concepts that interpret it, each of them ready to become the concept interpreted by all the others.[207]" In Eco's own words:

> In this labyrinth, which no longer presents itself as a logical division but as a rhetorical accumulation of notions and topics arranged under *loci*, the Latin verb *invenire* (= to find or discover) no longer means to find something one already knew existed, sitting in its proper place, ready to be used for the purposes of argument, but truly to discover some new thing, or the relationship between two or more things, that one was previously unaware of. Such a situation represents (as Rossi 1957, IV and V reminds us) the complete and radical refusal of any preestablished hierarchy among beings. Pursuing an idea that will be taken up again later by Leibniz, in the *Advancement of Learning* Bacon points out that, if a secretary of state is obliged to accumulate a series of records in his official place of business, he will classify them according to the nature of the document (treaties, instructions, etc.), whereas in his private study he will keep all the papers that require his immediate attention together, even though they may be of heterogenous nature. The Great Chain of Being is a thing of the past, and from now on every subdivision will invariably be made in context and directed toward a specific end.[208]

This concept of the labyrinth as a visual and theoretical approach to navigating a potentially infinitely open work is thus a useful part of developing an analysis of the excessive character of the neo-baroque (like video games) and for understanding what the structure of an open work might look like to an observer.

Another way of thinking about how the neo-baroque analysis foregrounds the importance of interpretation in artistic works with regards to video games as a medium specifically comes from Aarseth's account of ergodic literature and cybertext. In an attempt to define an alternative approach to literary theory capable of identifying the unique narrative potential of digital media formats, Aarseth develops the term "ergodic literature" to describe literary forms that focus on the tactile ways in which readers engage with literature. For Aarseth, due to their often interactive nature digital literary works highlight how readers often physically engage with

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[207] Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth*, 54.
[208] Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth*, 38.

literature. From reading lines on a page to the more engaged interactivity of video game narratives, nonlinear narratives exchange the hierarchical relationship between text and story with competing branches of a story, where "you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard.[209]" By focusing on the mechanical intricacies of interactive narrative media, Aarseth posits that ergodic cybertexts are unique in involving some kind of physical investment required to "traverse the text" that can't be reduced to the acts of reading or viewing performances central to novels or staged drama.[210] Whereas a reader might be heavily involved in interpreting the text they are looking at, they are ultimately a passive spectator of a narrative that is ultimately "the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but important.[211]" However, as Aarseth puts it:

> The cybertext reader, on the other hand, is not safe, and therefore, it can be argued, she is not a reader. The cybertext puts its would-be reader at risk: the risk of rejection. The effort and energy demanded by the cybertext of its reader raise the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention. Trying to know a cybertext is an investment of personal improvisation that can result in either intimacy or failure. The tensions at work in cybertext, while not incompatible with those of narrative desire, are also something more: a struggle not merely for interpretive insight but also for narrative control: "I want this text to tell *my* story; the story that *could not be* without me." In some cases this is literally true. In other cases, perhaps most, the sense of individual outcome is illusory, but nevertheless the aspect of coercion and manipulation is real.[212]

Aarseth is careful to point out that ergodic narratives are by no means reducible to game narratives or literary genres and instead seeks to describe "a broad textual media category" that "share a principle of calculated production.[213]" Nevertheless, Aarseth does claim that something game-like is central to ergodic aesthetics given that "[t]he cybertext reader *is* a player, a gambler;

[209] Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1997), 3.
[210] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 1.
[211] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 4.
[212] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 4.
[213] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 5.

the cybertext *is* a game-world or a world-game; it *is* possible to explore, get lost, and discover secret paths in these texts, not metaphorically but through the topological structures of the textual machinery.[214]"

While Ndalianis does include video games as examples of both the process and form of neo-baroque works, Kirkpatrick also gives a lengthy analysis of how the neo-baroque plays into discerning how games especially present meaning as aesthetic objects through play. For Kirkpatrick, games often embody the subjective meaning-making of navigating neo-baroque labyrinths both in the complexity of play within a set of rules that interact dynamically over the course of play (particularly for video games, where the addition of a computer referee obviously raises the ceiling on the number of possible rules) as well as in their often over-the-top story-telling. Kirkpatrick gives the popular card game *Magic: The Gathering* as an example. The game's emphasis on the effects any one card may have relative to the effects of cards already in play means that while *Magic* may have a number of consistent core rules the ruleset of individual matches will effectively differ wildly from each other. Additionally, this complexity of *Magic* is belied by a larger corresponding fantasy setting fleshed out in over 20 novels that may or may not inform a player's experience of the game. The result is a prime example of the kind of neo-baroque indulgence in complex virtuosity, where the pleasure of playing comes from navigating the various possible combinations of either card effects or their over-the-top fictional trappings both to discover different ways to win matches but also just for the sake of seeing what might happen:

> A goal of play is to establish networks of rules that allow us to do things, often without direct implications for our opponent (creating combos that allow us to generate large

[214] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 4.

> amounts of mana, for example). The reflexive modification of its rules, often for reasons that seem to be purely aesthetic - there are beautiful patterns to be made in this game - is what the game is about. Consequently, playing to win is only one way to approach *M:TG*. Others play for the fascination of seeing what effects cards will produce, or simply to enjoy the patterns that emerge and re-emerge from the shifting rule structure. Here we see progression but with no correspondingly enhanced role for linear fictional narrative mediating player actions. As the discussion here has highlighted, this unusual game has evolved alongside a massive fictional edifice and it is plausible to suggest that the game would not have the appeal that it does in the absence of some sense among players that this complex sprawling 'multiverse' is there. There is a kind of affective relation between the in-game properties of the creatures depicted on cards and the way that they are described in the novels. The following account from a *M:TG* novel illustrates how some of the convoluted dynamics of play described above make their way into the related fiction…[215]

Kirkpatrick also applies this neo-baroque sense of excess and virtuosity to video games like *dot.hack*, and goes further in suggesting that games also reveal a contradiction in the neo-baroque hypothesis, where virtuosity both creates meaning but also threatens to spin off into effective meaninglessness in its increasing complexity. Kirkpatrick attributes this meaningless precisely to the neo-baroque nature of game aesthetics; by indulging in the laborious and virtuoso conglomeration of references, pastiche and melodrama "we chip fragments of meaning away from a larger source that remains enigmatic and distant[216]." By foregrounding the subjective exploration of a much larger work, neo-baroque objects consequently present such an excess of meaning as to be unintelligible, where "[t]he play of these artefacts involves us surfing the resulting wave[217]" rather than discerning some coherent experience.

While Kirkpatrick argues that games as neo-baroque objects express an antagonism in contemporary culture (namely the drive for virtuoso demonstration of technique at the expense of subjective coherence), they nonetheless suggest that the apparent meaninglessness of games

[215] Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic theory and the video game*, 178.
[216] Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic theory and the video game*, 173.
[217] Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic theory and the video game*, 173.

nonetheless express some general sense of mourning. Citing Benjamin, Kirkpatrick argues that the way games often make death a central narrative theme through repetitive gameplay mirrors the way baroque mourning plays undermined the traditional centrality of the tragic hero in drama by blurring the narrative distinction between life and death. By reducing the direct experience of its protagonists to "never more than a finite set of characteristics that have been defined as functions within a technical system,[218]" through repetitious play video games evoke a nostalgic facsimile of narrative order that at once structures a game's fictions just as it makes them increasingly less meaningful. As Kirkpatrick puts it:

> The appeal of games resides in the complex implication of play with rule structures (an activity that is meaningless in itself) with the shards of projected fictional meaning that we find on the game interface. Patterns in this relationship, associated with bodily activity, account for its pleasurable character, which cannot be dissociated from its frustrations, especially the moments when we find our progress is blocked by a sequence of events that always seems to result in death. Following this kind of event are the inevitable long periods of repetition, when we master a sequence of moves essential to evade that boulder or kill that monster. During these it makes little sense to postulate anything other than a constantly receding role for fictional meaning. This is not a matter of the game giving us a choice between fictional or gameplay modes – that is too static a way of describing what is happening. Rather, the game projects an interesting appearance and then requires us to play against it. Our task as players is to pursue the difference between the illusory fiction and the game as a rule-bound object, often until the first is almost forgotten altogether.[219]

For Kirkpatrick the main interpretive approach this interaction generates is allegory, which is inevitably produced by the ambiguities of riding the line between "automated emblems in a world bereft of signification" and "a vertiginous excess of potential meaning" video game narratives draw.[220]

[218] Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic theory and the video game*, 184.
[219] Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic theory and the video game*, 188.
[220] Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic theory and the video game*, 185.

This account of narrative openness and labyrinthine complexity that emerges out of the neo-baroque concern with excess and virtuosity is useful for contextualizing the formal analysis of what a video game might be trying to argue in a procedural sense. While the procedural elements of a game are undoubtedly the main thrust of how video games translate meaning, the neo-baroque analysis also hints at the importance of parallel elements of broader cultural or intertextual resources with which a game is made to interpreting them. In particular, the neo-baroque use of the labyrinth as a conceptual tool for understanding game narrative will be key for concretely describing the actual effect of the prior discussion on play and describing the experience of navigating relatively complex interactive media like political simulators ("the insistence on the element of multiplicity, plurality, or polysemy in art, and the emphasis on the role of the reader, on literary interpretation and response as an interactive process between reader and text[221]"). This was shown through an overview of the neo-baroque and its relationship to digital media like video games, as well as related concepts like Eco's use of the labyrinth as a heuristic for narrative openness and Aarseth's description of ergodic literature.

Chapter 9: Methodological notes and videogame formalism

Methodologically, there are some precedents for engaging with art in the context of the aesthetic turn in IR. Generally, assessing art in IR largely focuses on contextual readings of a work; given the acknowledgement of the limits of mimetic representations of reality, the value of aesthetics in informing politics is not so much in what they literally represent as much as how

[221] Eco, *The Open Work*, viii.

they evoke or reflect the social conditions in which they were made. While this is obviously not an unproductive line of inquiry, the scope of the theoretical critique outlined in the aesthetic turn suggests that critical hermeneutics are not quite enough for an interdisciplinary engagement with how games work and express meaning. Particularly in light of the "ludology" aspect of game studies, a more formal approach to picking through a game's rules, narrative, production and social context is required if video games as such are to offer aesthetic/representational insights. Beyond the ontological question of what games look like as artistic works, some method of how to organize observations of the procedural or neo-baroque elements expressing meaning throughout play are required; in effect, beyond a theory of what games are, an engagement with game studies also requires a theory of how games work. In addition to outlining the existing methodological approaches to studying games in IR, this section will also argue that methodological developments on appropriating Russian formalism and neo-formalism into the study of video games (variously referred to as "video game formalism") provides a framework for understanding how games cue aesthetic experiences (procedural, baroque or otherwise) by breaking the experience of gameplay down into component formal parts.

O'Brien and Berents give an example of the kind of interpretation commonly applied to video games in IR literature, in their analysis of online games raising awareness about human trafficking. O'Brien and Berents similarly ground their analysis in a narratological acknowledgement that games are "texts that have inherent meanings,[222]" and that while they lack the empirical data to assess the impact of the game on players nonetheless contextualize the games they analyse as "educative tools within a wider anti-trafficking movement.[223]" While they

[222] O'Brien and Berents, "Virtual Saviours," 88.
[223] O'Brien and Berents, "Virtual Saviours," 88.

break down their chosen games both in the social/material circumstances of their production and the way they represent their narratives about human trafficking in detail, they nonetheless contrast these depictions with a broader reality of trafficking as leaning into typical narratives about the criminal physical abuse of young female victims which obviate both the agency of victims and the structural inequalities underpinning the movement of certain kinds of people across borders.[224] More concretely, Robinson argues that while making the distinction between different disciplinary emphases suggested by the ludology/narratology debate (such as a primarily narrative, visual or ludic analysis) is useful for different parts of an analysis of video games, it is nonetheless unproductive for IR scholars to prioritize one over the other as such an approach can elide the "multi-sensorial and composite experience that games can offer.[225]" The result, for Robinson, is a focus on adapting to the various kinds of game experiences and accommodating the ways different kinds of games express meaning. Robinson thus suggests capturing narratives as the interrelated elements of their chronological stories, representation as text and the prose of their narration as an outgrowth of the work done in the narrative turn in IR.[226] Similarly, they also point out that the visual turn in IR also offers methods for deciphering the visual and aural components of games and interrogating how images and sounds are deployed to particular ends (rather than the accuracy of their representation). Finally, citing Bogost Robinson also points to the importance of interpreting gameplay as a clear site of interpretive work, as particular game mechanics carry with them clear political biases. This emphasis on the formal properties of video game narrative and gameplay beyond the kind of Gadamerian contextualization also points to the importance of drawing insights from the

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[224] O'Brien and Berents, "Virtual Saviours," 88-89.
[225] Nick Robinson, "Videogames and IR: Playing at Method," *E-IR*, May 28, 2015. https://www.e-ir.info/2015/05/28/videogames-and-ir-playing-at-method/
[226] Robinson, "Videogames and IR."

ludological analyses of game aesthetics. Beyond the immediate concerns of note-taking, however, some framework for organizing observations about a game's procedural or inter/metatextual elements is also required.[227]

The two major concerns highlighted by the prior discussion of game aesthetics, namely intertextual complexity and proceduralism, are handily identified in methodological terms by attempts to incorporate Russian formalism into game studies. Beyond establishing video games as aesthetic objects, however, an interdisciplinary engagement with game studies also requires a theory of how games work aesthetically. While a game might be understood to convey meaning through its procedural or intertextual elements, what this means concretely for identifying the different parts of a game and how these parts interact in order to cue aesthetic experiences (procedural, baroque or otherwise) requires fleshing out. Here Van Vught and Mitchell's attempt to resuscitate the Russian formalism of writers like Shklovsky and Thomachevsky into a so-called "video game formalism" offers a straightforward framework for breaking down a game into component parts (or "poetic gameplay devices") and identifying the moments of aesthetic interaction as occurring when these parts come into tension. Vught grounds this analysis in Shklovsky's work as one of the earlier proponents of Russian formalism, and specifically highlights the importance of historicizing formalist analyses to move beyond "reductive and prescriptive claims on what counts as proper form and thereby 'real games'[228]" and towards "a more fine-grained approach for the textual analysis of videogames.[229]" In effect, Mitchell and Van Vught's video game formalism is primarily methodological in that it consciously sidesteps

[227] Robinson, "Videogames and IR."
[228] Jasper V. Vught, "What is Videogame Formalism? Exploring the Pillars of Russian Formalism for the Study of Videogames," *Games and Culture*, 17 (2022): 286.
[229] Vught, "What is Videogame Formalism," 286.

the ontological questions of the ludology vs. narratology debate in order to more directly engage with how video game aesthetics actually work, and how the formal arrangement of video game properties trigger aesthetic encounters with the observer.

According to Steiner, Shklovsky articulated a mechanistic futurism that pervaded the Russian intelligentsia of the early 20th century and was highly critical of more traditional literary approaches "concerned above all with what the work conveyed.[230]" Inspired by the industrial aesthetics of an emerging Soviet society and the lack of attention paid to technique in Russian literary criticism, Shklovsky's formalism sought to economize literary interpretation by focusing on the "*how*" of literary production.[231] According to Steiner, this reversal of the value of content was grounded in a separation Shklovsky makes between the automatized reality of the mundane and the tautological character of artistic form "whose purpose is to change the mode of our perception from practical to artistic.[232]" With regards to video games, Vught argues that Shklovsky's early formalism broadly and the de-familiarization effect in particular are useful tools for fine-tuning many narratological approaches to game studies. As Vught points out, much of game studies already engages in a kind of formalist search for game aesthetics and key concepts in game studies resonate closely with core metaphors in Russian formalism (such as the recurring image of the machine). However, Vught also points out that while game studies formalisms concerned with the central role rule systems play in game aesthetics might superficially reflect formalist concerns "Russian formalists were not looking for the essence of literature in the machine but a priori assumed the essence in *the literary experience*.[233]" The

[230] Peter Steiner, *Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics* (Geneva: sdvig press, 2014) 42.
[231] Steiner, *Russian Formalism*, 41.
[232] Steiner, *Russian Formalism*, 44.
[233] Vught, "What is Videogame Formalism," 289.

result is that connecting game studies formalism to the historical tradition of formalism sidesteps many of the ontological conceptual debates in game studies in order to focus on how game aesthetics achieve particular affects, "more in common with the phenomenological works that look at videogame form through, and entangled with the player's experience of embodiment…performativity…or affect.[234]" Out of this separation between the mundane and art form, Shklovsky develops the formalist analysis of de-familiarization as the main technique through which art disrupts the automatized reality of daily life. For Shklovsky, art intercedes into the habitual patterns of perception in that it breaks everyday economy of language (likened to prose). Where interacting with objects in the world becomes habitual and "unconsciously automatic" the ability to perceive those objects in any critical way is reduced to seeing it through the silhouette of its main characteristics, "as if it were prepackaged.[235]" The result of this automatic recognition is ultimately that "we do not see it, and, for that reason, we can say nothing about it." Art (or poetic language) has thus been "intentionally removed from the domain of automatized perception[236]" to "allow us to perceive the object in a special way, in short, to lead us to a "vision" of this object rather than mere recognition.[237]" As Shklovksy puts it:

> And so, held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war. If the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it's as if this life had never been. And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By "enstranging" objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious." The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant*.[238]

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[234] Vught, "What is Videogame Formalism," 289.
[235] Victor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose,* trans. by Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991) 5.
[236] Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 12.
[237] Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 10.
[238] Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 5.

Crucially, for Shklovsky this de-familiarizing effect is not a product of any particular meaning of an art work so much as its arrangement. The very artificiality of a work "attains its greatest and most long-lasting impact[239]" in making an observer dwell on it, allowing the objects it portrays to be "brought into view."

Key to how a formalist critic recognizes when they encounter a defamiliarizing experience is identifying the functioning devices in a work. As Mitchell and Van Vught point out, the basic component of a formalist analysis is the poetic device, a broad category referring to a formal component of a work that becomes relevant as it is foregrounded through the process of defamiliarization; as a material component of a work (likened to camera movements, costumes, or motifs in film) comes into tension with other components such that it plays a role in creating the tensions that cause the defamiliarizing effect.[240] According to Mitchell and Van Vught, breaking a work down into component devices is a loose process of identification as different kinds of devices can play different roles in different works, and while they hint at the extensive categories of devices like those listed by Chew and Mitchell they ultimately conclude that identifying devices is a matter of identifying the motivations behind including particular materials into a work. Considering a work as a "form of craftmanship in which all devices will have a reason for being there,[241]" a formalist approach to identifying devices might as a result not be categorical with the particular kinds of defamiliarizing effects it inspires in an observer, but Mitchell and Van Vught nonetheless suggest the intentions behind including particular

[239] Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 12.
[240] Alex Mitchell and Jasper Van Vught, *Videogame Formalism: On Form, Aesthetic Experience and Methodology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024) 33.
[241] Mitchell and Van Vught, *Videogame Formalism*, 33.

materials in a work might be a more expansive way of understanding what a device is supposed to be doing in a work. Drawing on Thomachevsky (for whom identifying intention was an inductive process distinct from authorial intent), Mitchell and Van Vught outline their own motivational categories which serve as the basis for identifying how material in a work acts to create the tensions that undermine the regular flow of automatization and become strange to the viewer (thus setting the stage for the aesthetic encounter with the defamiliarized). Borrowing specifically from Thompson's use of neo-formalism in film analysis, Mitchell and Van Vught list motivations as:

> – "*compositional motivation* justifies the inclusion of the device that is necessary for the construction of narrative causality, space, or time".
> – "*realistic motivation* […] is a type of cue in the work leading us to notions from the real world".
> – "*Transtextual motivation* […] involves any appeal to conventions of other artworks" (e.g., genre conventions, previous work by the same actor, or the use of certain techniques such as the cliff-hanger).
> – "*Artistic motivation* […] [concerns those devices that] contribute to the creation of the work's abstract, overall shape – its form". This is probably the most difficult type of motivation to define. The artistic motivation is often overshadowed by more prominent other motivations, and it only really becomes noticeable when the other ones are withheld. Generally speaking, abstract stylistic devices that trigger non-straightforward (symbolic) meanings can be considered to have an artistic motivation.[242]

In addition to these, Mitchell and Van Vught add "ludic motivations," or devices that facilitate "rule-bound, goal-directed progress in a game.[243]" Vught gives an example of how identifying these categories works their breakdown of *Bioshock 2*:

> For example, there is a specific moment in Bioshock 2…where we are traversing the ocean floor until the music swells and we come to the edge of a cliff with a view of the underwater city of Rapture. During the traversing of the underwater space, a wide range of devices and functions are at play. The action abilities, the diving suite and spatial architecture, function ludically, compositionally, realistically and transtextually allowing for player progress to the next area, contributing to the identity of subject Delta (the player character) and the

[242] Mitchell and Van Vught, *Videogame Formalism*, 58.
[243] Mitchell and Van Vught, *Videogame Formalism*, 58.

> story of Rapture, and referencing old atmospheric diving suits and the story of Atlantis. These functions continuously alternate between dominant and subordinated until we get to the cliff edge when everything is pushed back to make way for the artistically motivated music and a view of the city. That particular moment cues us to appreciate the game as a crafted artefact. In this sequence, the game foregrounds different formal components that have us reflect on the notion of agency. Subject Delta's relative free will (compared to other Big Daddies), his diving suite, the building music, the framing of the city and the game's emphasis on choice (a near opposite focus compared to its predecessor) all have us expect a free exploration of the outsides of the city of Rapture. However, immediately after our view from the cliff's edge, we have those expectations thwarted by the linear gameplay, almost reminding us of the 'would you kindly' plot twist in the first Bioshock game.[244]

From a methodological angle, these motivations are useful for a formalist analysis in that they put the onus of recognizing an aesthetic encounter with play onto the functioning of discrete component devices which are fulfill broadly recognizable roles in a work. Additionally, these motivations also include the way a work interacts with intertextual references as formal properties of a work, opening up a formalist analysis to the ways genre convention and inter/metatextual references can also prime aesthetic experiences. As Mitchell and Van Vught point out, however, also crucial to a formalist methodology is identifying how these devices work together to create an overall aesthetic theme in a work, referred to as the "dominant."

According to Vught, the key component of incorporating Russian Formalism into the analysis of video games is an appreciation of the "dominant," a concept from the later formalists "in which all devices work together to shape the material towards an overall form.[245]" For Vught, the dominant is characterized by "a struggle between foregrounded and subordinated devices[246]" in a work which nonetheless runs through both the motivations behind specific moments and the intentions of the overall work, illuminating the difference between automatized material and the

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[244] Vught, "What is Videogame Formalism," 296.
[245] Vught, "What is Videogame Formalism," 293.
[246] Vught, "What is Videogame Formalism," 293.

defamiliarized material which cues an aesthetic experience. When applied to video games, the result is an analysis which subordinates literary meaning and interpretation to appreciating the various techniques used to achieve the de-familiarizing effect, be they "those moments during which our expectations around 'how games do things' are undermined and the machine is laid bare[247]" or "the struggle amongst narrative, stylistic and rule-based devices[248]" which produce the aesthetic experience. As the relationships between different motivated devices are highlighted and contextualized by the work as a whole, Mitchell and Van Vught argue, "it should start to become clear what the nature of that aesthetic experience is[249]" (i.e. what is automatized as opposed to defamiliarized, what is foregrounded as opposed to subordinated, etc.) as "players…step back from their expectations and see game elements in a new light.[250]" As an analysis of the relationship between devices functioning in a work, the dominant thus becomes a key tool for systematically thinking how the formal properties of a work are signalling moments of meaning making to players, and crucially not necessarily in ways that prioritize thematic harmony.

It is with these concerns in mind that the present study approached the study of video games concretely. This study takes its immediate pointers on recording data from video games from Robinson, who offers some tangible methodological pointers which ground capturing video game experiences (which Robinson acknowledges can vary wildly between players):

> Best practice involves playing the respective game several times while taking notes and screenshots in order to capture relevant visual signifiers, record the story and narrative, and analyse the structure of the gameplay. The first playthrough is designed to capture the broad

[247] Vught, "What is Videogame Formalism," 296.
[248] Vught, "What is Videogame Formalism," 296.
[249] Mitchell and Van Vught, *Videogame Formalism*, 126.
[250] Mitchell and Van Vught, *Videogame Formalism*, 69.

> meaning and feel of the game, with subsequent playthroughs focused on specific levels/incidents in order to consider the alternative narratives, examine the visual and aural signifiers, and explore the scope of the gameplay options available to the player. Such an approach enables reflection on key questions: What are the choices open to me? How can I complete this objective? Does the game allow alternative patterns of play? In asking such questions, the aim is to reflect on the meaning that comes from the gameplay options encoded into and coded out of the game – 'the possibility space', in Bogost's terms.[251]

However, in attempting to argue how dimensions of ludic form like baroque complexity or proceduralism shape a game's ability to represent the political, a video game formalist analysis offers a way to organize the notes and images taken from multiple playthroughs and more specifically identify when the components of a game are working to create meaning.

Organizing observations about a game along these lines will allow for a clearer picture of how the component devices of games as aesthetic works (both in why they are present and what they might be doing), and within a formalist analysis identify where and when they come into tension (i.e. subverting, subordinating or otherwise defamiliarizing each other). As a result, a video game formalist analysis offers a broad methodological sketch of how to identify where in the experience of play a player is being confronted with the aesthetic experience of play and ultimately building to the main controlling devices mediating the other components in the work. As such, the prior observations were categorized as devices working through the different motivational categories Mitchell and Van Vught identify; "compositional motivations" (or devices deployed for narrative purposes), "realistic motivations" (devices deployed to evoke realism), "transtextual motivations" (devices that appeal to the conventions of other artworks) "artistic motivations" (devices that "contribute to the creation of the work's abstract, overall shape") and "ludic motivations" (or devices that facilitate "rule-bound, goal-directed progress in

[251] Robinson, "Videogames and IR."

a game”). The observations categorized in these ways ultimately build to identifying the “dominant” in each game, as well as other major themes crucial to understanding how they represent politics in aesthetic terms.

Chapter 10: Choice of games

In exploring how games might present a way of thinking about politics as aesthetic objects, it is important methodologically to be specific about what kinds of games are under analysis. Much as terms like “narrative” or “visual” encompass a vast selection of media, genre and form, as Robinson’s suggestions hint at there are a number of different kinds of video games. However, as Ciută argues, much of (though not all) of existing IR scholarship on video games tend to focus on broadly popular war-themed shooting games. This tendency makes sense in that these games are popular enough to justify as research topics (as in the blockbuster film-scale sales of the *Call of Duty* franchise), directly represent the events and details of contemporary conflict (such as in the ideological distortions of the *Medal of Honor* franchise) or are prime examples of entertainment commodities explicitly made as propaganda or recruiting tools. Nonetheless, as Ciută points out the tendency to stick largely to these kinds of games not only elides the many other ways games communicate similar (or completely different) themes but also reproduces the kind of quantitative methodological thinking that aesthetic IR seemingly attempts to avoid to begin with.[252] While this tendency by no means covers all IR inquiries into video games (Salter and Schulzke have written about the *Grand Theft Auto* series, while Hayden has

[252] Ciută, “Call of Duty: Playing Video Games with IR,” 202.

written about the *Mass Effect* series), thinking about the kind of games worth pursuing for the present analysis and getting outside the typical genres, design approaches and topics that IR scholarship has heretofore engaged with video games is a key consideration.

With this background in mind, this analysis will focus on games often categorized as "political simulators," for a few specific reasons. While never as popular commercially as, say, first person shooter games, the political simulator genre is nevertheless a relatively old genre of games, with early titles like *Balance of Power* dating as early as 1985. Something of a subgenre of strategy games, political simulators typically play as turn-based games where the player is cast as the leader of a country (sometimes real, sometimes not) faced with navigating a crisis (either historical or a facsimile of real event) while juggling parallel concerns like staying in power. Procedurally, political simulators often have the clear goal of recreating the logic of how a particular event or political process unfolded while the focus is nonetheless on giving a player some leeway in experimenting with how the details of that event or process may have alternatively played out. For example, in David Eastman's 1990 *Conflict: Middle East Political Simulator* the player is cast as the Prime Minister of Israel who, in the Cold War future of 1997, has to bring about the collapse of neighbouring rivals (like Lebanon and Egypt) while maintaining their legitimacy at home by making decisions over month-long turns. While the overall focus of the game seeks to recreate the security logic which underlined Israeli foreign policy during the Cold War, the player is also afforded to play out that logic to fantastical extremes (up to and including nuclear proliferation). Similar political simulators are a good choice for exploring how game studies might be a useful heuristic for IR analyses because they clearly consciously engage with the intersection between representations of political processes

and gameplay (whether for pedagogical or entertainment reasons, or both) in a way that the typical military shooter does not. If nothing else, political simulators are not necessarily about war in a way military shooters almost exclusively are. Furthermore, many of these games also tend towards representations of political contexts or events which are often ignored by more mainstream genres; the *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honor* and *Battlefield* franchises are replete with revisits to the Second World War (largely from the Allied perspective, and even then largely from the perspective of major Allied powers) while their more contemporary entries tend to focus on present-day American military deployments (even their science fiction entries look suspiciously like the Cold War restaged in space). Political simulators, meanwhile, more often put players in places and roles that give a little more perspective. Spectrum HoloByte's 1991 game *Crisis in the Kremlin* makes the simple move of putting the player on the other side of the Cold War as a leader steering a collapsing Soviet Union into different futures, while Positech's *Democracy* series allows the player to play as the leader of a range of countries (many of them in the Global South by the third installment) passing legislation to win elections and stay in power. Despite these considerations, however, political simulators are understudied in IR video game literature, and thus are prime candidates for an extensive engagement with how thinking about politics and video games intersect.

With these considerations in mind, this analysis will focus on three political simulators in particular; Trans Fiction Systems' 1988 game *Hidden Agenda*, LRDGames' 2015 game *Rogue State* and Nostalgames' 2021 game *Collapse: A Political Simulator*. An early American political simulator, *Hidden Agenda* casts the player as the president of a newly formed junta government of a fictional Central American country that had undergone a revolution in the 1980s. Over the

course of roughly four in-game years, the player is tasked with passing laws and moving money around while weaving between the different factions inveighing on the player to make particular decisions. *Rogue State* is similar in its overall structure; the player is again the president of a new government, this time of a fictional country in the Middle East in the early 2000s. *Rogue State* also tasks the player with navigating countervailing political forces demanding the player make certain kinds of decisions, juggling both domestic concerns to stay in power as well as foreign relationships with more options to interact with. As the most recent game, *Collapse* presents perhaps the deepest simulation but broadly the same outline as its predecessors. Also set in a fictional country, *Collapse* sees the player lead a political party vying for control of a former Soviet republic in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, spanning most of the 90s and ending around the American invasion of Iraq. While not necessarily the leader of their country, *Collapse* shares the overall goal of appeasing (as well as contending with) demographic and political factions both to implement particular policies and/or seek power. These games form an interesting trio largely because of their similarities which bring the unique properties of political simulators to the fore. As political simulators, each game is ostensibly about politics and representing the details of political decision-making in some way. Each game plays relatively similarly; the player adopts an avatar (who is customizable in some way, if only in choosing their name) but rather than indulge in visceral representations of combat instead spends each game poring over dossiers or meeting with other characters in order to make decisions about passing laws or making deals. Each game is tied to specific historical moment which it consciously attempts to invoke (20th century Latin American politics, MENA affairs during the War on Terror and the collapse of the Soviet Union respectively) and with a few game mode exceptions ends at a set period. However, each game also abstracts their representation of a historical period into a

fictional setting, and thus allows (and even encourages) experimentation with different political and historical possibilities for how these events could have or did unfold. Besides their similarities, however, their differences also make them interesting works to contrast. Separated across time as they are, each game (and the circumstances of their development) reflect different representational styles, user interfaces and degrees of interactivity, in addition to different procedural rhetorical styles; as will be discussed later, *Hidden Agenda* is far more simplified than the other two, while *Rogue State* is far more abstract and satirical than the other two and *Collapse* receives far more ongoing developer support than the other two. This mix of similarities and differences stretched out over the history of the medium makes these three games stand out in from other simulators in formalist terms; examined together they give a clearer idea of where moments of subversion and defamiliarizing of the genre in and over time are occurring in a way a comparison with apparently bolder departures (such as the far less narrative-heavy entries in the *Democracy* series) might not as readily.

Finally, it is perhaps worth also ruminating specifically on what is not under analysis. While it is tempting to study games that have the temerity to directly represent historical or political processes by judging their accuracy, this is not in the purview of this analysis. For one thing, following from Bleiker's aesthetic analysis when it comes to IR theory total historical or procedural accuracy is not necessarily a definitive concern for judging whether a political argument is worth considering; while facts are obviously important, they are obviously not the horizon of an aesthetic analysis given that "[n]o representation, even the most systematic empirical analysis, can be identical with its object of inquiry.[253]" The shift from the mimetic to

[253] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 46.

the aesthetic analysis is thus likened to comparing artistic reproductions in a gallery more than comparing truth claims as such.[254] The games in question are by no means perfect invocations of the different times and places they are set in, and there is no shortage of IR analyses rightly pointing out the limitations of the design and imaginaries of video games when it comes to political representation. However, the way theory is given a kind of equality when treated as so many different kinds of representations of reality rather than definitive pictures of it in Bleiker's account of aesthetic politics nonetheless suggests that taking the interdisciplinary step of engaging with art and art theory means focusing just as much on what these objects actually do in addition to what they don't do. This becomes a particularly poignant point of parsimony between these three games in light of the neo-baroque analysis; in recreating the details of fake countries and trying to fit them back into real history, these games approach politics in a way that is close enough to reality to remain recognizable to an IR analysis but nonetheless indulges in the virtuoso flights of fantasy key to the medium. Thus, while the political simulators under study definitely do not necessarily recreate facts as such (especially in their fictional settings, limited timeframes of play, and mechanical representations of interacting with people), they nonetheless do filter their representations of actors, institutions and ideologies through peculiar and unique modes of play and are rethought through the ludic and what kinds of insights games are capable of bringing to IR.

Chapter 11: Motivations and devices

[254] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 46-47.

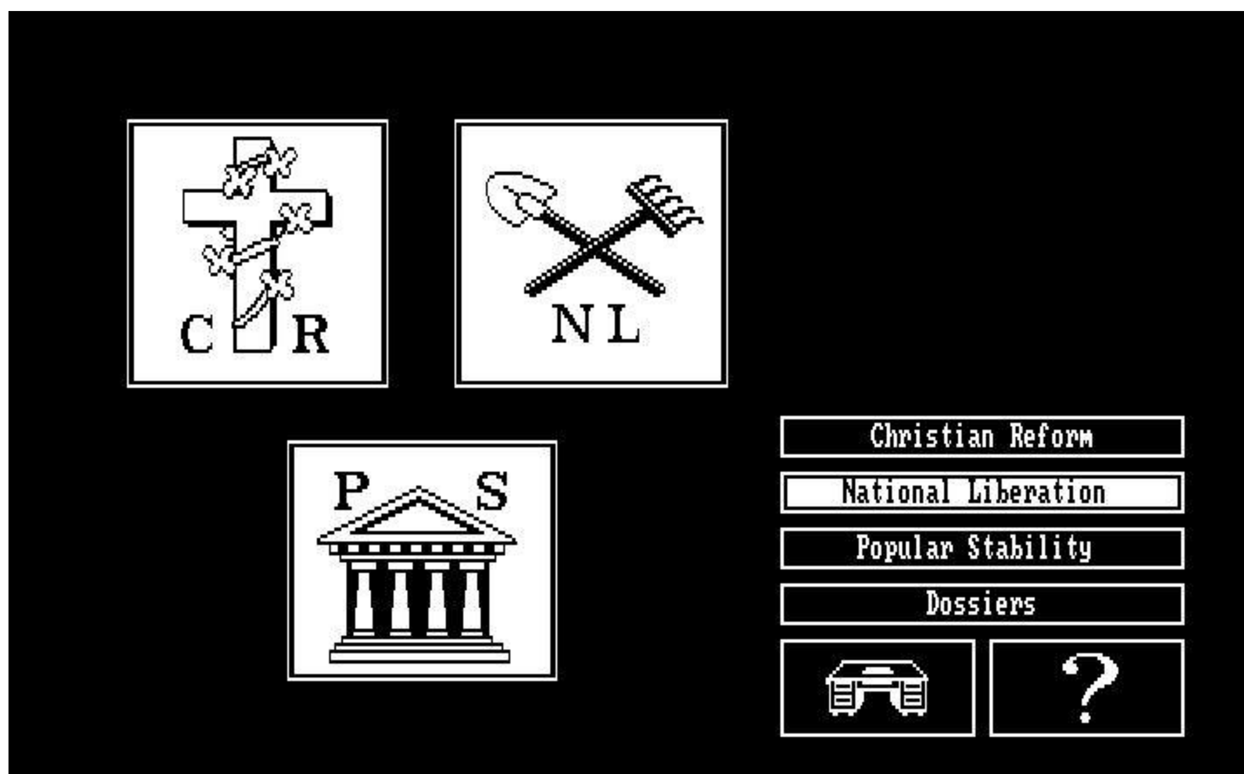
Compositional

The first of the motivational categories Mitchell and Van Vught identify are compositional devices "necessary for the construction of narrative causality, space, or time.[255]" *Hidden Agenda* casts the player as the interim president of a transitional government ruling the fictional Central American country of Chimerica following a revolution which ousted an American-backed dictatorial government some time in the 1970s. The game ends after four years regardless of how well (or badly) the player manages to govern Chimerica, and the challenge of the game rests in navigating the various political factions supporting the junta who pressure the player with often contradictory demands. After giving their president a name and outlining the priorities of their administration, the game is largely played by speaking with a wide variety of characters who represent different interests in Chimerica who will offer the player the opportunity to take a stance on policies they are concerned about and that the player usually either implements or rejects. The player forms a four-person cabinet made of nine possible individuals from Chimerica's three major political factions and is a four-year mandate to make decisions and ultimately shape the immediate future of Chimerica (which is ultimately summed up in a text fragment that changes depending on the player's choices and is presented at the end of the game) (*figure 1*). The major challenge of the game comes from managing the three political factions that form the coalition of the player's government; the leftist National Liberation party (made up of intellectuals, former guerillas and a liberation theology priest), the moderate Christian Reform party (made up of moderate members of the church, activists and business leaders) (*figure 2*) and the business-friendly Popular Stability party (made up of

[255] Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 16.

business leaders, former members of the previous government and dissenting military officers). Representatives from each party are both prompts for policy decisions and weigh in on other policy choices the player must make, and also provide a possible third option for policy dilemmas if asked for advice depending on their ministerial position. In addition to the player's cabinet, they also deal with a large supporting cast of 21 characters representing a wide range of interests in Chimerican politics, from urban and rural trade unionists to people seeking justice for their disappeared families and members of the military. Among these supporting characters are also representatives from international interests in Chimerica such as American, Soviet and Cuban ambassadors as well as representatives from the IMF. Playing through the game these characters will regularly confront the player with policy dilemmas, but the player will also regularly prompt encounters both to actively make decisions but also to advance time in the game. Besides navigating this political landscape, the player can also keep track of Chimerica's economy through a series of graphs tracking a simulation of the production of staple goods, budget as well as social dynamics like land distribution and infant mortality. Finally, the player is regularly reminded of their progress through excerpts from different newspapers commenting on their decisions (often with very particular biases).

(Figure 1: The different cabinet positions the player has to fill)

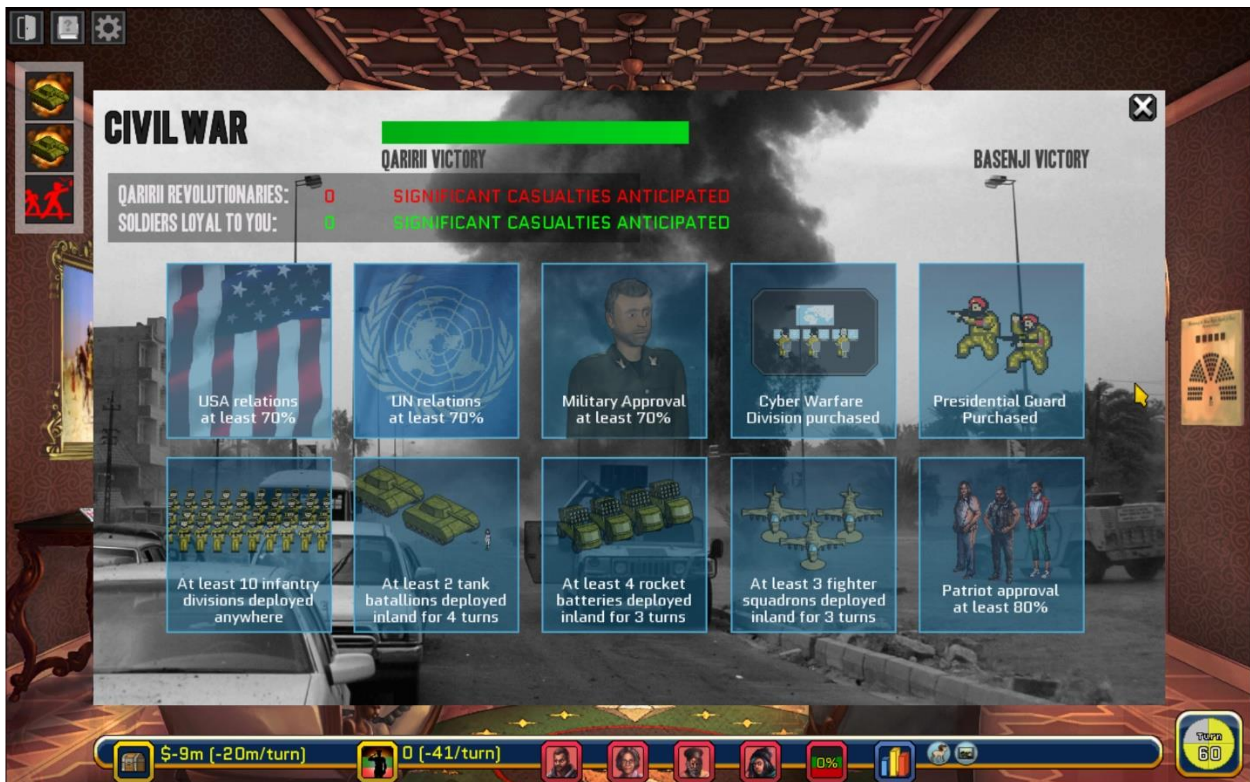


(Figure 2: The different parties representing disparate social forces in Chimerica)

Similar to *Hidden* Agenda, in *Rogue State* the player takes on the role of the president of a transitional government of a fictional country in the Middle East following the end of a civil war some time around the 2010s. As the president of the newly formed People's Republic of Basenji, the player is also tasked with leading the country through a five-year term (or longer on the game's endless mode) rife with crises while also managing competing domestic and international interests pulling on the player's attention. Much like *Hidden Agenda*, *Rogue State* also positions the player in front of a desk taking meetings with other characters who prompt the player to make decisions. Where *Hidden Agenda*'s complex web of interpersonal decision-making is presented through a minimalist interface, *Rogue State* allows the player to control a nameable avatar (male or female) who walks around an Oval Office-like space with features that when selected reveal different sources of information (like a newspaper keeping track of the player's progress or a chart of Basenji's parliament) (*figure 3*). While the regular flow of the game incentivizes the player to be flexible in adapting to events as they arise, this flow is interrupted by one of around five major crises that require the player to accomplish specific goals in order to alleviate the damage on Basneji that are randomized through different playthroughs. The game ultimately culminates in a major civil war crisis, where success is instead dependent on decisions the player could have made over the course of the game (such as instituting a presidential guard, maintaining the support of the military or foreign powers, or maintaining a high level of public support). These crises (as well as the consequences from the regular flow of the game) also revolve around the relationship between the player and their avatar's brother Farouk (*figure 4*). Described by an in-game encyclopedia as a hero of the revolution that brought the player to power but was passed over for leadership of the transition to the post-monarchical regime, Farouk is presented as game's main antagonist from the beginning. When choosing

ministers for their cabinet the player is forced to include Farouk, who unlike other candidates sabotages any position he is given. Furthermore the player is regularly reminded that as their own popularity wanes Farouk is increasingly seen as a better alternative (and becomes one if the player loses the game), and it is ultimately Farouk who leads the insurgency in the civil war that ends the game.

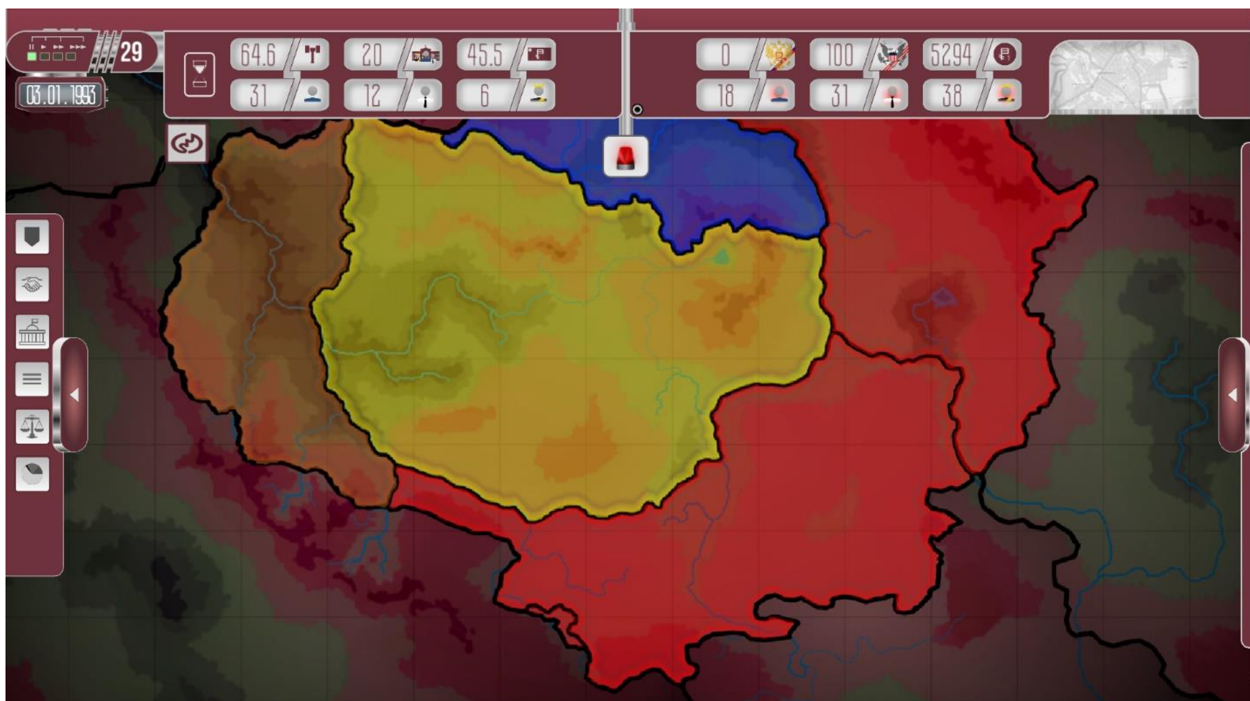
(Figure 3: The player's office which they navigate over the course of the game)



(Figure 4: The screen describing the civil war which ends the game)

Following from *Hidden Agenda* and *Rogue State*, *Collapse: A Political Simulator* is a game about the politics of a fictional Eastern European country (implied to be somewhere between Ukraine and Belarus) in the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union. Like the other political simulators, players take on the role of a leader in a transitional government essentially adapting to the end-of-history moment of the 1990s. *Collapse* differs slightly from other political simulators in that players specifically head one of seven political parties vying for control of the Republic (formerly the Soviet Socialist Republic). After selecting their faction (ranging from a reformed Communist Party to an emerging People's National Party to a far-right Blue Guard Party), players begin the game with an extended choose-your-own-adventure style biography of their character, where they define their gender, background and political career in the communist party bureaucracy of the SSR until its implosion due a protracted political scandal in 1992. From then on, players contend with both domestic and foreign problems as they try to keep opposing social and political forces from ending the nascent Republic until the game's end date in early 2004 (just after the American occupation of Iraq begins). Unlike *Rogue State* or *Hidden Agenda*, *Collapse* is not turn-based and instead plays in a kind of controllable real-time where seconds roughly map onto single days (though this can be sped up or slowed down). Unlike *Rogue State* or *Hidden Agenda*, *Collapse* is largely played over a map of the Republic and its different provinces from which the player regularly receives news prompts about domestic and foreign events (*figure 5*). Many of these are frequent updates about nearby historical events as they happen, such as day-by-day breakdown of the election of Boris Yeltsin, the breakup of Yugoslavia and the First Chechen War. Others are alerts about events in the Republic, as parties work to pass legislation and different parts of the population inevitably break out in protest as a result. From the map, the player can also keep track of their financial and administrative points

which they can spend on projects within their party, on the many factions which influence Republic politics, on laws in the Republic's parliament or on developing one of the Republic's provinces. While *Collapse* does have several end-states (such as one of the Republic's three social classes being alienated enough to storm the capital and end democracy), unlike *Rogue State* or *Hidden Agenda* the game does not focus as strictly on staying in power. Instead, the player leads their party until the end of the game both in and out of power, and shape the character of the Republic as an opposition party as much as a ruling one.



(Figure 5: The map of the Republic and the main screen of the game)

Realistic

The second motivational category Mitchell and Van Vught identify are devices with realistic motivations, or a "cue in the work leading us to appeal to notions from the real world to justify the presence of a device" though as Thompson points out this is often "an appeal to ideas about reality, rather than an imitation of reality as such."[256] For example, while the production of *Hidden Agenda* was explicitly inspired by political events beyond the game and was also explicitly intended to serve a pedagogical function beyond play (both for designers and players), the game also engages a kind of neo-baroque aesthetic in the way that part of the actual functioning of the game quite literally escapes the game itself. On the one hand, *Hidden Agenda* clearly requires (while seeking to inform about) some knowledge of the broader relationship between the United States and Latin America during the Cold War. Playing the game itself, little effort is made to explicitly connect the different streams of Chimerican politics to their real-world counterparts. The result is that much of the game on its own may ironically not make much sense unless a player already has some prior knowledge of events like the Cuban Revolution, the Pinochet coup or the Iran-Contra scandal as a point of reference. However, this partly addressed by the fact that the game is accompanied by a reference manual which (in addition to a user manual explaining game mechanics) also expands on both the in-game context and real-world connections. For instance, it is not obvious in *Hidden Agenda* itself that Chimerica does have a whole explicit history leading up to the immediate events of the player's insurrection. Just playing the game, it is not immediately obvious that the player's junta is actually the fourth Chimerican insurrectionist government in roughly forty years; the previous

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[256] Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 16.

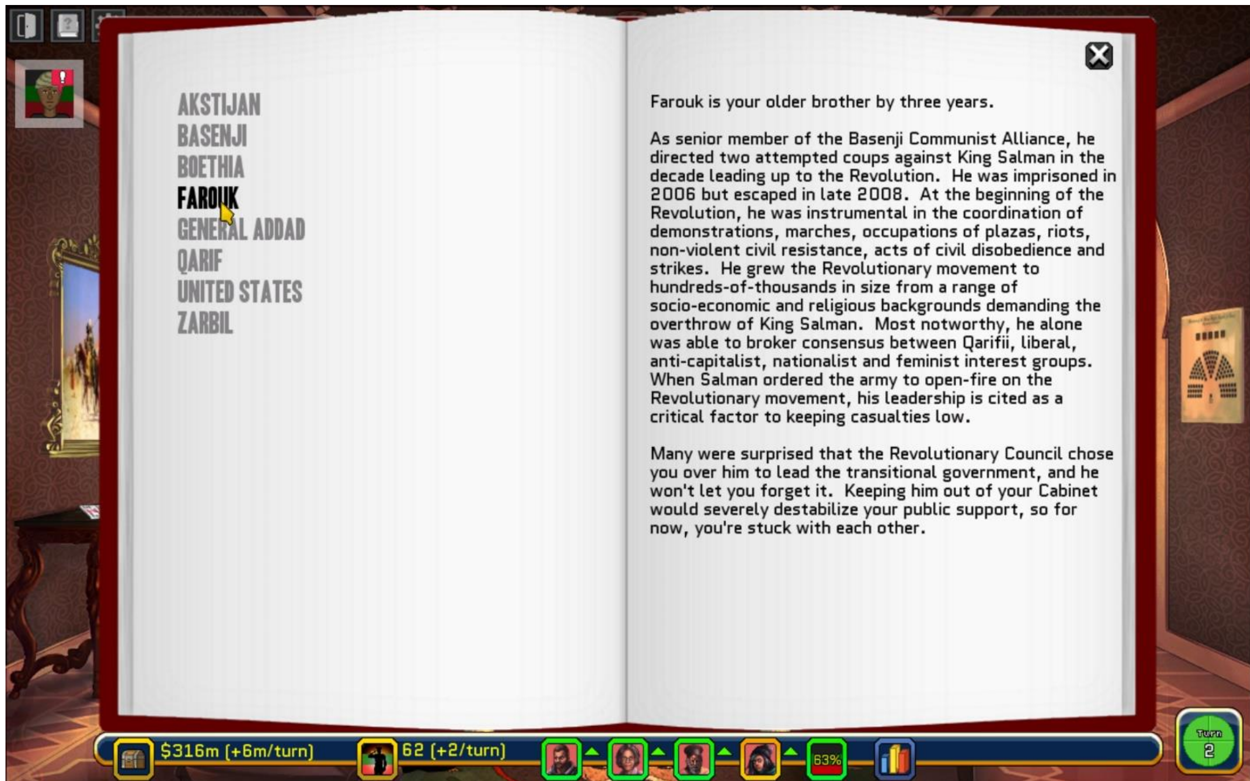
American-backed military dictator Julio Farsante essentially inherited the presidency from his father Edgardo who had taken power from the progressive Colonel Leonard Flores in a CIA-sponsored coup in 1954, while Flores himself took over from the dictator Emilio Rosario in a Free Officer-like movement in 1948. It is also not necessarily obvious in *Hidden Agenda* itself that, for instance, the landowning elite (who the reference manual identifies as only nineteen families) that control much of the coffee and cotton production which Chimerica relies on (and who resist the land reform program the player can undertake) largely evolved out of the feudal structure of the country's Spanish colonial roots, and are where past dictators like Emilio Rosario emerged. It is also not necessarily obvious the degree to which American involvement has shaped Chimerica's past. While a potentially benign force in the game, according to the manual the United States occupied Chimerica three times during the early 20th century as the country became increasingly unstable after declaring independence from Spain in 1821. The Farsante regime the player are depicted as having close ties to the United States despite their practice of widespread political repression, and while the impact of alienating the United States on Chimerica's economy can potentially be measured through play the reference manual handily points out that seventy-five percent of Chimerica's exports go the US while most of its emerging manufacturing sector is part of American-based chains. The reference manual also includes an extensive glossary of terms used throughout the game ranging from Leninism to liberation theology, and also handily points out that Chimerica is explicitly based on the history of countries like Nicaragua, Cuba, Haiti and the Philippines (among others).

Though much of *Hidden Agenda*'s backstory was either embedded in interactions the player has throughout the game or in the accompanying handbook, *Rogue State*'s references for

Basenji and its neighbours are far more front-loaded into the game itself. According to an in-game encyclopedia, Basenji is a “coastal Middle Eastern state with a population of just over 4.6 million,” that for sixty-seven years was ruled by a US-backed monarchy where “criticism of the government was outlawed, tens of thousands were imprisoned without trial for minor offenses and many more died from starvation.” After the murder of a teenager by police, an Arab Spring-inspired revolt aided by the defection of the military overthrew the ruling Salman family and instituted a revolutionary council overseeing a transition to democracy. This encyclopedia is also revealing about major characters the player encounters; for instance, while their relationship with their brother might seem needlessly hostile Farouk is described as having been a major part of the revolution that brought the player to power despite being passed over for control of the country. Having gotten their start in politics as a senior member of the Basenji Communist Alliance, Farouk escaped imprisonment in 2008 and was “instrumental in the coordination of demonstrations, marches, occupations of plazas, riots, non-violent civil resistance, civil disobedience and strikes.” It was Farouk who apparently managed to create the coalition between “Qarifii, liberal, anti-capitalist, nationalist and feminist interest groups” that ultimately brought down the Salman regime (*figure 6*). Furthermore, while the Qarifii minority living in Basenji’s south ostensibly appears in the game as a problem the player has to appease (particularly if they want to make increasingly liberal or secular decisions), the in-game encyclopedia locates their majority religious fundamentalism in “an overall greater unemployment rate, deteriorating infrastructure, and more limited access to freshwater” and a violent relationship with the Salman regime that produced a longstanding separatist movement. Outside the game, Little Red Dog CEO Ryan Hewer has described Basenji as representative of a number of Middle Eastern countries but no particular one, with “a little bit of Oman, a little bit of Bahrain, a little bit of

Kuwait in there.[257]" In *Rogue State*'s sequel *Rogue State Revolution*, billed as a "completely new and re-imagined *Rogue State*" set in the aftermath of Farouk's coup (now given a more specific date of around 2017) and essentially casting the player as their own elected successor, much of the physical makeup of Basenji is fleshed out. While the player similarly makes decisions about policy (if far more of them), they do so over an actual map of Basenji as well as its roads, cities, borders and infrastructure projects. While their exact positions are randomized, *Rogue state Revolution* goes on to flesh out where and how Basenji's main cities (like its capital Majimarah) and provinces (like its capital province Banifa) broadly connect to each other (*figure 7*). Even the characters the player interacts with regularly in *Rogue State* such as the randomly generated parliamentary ministers the player appoints to cabinet positions or their Qarifii aide Tariq are given greater characterization as recruitable ministers with backstories and gameplay effects.

[257] Little Red Dog Games. "RSR Devblog #1" Youtube, July 1, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMSgd0adKZA



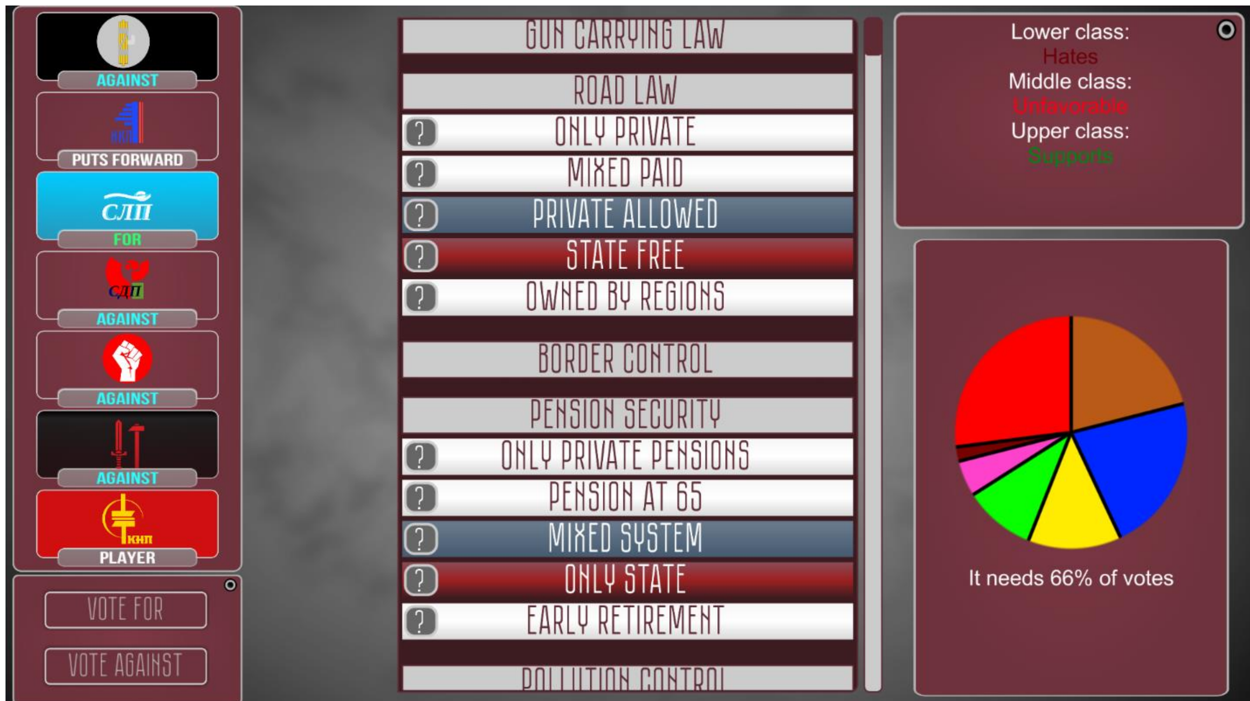
(Figure 6: The in-game encyclopedia entry on Farouk)

(Figure 7: The in-game map of Basenji from *Rogue State Revolution*, which outlines the country’s major cities in more detail)

Besides regularly responding to prompts and events, players spend much of *Collapse* contending with rival Republican parties over control of the parliament, provincial governments and the handful of elections that occur over the course of a game. As the parties have different preferences for what kinds of laws they want passed and appeal to different constituencies, the player will often spend time fighting over the long list of 34 possible laws that can be passed. These range from the state of unions (which themselves can be set to banned or to Soviet-style state unions) to border control to the institutional design of elections (*figure 8*). In addition to pursuing some course of political ideology, these laws also please or alienate different social classes and grow the player's base of support among them (lower classes tend to approve of government spending on social benefits, middle classes tend to approve of greater political freedoms, and upper classes tend to approve of greater economic freedoms). They also ostensibly have direct effects on the demography and economy of the Republic detailed on various graphs tracking information on population numbers, employment rates and debt. While any law being passed imposes a cost on the player's resources, the cost for passing less than three laws at a time is dramatically larger than four or more. In addition, laws require some kind of majority (usually fifty-one percent of seats, or sixty-six for laws like election changes) in order to pass, and as a result the player is incentivized to pass laws in omnibuses minutely tailored to get the desired level of support. After elections, the player also jockey with other parties for control of different ministerial posts which have their own budgets that are contrasted with their levels of operability or effectiveness and corruption but offer a range of extra decisions the player can take to shape policy or attack their opponents (the Ministry of the Economy can prioritize the level of state ownership of major industries, while the Ministry of Education can revoke the media licences of other parties) (*figure 9*). The cumulative fruit of these efforts is tracked in both the player's

support among the different class groups and the classes' "aggressiveness," which if left to fester can result in a game over when an overly aggressive class storms the Republic's capital and overthrows the government. In addition to the classes, the Republic is also divided into different lobby factions (such as the Republican church, the Republic's southern "national minorities," the mafia or a revolutionary Trotskyist cell) which can also be courted or alienated as the game goes on. In addition to all this, the player also manages the Republic's relationship to the United States (as well as an emerging European Union) and Russia, both of whom can also be courted for benefits like development loans and membership in treaties or alienated at the risk of consequences like trade embargoes. While the Republic has an overall state budget, mediating all of these decisions are the party's budget of money, "administrative resources," and party unity, which can all be spent on passing laws, raising support among factions, implementing programs in controlled provinces and staving off end-game states like when the player's control of the party is questioned.

(Figure 8: The screen the player navigates to use the powers of the government ministries under their control)



(Figure 9: The list of laws the players can pass, and the stances of the different parties they contend with)

Transtextual

The third motivational category Mitchell and Van Vught identify are devices with transtextual motivations that "appeal to conventions of other artworks.[258]" An example of these kinds of appeals in the context of *Hidden Agenda* can be found in many of the circumstances surrounding the game's production, which are contextualized by its relationship to other early examples of the genre of political simulators. Made in 1988, little is documented about *Hidden Agenda*'s creation. A product of the American TRANS Fiction Systems development studio, the game was the result of a collaboration between writer Jim Gasperini and game designer Ron Martinez. In a 2008 interview Gasperini described how his introduction to game development emerged out of an earlier career writing interactive historical young adult novels, and that he was explicitly intrigued by the possibilities even early computing devices offered to interactive storytelling. According to Gasperini, *Hidden Agenda* was also born out of an interest TRANS Fiction had in exploring "serious themes" even while the publishers they collaborated with ultimately pushed them towards commercial projects (such as the Star Trek text adventure *The Promethean Prophecy*). Nonetheless, according to Gasperini TRANS Fiction's interest in more educational content eventually bore fruit after a trip to Nicaragua inspired Gasperini to pitch an explicitly political game meant to shed light on the role the United States played in funding opposition to the Sandinistas:

> Traveling with my brother in a remote region of northern Nicaragua, we came upon the burnt-out shell of a bus. As we took photographs, a local woman came up to us. She explained (my brother translating) that the Sandinista government had created a bus service between this remote valley and other parts of the region. Her sister lived in a different valley. It was a great convenience to the sisters to have regular bus service when they wanted to visit, instead of having to hitch a ride in the back of a truck. One night, as the

[258] Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 18.

> bus was coming into the town, armed men appeared out of the darkness and shot out the tires. The passengers were ordered to leave, and the bus was set aflame. These men were «contras,» led by military partisans of the recently overthrown dictator, Somoza. They were funded by my government, the United States. Perhaps inspired by Sandinista rhetoric, this woman had a naive faith in democracy. The United States is a democracy, she knew, but the things its government did in the name of the American people were not always good. She and her sister needed this bus service. If the people of the United States knew that their government was destroying useful bus service in northern Nicaragua, they would act democratically! They would stop funding the armed men who destroyed the buses! Please, she asked me, when you go back north, tell everyone what you saw here. Let them know that we need bus service in northern Nicaragua![259]

While a critical success, according to Gasperini issues with the publisher closing down as the game was released meant *Hidden Agenda* did not do as well commercially despite originally being conceived as part of a series of similar games ranging across other Cold War hotspots. Despite its relative obscurity, the particular confluence of narrative interactivity and political pedagogy *Hidden Agenda* represented has been considered to be a forerunner of the long-running "Games for Change" movement and inspiring other efforts to treat "serious themes" in interactive formats (along with games like Chris Crawford's 1985 nuclear war simulator *Balance of Power*). As Gasperini puts it, beyond teaching players about the dynamics underpinning Latin American politics games like *Hidden Agenda* could "demonstrate how useful the game medium could be to students of political economy, in communicating their ideas to a larger public."

Rogue State was released in October 2015 by New York-based development studio Little Red Dog Games, a company that according to CEO Ryan Hewer "started off as a hobby business making point-and-click adventure games." *Rogue State* in many ways reflects the satirical but nonetheless distinctly political angle that makes its way into much of Little Red Dog's other

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[259] Joachim Froholt, "Interview with Jim Gasperini, creator of Hidden Agenda," interview by Joachim Froholt, *Spillhistorie.no*, 2008.
https://spillhistorie.no/interview-with-jim-gasperini-creator-of-hidden-agenda/

work. In their follow-up to *Rogue State*, 2019's *Precipice*, for instance, players play out the Cold War in a turn-based game of staging coups and assassinations across a world of anthropomorphic animals representing different countries (like the Beaver leading Canada), and one of the early challenges in *Rogue State*'s sequel *Rogue State Revolution* is dealing with a farmer who accidentally built a bipedal Killdozer. This is already clear in *Rogue State* itself, where upon immediately starting play the player can't help but notice an actual Basenji emblazoned above their desk. Other jokes and pop culture references pepper the game; in order to overcome the 'pandemic' major crisis the player is required to recruit a "cantankerous" American doctor with a limp, one of the countries that can border Basenji is seemingly a nation of chickens called the Empire of Chickestan, and the American ambassador (whose randomized appearance can look suspiciously like Hillary Clinton) (*figure 10*) can assure the player that meeting is "no trouble at oil…I mean, all (*figure 11*)." Even Basenji's in-game anthem "Bring Us The King![260]", sung throughout the main menu begins with a declaration that people will only be free once the king is killed in lurid fashion. This satirical edge extends into much of the world-building around both Basenji and *Rogue State*, evident in many of the materials around *Rogue State Revolution*. Using the actors who appear both as voice actors and in live-action cutscenes as the player's main advisors, LRDG has made short live-action trailers for *Revolution* that underscore this comedic approach. In a short video with the pretense of a tourism ad for Basenji in the midst of the Covid pandemic, watchers are invited to "come to the place no one else would ever visit," a "land of intrigue, adventure, uncertainty and unrest.[261]" Another highlights various live-action cutscenes that appear throughout the game, including scenarios in which one of the advisors is assimilated

[260] Little Red Dog Games. "Bring Us The King!" Youtube, July 30, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXDUHXolrFs
[261] Little Red Dog Games. "Visit Basenji!" Youtube, April 18, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oytg8B4OeI

by a rogue AI uprising. Indeed, where *Revolution* adopts the conceit of replayability built in to *Rogue State* as a core gameplay and story "roguelike" mechanic, where individual playthroughs are meant to be short and challenging so as to be played repeatedly and the player's in-game character seemingly caught in a time-loop they can only break by leading a successful Basenji.

(Figure 10: The diplomacy screen, including a chicken and a Hillary Clinton look-alike)

(Figure 11: An American ambassador letting too much slip)

Collapse was released in February 2021 and made by Russian development studio Nostalgames. A small studio of self-professed socialists Nostalgames got its start developing a remake of the 1991 game *Crisis in the Kremlin*, a contemporary of *Hidden Agenda* (itself an inspiration for the developers). According to a 2019 interview with a member of the development team for Nostalgames' 2019 title *China: Mao's legacy*, the studio's stated "task is justly to highlight the undeservedly forgotten period of the cold war [sic]…And to show the perspective of the socialist camp.[262]" Unsurprisingly, then, all of Nostalgames' work share an interest in exploring the dilemmas faced by communist regimes leading up to or following the collapse of the USSR. Both the original *Crisis in the Kremlin* and the 2017 remake cast the player in the role of different leaders of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991, similarly trying to navigate historical events and steer the USSR towards different outcomes. 2018's *Ostalgie: The Berlin Wall* puts the player in similar positions in a range of former communist regimes from East Germany in the base game to Yugoslavia, Romania and Albania in subsequent downloadable expansions. Breaking the mold slightly is *China: Mao's legacy*, ostensibly starts the player at the end of Cultural Revolution in 1976 and lets them play as different party leaders of the CCP up until 1985. While the games range in topics, they all nonetheless play relatively similarly and present very similar arcs with regards to the kinds of decisions players make playing them. While *Crisis in the Kremlin* resembles *Hidden Agenda* in largely sticking the player to shuffling papers around on a desk in the Kremlin, both *Ostalgie* and *Mao's legacy* open the gameplay up to navigating maps like in *Collapse*. These latter games also all play relatively similarly in their use of a real-time approach to advancing time in the game, as well as in dividing the player's attention

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[262] "An Interview with BrutalPin of Kremlingames, developers of "Crisis in the Kremlin" and the upcoming release, "China: Mao's Legacy." Interview by Political Simulators Unite! May 22, 2019. https://medium.com/@Politicalsimulatorsunite/an-interview-with-brutalpin-of-kremlingames-developers-of-crisis-in-the-kremlin-and-the-fa7b9083390e

between the various resources they have to manage and their involvement in pop-ups about historical events. Each game, however, also mirrors the central drama in *Collapse*, with an emphasis on providing for a wide range of (sometimes implausible) directions to take 20th century communism at these various points of crisis. While *Collapse* largely limits itself to the details of its own fictional setting, *Ostalgie* and *Mao's legacy* commit to much broader geographic context, and as a result provide wide latitudes in shaping the 20th century in a playthrough. In *Mao's legacy*, for instance, the playable map essentially includes the entire globe and extends its historical reach to a wide range of interactable pop-ups; players deal with realigning the CCP after the historical death of Mao Zedong, but they can also encourage the reunification of the United Arab Republic, intervene in the Japanese elections in 1980 or explore the recurring theme of colonizing space. In the context of the rest of Nostalgames' work, *Collapse* is thus consciously one piece of a larger project of recapturing the Cold War at different levels of analysis, different points in time, and different places.

Artistic

The fourth category Mitchell and Van Vught suggest for identifying devices are artistic motivations (or devices that contribute to the overall artistic shape of a work).[263] While the least straightforward of the categories they often overlap with many of the other motivational categories, the games outlined in this dissertation nonetheless have features that while seemingly tangential to gameplay or narrative stand out in shaping the way these games represent their politics. One way of conceptualizing these kinds of devices in *Hidden Agenda*, for instance, can

[263] Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 19.

be understood in the different kinds of endings players can attain by playing it in different ways. As Walsh points out, the web of decision presented by *Hidden* Agenda make for three main ways to play through the game which roughly map onto a leftist, rightist and centrist ideological approach. While the game ends after four in-game years (or a coup) regardless of how a player performs, after a game over the player is left with a printable summary of their administration and its impact on Chimerica's future. As a handy example, Walsh provides a guide for the main avenues of play meant to exhaust choices of particular ideological positions without leaving Chimerica a total mess afterwards. The "yellow" solution Walsh identifies, for instance, involves leaning into Christian reform party members as ministers and following much of their advice. According to Walsh, this essentially means accepting some level of social welfare while resisting implementing social reforms like labour reforms or health and education spending as well as managing the balance of forces in Chimerica's military. The "pink" avenue, meanwhile, "goes as far left as possible without leading Chimerica into bankruptcy" and broadly involves timing major reforms (like the land reform program, implementing agricultural subsidies or restructuring the military) to lessen their impact on the simulation of Chimerica's economy as well as refusing to take foreign aid from other countries. Finally, Walsh's "blue" solution "goes as far right as possible without getting overthrown by National Liberation." In addition to these major paths, Walsh also points to other colour variations; Walsh suggests a "purple" variation of reaching a blue ending with a National Liberation cabinet, or an "orange" variation on the yellow ending but with a stronger National Liberation-influenced military. Walsh even suggests a "red" variation of the pink ending and pushing as far left politically as possible "without prior knowledge of what will happen in the model of Central America built into the game," with a twist of submitting to the demands of the inevitable American embargo. Of note is that Walsh's

different solutions highlight the regularity of how *Hidden Agenda*'s characters respond to events; characters will put particular items on their agenda on particular turns largely in response to current events, and Walsh's solutions each take care to game these regularities to fit desired endings in the timeline of the game.[264]

In the case of *Rogue State*, an example of devices included for contributing to the overall shape of the work are the incentives added to replay the game, which often go further than the simple scope of possibilities latent in *Hidden Agenda*. While many of *Rogue State*'s immediate gameplay features resemble *Hidden Agenda*'s, *Rogue State*'s end game is far more linear than *Hidden Agenda*'s open and modular ending but encourages repeat playthroughs of the game. Like *Hidden Agenda*, *Rogue State* also ends the game with a text summary of Basenji's history following the player's five-year term, which changes depending on the range of choices the player makes over the course of a playthrough. However, while the arc of *Hidden Agenda*'s story largely coheres to distinct political ideological projects aligned with the three political parties the player contends with, *Rogue State*'s story mode has one main ending with others based on different failure conditions. For the most part, if the player manages to make it to near the end of the sixty turns of the game, they are alerted that their in-game brother Farouk has staged a coup in Basenji's main legislature and that the country has been plunged into a civil war. Between this alert and the end of the game, the player has the opportunity to invoke different decisions they have accumulated throughout the game (such as whether a referendum on Qarifii independence passed, or whether the player invested in a presidential guard unit, or the player's relationship with the United States) to strengthen the performance of loyalist troops and overcome the coup.

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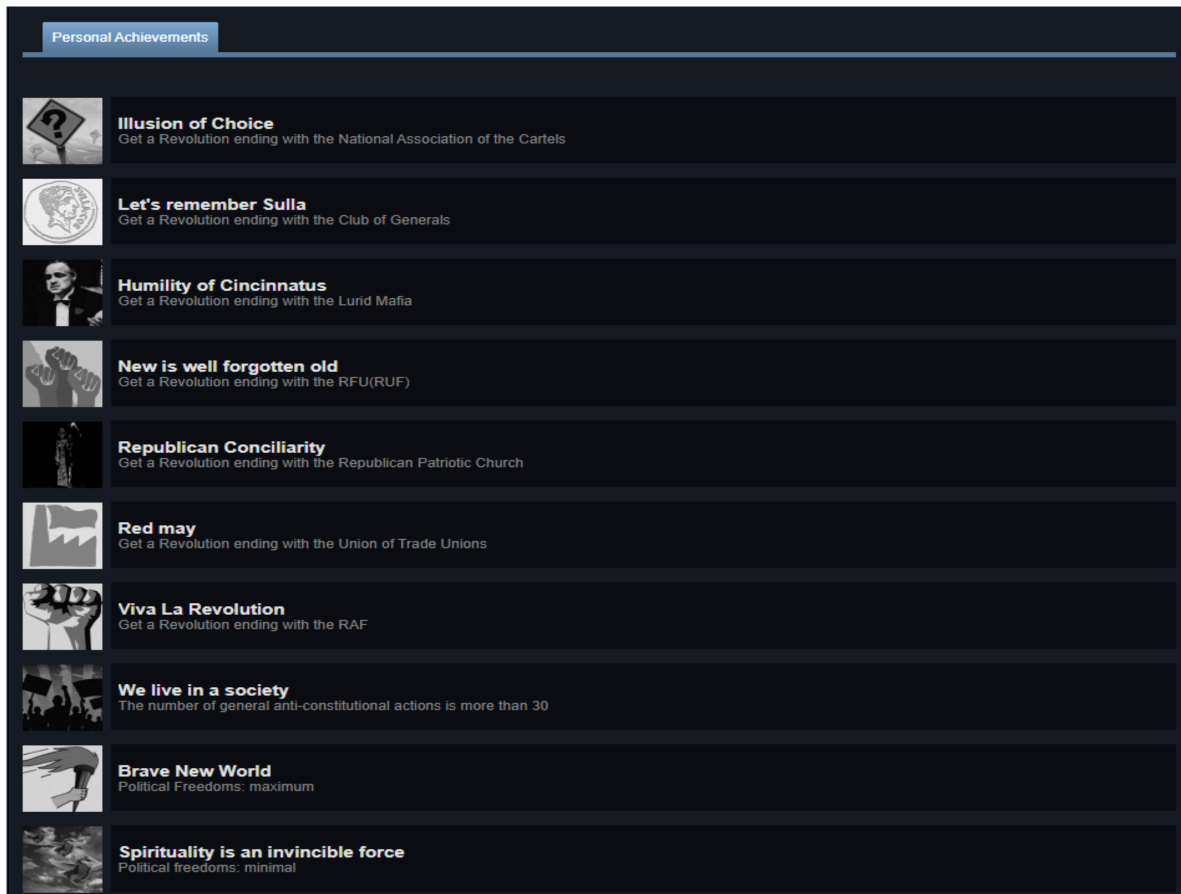
[264] Timothy R. Walsh, "Here are my stories," accessed January 2023. http://www.info2.uqam.ca/~walsh_t/pages/tales.html

While the text that follows telling the player of the elections that follow their tenure and that their legacy has yet to be decided stays the same, like *Hidden Agenda* each run of *Rogue State* also evaluates the player's performance with a point value. Based on how long they managed to stay in office, their relationship with domestic and international factions and whether they accomplished any long-term projects the player is awarded with points that get converted into experience points associated with the player's profile (*figure 12*). During future runs, the player is able to spend these points on unlockable scenarios (accessible via a hidden compartment behind a copy of *Riders Crossing the Desert* by Jean-Léon Gérôme) which modify the game in different ways; the "Hermit Kingdom" scenario starts the player with low relations with foreign factions but greater control over domestic factions, while the "Petroleum Theocracy" scenario starts the player with oil resources they can trade and large opinion bonuses among fundamentalists. The player can also unlock basic game features, such as the ability to tell jokes on calls with foreign leaders or flirt with characters of the opposite sex, as well as the ability to speak to the Chickestani faction which can randomly spawn as one of Basenji's neighbours (and normally just cluck at the player) (*figure 13*).

(Figure 12: The end-game screen where the player is awarded points based on their performance)

(Figure 13: The unlockable scenarios which change subsequent playthroughs)

In the case of *Collapse*, an example of parts of the work which similarly shape its overall form are the incentives the game provides to play it in particular ways. Like *Rogue State*, playing *Collapse* can award players with digital badges associated with their profile on video game marketplaces (namely Steam) as long as they play with the "Last Hero" setting which essentially doesn't allow them to make save files. *Collapse* has seventy-five of these winnable badges (to *Rogue State*'s thirteen), which players can gain by completing specific tasks or gamestates in playthroughs (*figure 14*). While some simply ask the player to complete the game on certain difficulties, more complex achievements require getting certain endings or have the Republic be in a certain state by the end of the game. For instance, the "Let's remember Sulla" achievement requires the player to get a revolution ending with the Club of Generals faction while "Tito's Testaments" requires the Republic's economy to be thirty percent cooperatively run, have a one party setup with a Blue Guard or People's National Party faction in power and pass all the nationalist laws at the end of the game. Others require completing specific objectives in the course of play; "We live in a society" requires the player to perform 30 illegal actions, "Republic of the victorious Metamodern" requires that only the Communist, Blue Guard or People's National parties have deputies in the parliament, while "The Fourth Power" requires the player to intervene in the Iraq War against the United States. Given that these achievements can only be awarded from games where the player can't restore earlier save files, the result is that this dimension of *Collapse* requires many different playthroughs in order to experiment with what decisions need to be taken in order to achieve certain gamestates or endings.



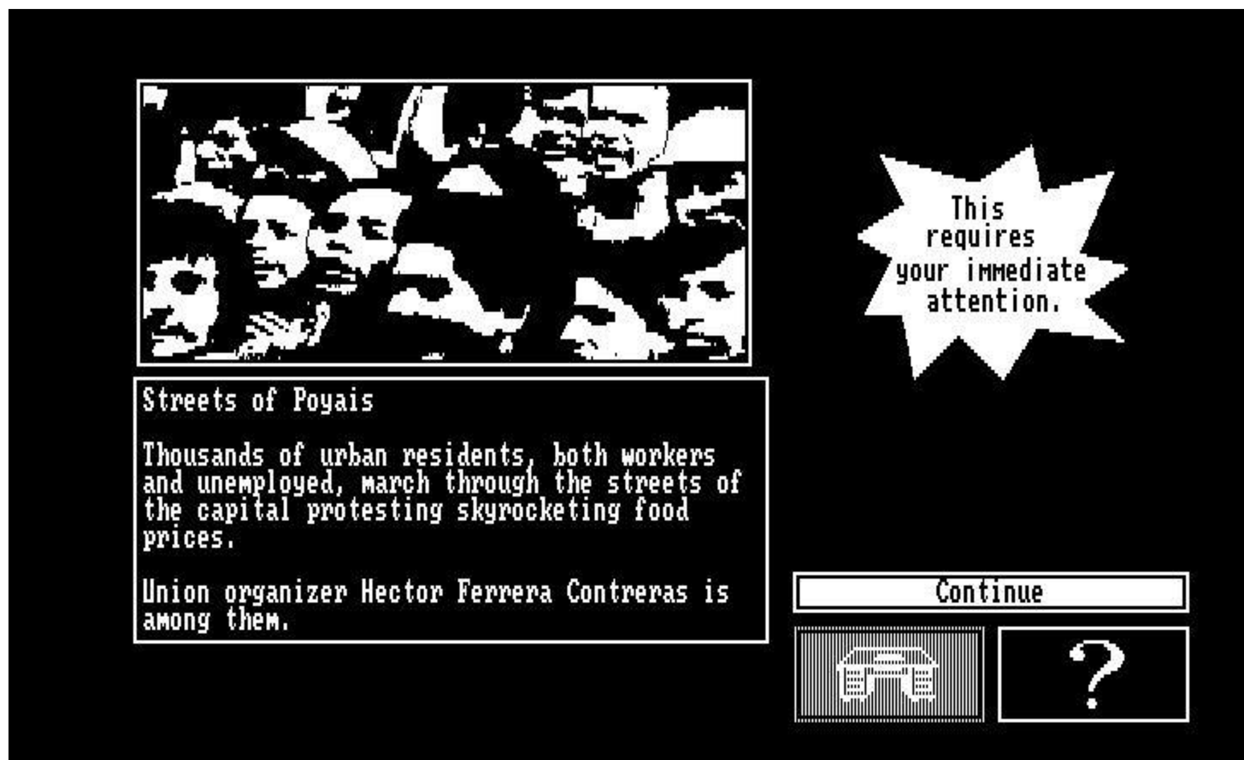
(Figure 14: The list of achievable Steam badges)

Ludic

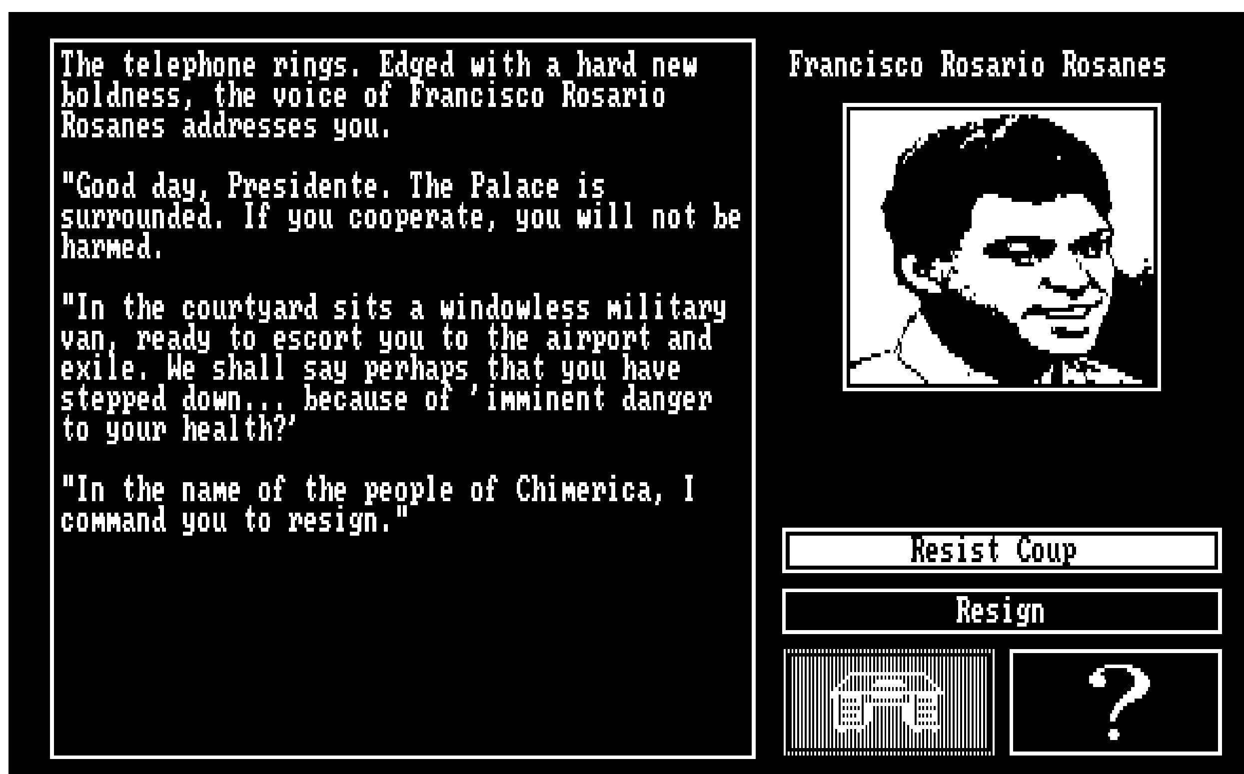
The fifth category Mitchell and Van Vught suggest for identifying devices are ludic motivations, which justify a device as it facilitates a player's "rule-bound, goal-directed progress in a game," which sees a player "acknowledge the game's goals and strive for them actively while voluntarily subordinating themselves to a confining set of rules and challenges.[265]" For instance, *Hidden Agenda*'s various moving pieces end up presenting the player with a number of evolving dilemmas over the normal course of gameplay (*figure 15*). Many of the policy prompts the player receives generally range from deciding over spending for social programs (namely education or health), taking sides on disputes between labour and business interests (both between urban labourers and their bosses and agricultural workers and big landowners), and outlining Chimerica's stances on various international events (such as voting on UN resolutions or denouncing decisions by the United States or the Soviet Union). However, a few of the prompts the player is given follow a chain of major policies that the different factions in Chimerica are essentially directly at odds over. The player manages a land reform program, a restructuring of Chimerica's military and must make preparations for elections to follow the end of their term, and each decision chain both affects each other and has consequences for how the player approaches the rest of the game. For instance, from the beginning of the game, the player is repeatedly confronted by activists demanding they enact a program that redistributes "power and wealth" to the agricultural poor in Chimerica. However, the player is warned by opponents to the program that the existing setup is also the most productive, and that leaning too far into redistribution would have serious consequences. The degree to which this is true in *Hidden*

[265] Mitchell and Van Vught, *Videogame Formalism*, 59.

Agenda's economic simulation, however, seemingly matters less than how different characters in the game react to the player's choices. Going too far with land reform prompts the player with warnings by characters aligned with the Popular Stability party to stop, while compromising at various stages of redistribution can draw condemnation from the National Liberation party and other representatives of the Chimerican poor. Either path can start giving the player prompts about (sometimes violent) disruptions that push the player towards looking for foreign backing, which in turn further alienates the opposition leading the greater disruptions (the player can lose the game when a too-alienated faction stages a coup, and while the player can survive this even then foreign powers can turn the opposition into an insurgent militia) (*figure 16*). While it is possible to lean wholesale into a particular ideological direction, the major decision chains form a kind of web with other encounter prompts that may lead the player to be strategic in how they approach other issues plaguing Chimerica. Since a lot of resources and political capital can go into the land reform program, a player might be more selective with social spending or lean into encouraging business interests elsewhere to make up the difference. In order to appease conservative Chimericans, a player might forego the land reform program altogether despite opposition and spend money on social programs instead. Similarly, the way the player handles how their military is restructured (whether they integrate former guerillas or disarm them, whether they take weapon supplies from the US or the USSR, how they deal with alleged human rights abusers) or how they handle setting up elections (either as a transparent local process the player could lose or as a top-down process they are likely to win) weave consequences into both major and minor decision chains that can impact the kind of compromises a player is willing to make in a given playthrough.



(Figure 15: An example of a dilemma, where the player is confronted by striking city workers)

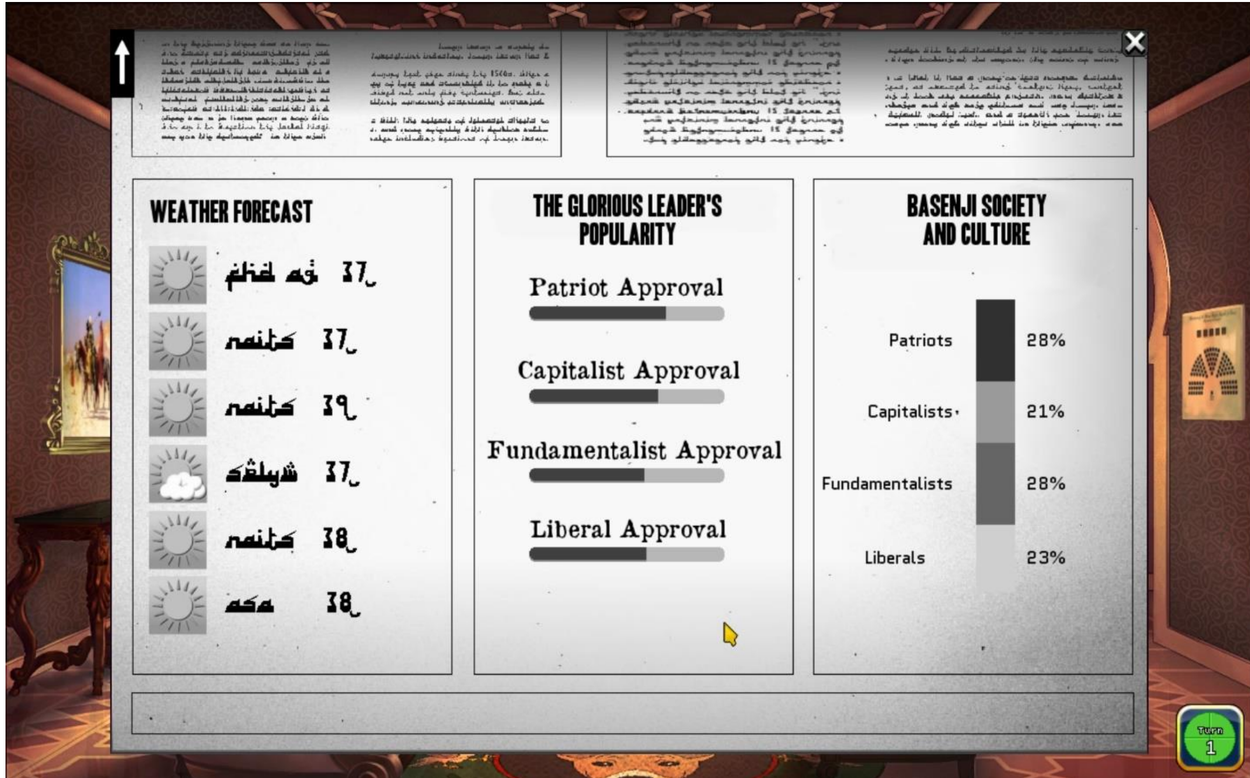


(Figure 16: A Chimerican politician staging a coup)

Like *Hidden Agenda*, *Rogue State* is also turn-based but also makes much of the fluctuations in public opinion and resources the player manages more explicit. Basenji's demography is neatly broken down into nationalist patriots, market economy-focused capitalists, religiously conservative fundamentalists and secular liberals whose opinion of the player (and proportion of Basenji society) regularly vary with every decision the player makes, and the player begins the game selecting from representatives of these factions to fill different ministerial positions (*figure 17*). Besides the regular prompts of immediate problems the player is forced to take a stance on (such as dealing with discontent among Basenji's Qarifi ethnic minority, deciding on whether a national park should be protected from development or addressing an international controversy at the UN), much of a turn is spent prioritizing spending the national budget represented by million-dollar blocks. While they spend the first few turns paying for the reconstruction of basic infrastructure destroyed by the civil war, the player spends much of the game weighing the costs and benefits of paying for different avenues for rebuilding Basenji both in paying for building trees representing different social avenues (such as the military or education) as well as direct blocks of their revenue to different policies set on sliding scales of greater or lesser investment (such as a national minimum wage). Each decision has the immediate impact of raising or lowering the resources the player has access to (such as revenue each turn or soldiers in Basenji's army) but also impacts the player's relationship with different social groups in Basenji society. As the player courts the favour of different political factions and alienates others, they both receive rewards (through the support of aligned members of the player's cabinet and the support of aligned members of the Basenji parliament) and risk ceding support to their brother Farouk who is depicted as another popular leader in the revolution actively seeking ways to depose their sibling and will end the game if given the chance. The

player can also use a red phone on their desk to call (or receive calls from) any of the leaders of Basenji's four neighbouring countries (which are randomized on different playthroughs) to discuss trade deals or other forms of diplomatic cooperation, as well as call the ambassador to the United States to secure military support, economic aid or even a visit from the American President. Aside from the phone, players can also consult a map in order to recruit army units and invade their neighbours. Each turn is limited to four possible actions, and the standard story mode of the game runs for a total of sixty turns. Every twelve turns, the player is also prompted to play a minigame simulating a televised presidential address, where they can select from a range of possible options over the course of a speech in order to curry favour with different political factions from statement to statement (*figure 18*). Over the course of the game's standard mode, Basneji can undergo a financial, medical and security crisis, as well as an occasional uprising from Basenji's Qarifii ethnic minority. While the player is usually left to govern as they like (or as they have to in order to stay in power), they also are essentially made to scramble to address major crises as the impact of some issue (such as the failure of some local companies or the localized outbreak of a viral disease) their advisor makes them aware of begins to mount, particularly as the order of the crises is randomized. For instance, after being told of "widespread failure in financial corporate governance in the United States" after a few turns the player is told that various Basenji industries are beginning to fail, and require bailouts in order to stay afloat. While some industries are more profitable (like banks or airlines) but require larger bailouts others may be more popular with the public (like fisheries or agriculture) and require less money, and the player is given a certain number of turns to direct funds to these industries before they collapse. Whether they prioritize larger profitable industries or smaller popular ones (or save the

Basenji economy entirely) the player is left to deal with the consequences of a drastically reduced budget or standing with the public.

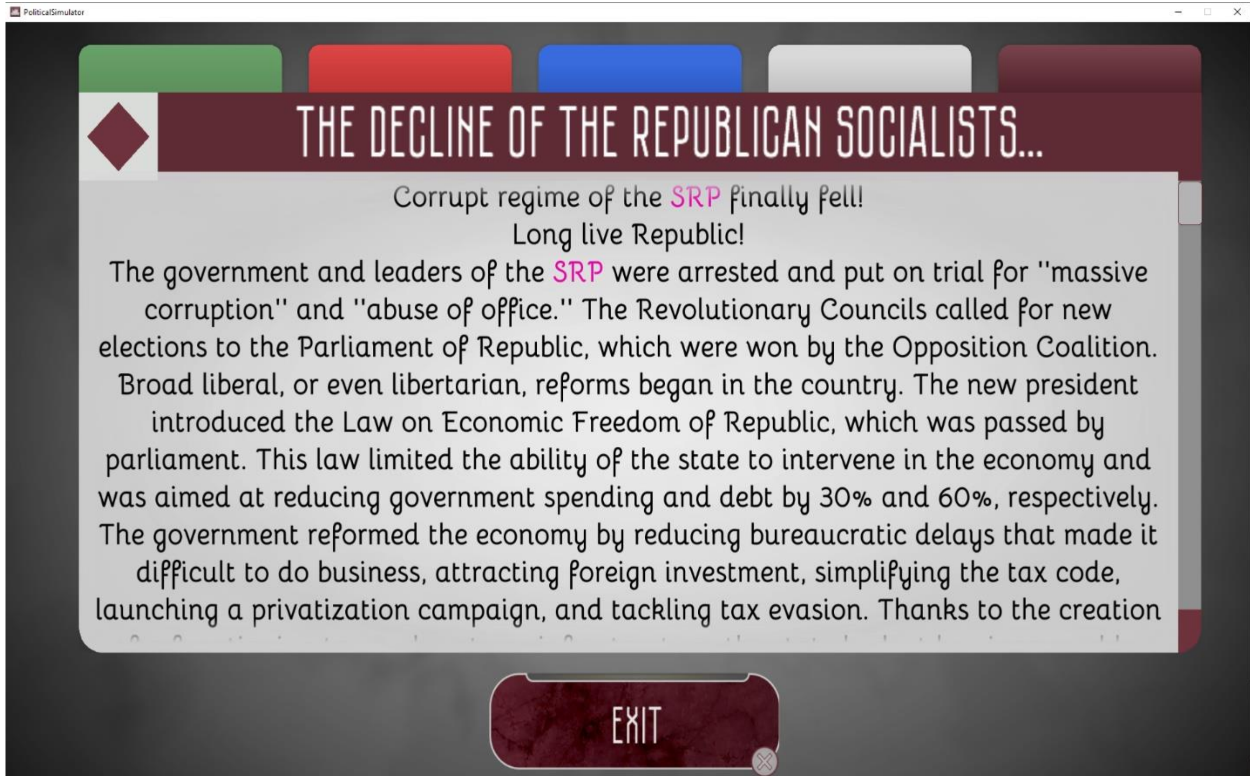


(Figure 17: The newspaper that keeps track of the player's relationship with Basenji's population)

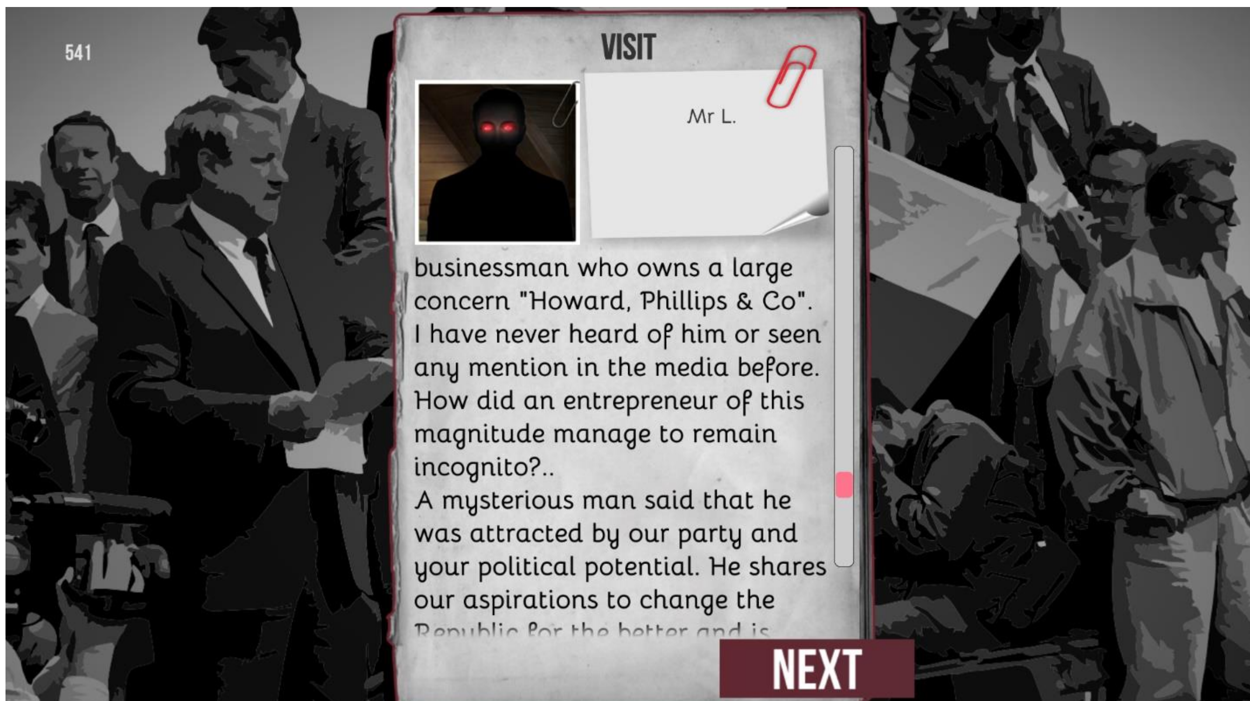
(Figure 18: The player giving a speech to the Basenji public, with their reception tracked by a bar at the top of the screen)

From this setup, *Collapse* offers players a number of different ways to make their way through the game. This is immediately obvious at the beginning of the game in the skippable short introduction where the player defines their character's personal and professional history. Aside from their gender, the player also chooses where their character was born in 1951, went to school, and navigated the Republic's Soviet-era bureaucracy up until the 1990s. While this provides some background for roleplaying, these decisions also carry some gameplay effects over to the beginning of the actual game; for example, depending on whether they married their spouse for their looks, brains or demeanour the player receives a different passive bonus. Thus before the game even starts the player can approach the Republic nascent politics as an idealistic capitalist reformist, a corrupt communist loyalist or an ambitious nationalist. This is most evident from the beginning of the game when the player chooses a party to lead, and strictly speaking adopts an ideological goal. However, at least in initial playthroughs it becomes obvious that like in *Hidden Agenda* and *Rogue State* the player is encouraged to make compromises and concessions in order to stay in power, and possibly more so to pass legislation. Nonetheless, the standard ending in *Collapse* is modular in a similar manner to *Hidden Agenda*, where general categories of political freedom, economic freedom, levels of technology, foreign relations and even the party's vote share are tracked and give different summaries of the Republic's future at the end of the game. In addition, the fate of several issues that run throughout a playthrough also alter this endgame text (*figure 19*). How the player handles the Republic's relationship with its southern ethnic minorities, the sixth "little Republic" breakaway state and its secessionist movement, the state of the old Soviet nuclear stockpile or the ideological split in every party (usually between a radical and a moderate wing) each modify the ending the player gets. Additionally, depending on whether they control the appropriate ministry and have enough

resources, players can also intervene in the course of historical events in the countries around them and change the course of these events, in turn altering the state of the world by the end of the game. Going into the 21st century, the Republic can be a Western-aligned multi-party democratic federation, a Russian-aligned unitary hermit state, or a nuclear power that gets along with everyone. In addition to simply making it to the end of the game as a democracy, the player can also work with one the eight non-party factions to stage their own coup and get a revolutionary ending, which ostensibly changes depending on whether they work with the Trotskyist Rebel Army Faction, the liberal Union of Feminists or the Mafia criminal element. Like in *Rogue State*, these standard methods of making it through a playthrough of *Collapse* can also be modified at the beginning of the game through different difficulty settings. One “Mystic” setting even modifies the game entirely with a subplot where the player has to contend with one Mr. L, a businessman from “Howards, Phillips and Co.” who repeatedly offers the player power through their dreams (*figure 20*).



(Figure 19: An example of an end game screen)



(Figure 20: An example of the ways *Collapse* allows the player to modify a playthrough)

Finally, also key to a videogame formalist analysis is situating these formal components with respect to changes in political simulator games as a genre over time. Mitchell and Van Vught stress that a formalist analysis of video games seeking to transcend a staid ontological argument must consider the interactions between the devices in a work in the context of changes in genre over time as much as in time, as what is automatized about a genre might change as subsequent entries in these conventions become definitive of the overall genre. For these games specifically and political simulators as a whole, the narrative and technological changes over the thirty or so years that separate *Collapse* from *Hidden Agenda* are mark a clear evolution of the form. As was shown, while the core features of the genre remain relatively consistent (politics as agents, institutions and policies in particular places at particular points in time) from its roots in early games like *Hidden Agenda*, subsequent games clearly play with the formula in both graphical and gameplay terms. From the minimalism of the monochrome interactions in *Hidden Agenda* to the 3D avatar players pilot around a fully rendered presidential palace in *Rogue State* to the stack of maps and charts the player sifts through in *Collapse*, the neo-baroque character of the medium becomes evident as the aesthetic experience becomes alienated through an increasing proliferation of procedural material the player is made to navigate.

Beyond identifying these effects with respect to genre, however, the contribution of the ludic to the political dimension of these representations is how this effect of alienating proliferation over time is applied to questions in IR theory. In this dissertation, the way the formal components identified here form an aesthetic effect of labyrinthine excess both within each work but also with the genre as a whole is grouped under a dominant theme of

"complexity," which is used here to describe the picture of political processes that emerges out these games at the level of form.

Chapter 12: Complexity

Bringing the various threads of the aesthetic turn, procedural rhetorics, the neo-baroque and videogame formalism together allows for a substantive discussion of the dominant themes running through *Hidden Agenda*, *Rogue State* and *Collapse*. As Mitchell and Van Vught point out, the formalist concept of the dominant is best understood as the foregrounded devices which control the overall shape of the work, subordinating other devices (aesthetic features, genre conventions, etc.) in order to cue the aesthetic experience of encountering defamiliarized material. It is in considering the dominant tensions between the devices identified in the prior section that what kinds of meaning video games as aesthetic objects try to make (as procedural works in formal terms and neo-baroque works in cultural terms), and in broader terms the tensions between the aesthetic form of games and IR theory, can be better understood. As laid out in chapter two, for Bleiker "the very location of politics" in aesthetic terms resides in the "gap between a form of representation and what is represented,[266]" and rather than elide this gap the IR theoretical engagement with art focuses instead on the details of the mediating forms of political representation rather than solely (or even primarily) their accuracy. In Bleiker's own example this involves considering the way poetry interrupts language in a way that exposes the emotive dimension of politics,[267] and in this dissertation the formalist concept of the dominant

[266] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 14.
[267] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 86.

allows for considering a few ways in which these games (and likely other video games writ large) represent different political contexts through play in ways that put playing games in tension with the mimetic rationalism that informs the opposition to Bleiker's aesthetic turn. In this dissertation, the arrangement of the devices in each of the subject games work politically in how they defamiliarize not only the conventions of video game and political simulator rules, but also recurring questions in IR theory. Specifically, three major themes emerge out of the interactions between the devices making these games up that speak to themes in political theory as ludic interlocutors are repetition, complexity, and intimacy, each of which constitute a distinctly ludic representation of how the political systems, incentives and agents in the various contexts they depict work that nonetheless may be useful for thinking about politics more broadly.

The immediate dominant theme which emerges out of identifying these formal components of each game and how they portray the political systems of their fictional social orders is their relative complexity, especially seen through the lens of the neo-baroque. This theme emerges as a key point in this dissertation as it speaks directly to the narrow focus of social science pretenses to mimetic fidelity; even the oldest monochrome political simulator like *Hidden Agenda* stages its approach to politics and history as a web of material both within and without the work that a player must sift through in order to construct their narrative(s). Where for Güner IR theory is akin to painting in how its "attempt to descend to the bare essentials of international interactions parallel artists' attempt to capture the essence of an object representing something previously invisible.[268]" However, in the context of understanding video gaming as

[268] Güner, *Art and IR Theory*, 31.

neo-baroque medium the nature of ludic representation makes this question of abstraction central as even simple games are more often than not complex assemblages of digital procedures.

Working off of literary theories of the labyrinth (including Eco's), Ndalianis argues that a key marker of baroque works are the flourishes of virtuoso skill which lean into aesthetic excesses that highlight the skill of their creators. The result is an openness of form which indulges in labyrinthine layers of meaning, textured both by the denseness of possible narrative trajectories and interpretations as well as the intertextual relationship between the work and its place in broader culture or society over and above the formalist acknowledgement of a work's relationship to genre; paratexts, homages and technical flourishes also come into play as part of the context-based meaning-making video games as neo-baroque works indulge in. Consequently, while each of these games certainly can be played as coherent straightforward linear narratives (though repeatedly, and in different ways as noted earlier), a repeated theme of each game is the excess of ancillary material both in and outside the game bleed into and ultimately transform the context of each game's main story, proving to be surprisingly dense interactive objects. Both in the elasticity of the narrative in each game and the plethora of intertextual (and not to mention historical) references sprinkled throughout each game make the experience of playing them inextricably linked to broader cultural and political contexts they were made in or about. Politically this also extends the argument of the aesthetic turn in also making creative inter/paratextuality central to ludic representations of the political, and where "abstractions are stilted and limited in design[269]" having to appreciate these games as necessarily complex works

[269] Sylvester, "Art, Abstraction, and International Relations," 553.

requires an analytical approach that must "expand the repertoire, the sightable styles, and admit more colours, tones, and metaphors.[270]"

This complexity appears in the way *Hidden Agenda* presents its politics through play. Appropriate to a neo-baroque medium, *Hidden Agenda* is simply a fairly extensive simulation. On the one hand, this is obvious from the many branches of the decision tree that the player navigates over the course of a game as well as from the large cast of characters and their evolving interests they interact with. As Walsh's guide indicates, even the "main" ideological avenues for completing the game are involved processes requiring the player to navigate the reactions to the web of decisions presented by the different characters they meet.[271] This complexity in gameplay is also reflected in the depth of the simulation that *Hidden Agenda* often only hints at. While by no means a total or complete reproduction of a national economy or history, Chimerica is nonetheless a fleshed-out series of historical references and graphs (*figure 21*). The briefings the player can consult on their desk about the state of their presidency track their progress through a series of press-like graphs; Chimerica's GDP relative to its debt (and the different debtors they owe money to), the rate Chimericans are producing staple goods like coffee or tobacco relative to the price of these goods abroad, or the budget of the social programs they have agreed to fund relative to development indicators like infant mortality or literacy rates. Furthermore, in line with the pedagogical intent of its creation *Hidden Agenda* is steeped in references to the scope of 20th century politics in Latin America, from the Contras to the 1973 coup in Chile to civil war in Colombia. Key to the baroque excess of this presentation of politics

[270] Sylvester, "Art, Abstraction, and International Relations," 553.
[271] Timothy R. Walsh, "Here are my stories," accessed January 2023. http://www.info2.uqam.ca/~walsh_t/pages/tales.html

is in part how superfluous much of it is to the immediate experience of playing the game. While certain aspects of the game are more obvious to the player than others (such as when characters who stand in for particular social or historical issues prompt the player to make a decision), it is entirely possible to play *Hidden Agenda* without ever seeing much of its simulation. The graphs displaying what is happening over the course of the game are literally tucked away behind a pile of files on the player's desk, and much of Chimerica's history isn't laid out directly in the game. While the player gets bits and pieces of their relationship to their predecessor and wider Chimerican society through the biographies of the characters they meet, only reading paratexts like the game's accompanying manual (particularly difficult now given that contemporary restorations of *Hidden Agenda* may or may not include these texts) reveal a history going back to Spanish colonialism. The rural campesiños who ask (possibly demand) the player enact a more equitable land reform are revealed to express a four hundred year-long conflict between Chimerica's rural poor and a parade of landed elites. While the player begins the game with the United States as a close ally, the history in the manual reveals why; Chimerica's economy is almost entirely dependent on exports to the United States, a relationship that America has maintained by repeatedly intervening militarily during periods of Chimerican political instability over the course of the 20th century (including a familiar CIA-backed coup of an elected social democrat in 1954). A player may or may not be aware of these details playing *Hidden Agenda* and may or may not take them into account over the course of play, but cobbling together an interpretation of what's going on in Chimerica from navigating this excess of meaning is clearly central to the presentation of its politics as a game.

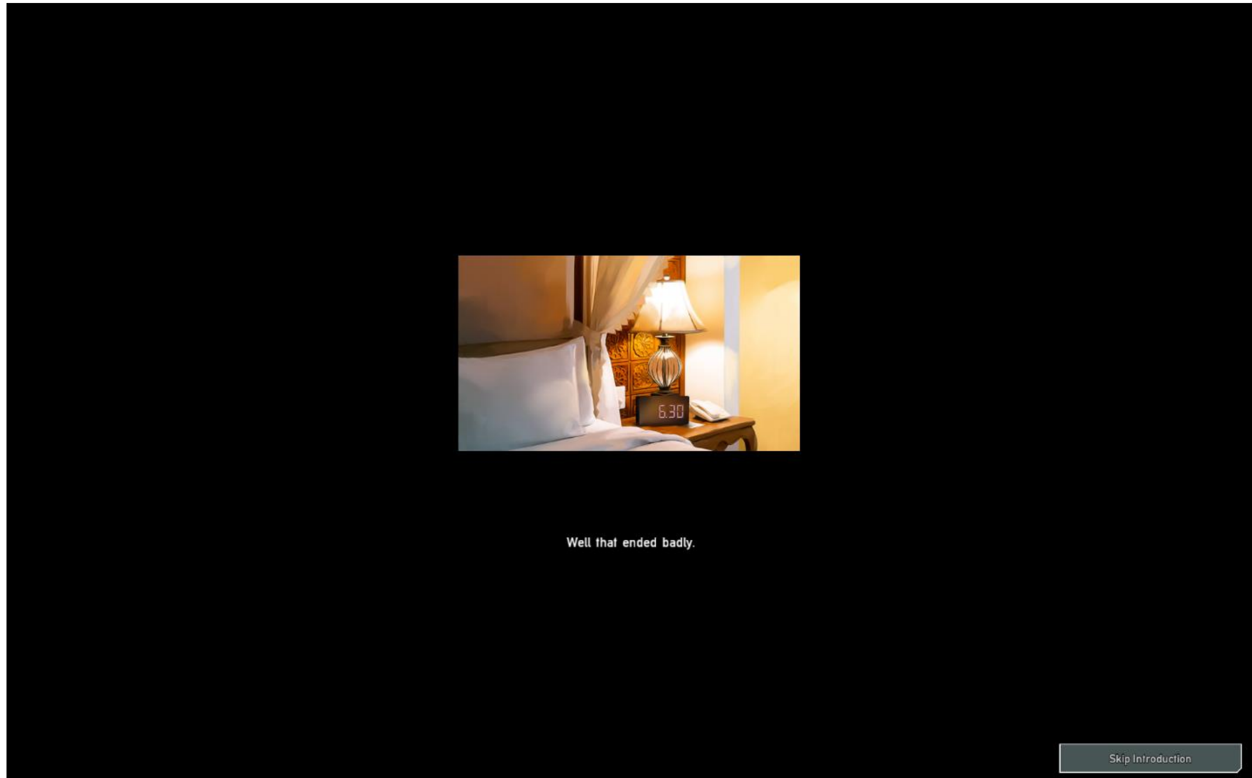
(Figure 21: An example of the graphs keeping track of the player's progress)

Much in the same way that *Hidden Agenda* presents a picture of politics through a complex labyrinth of play rather than a direct reproduction of its topic, *Rogue State* similarly contextualizes its treatment of Middle Eastern politics during the 21st century through an excess of content a player has to navigate as they play the game. Like in *Hidden Agenda*, this is evident in the wide net of decisions available to a player going through the game multiple times. Where *Rogue State* does not have clear paratexts like *Hidden Agenda,* it nonetheless indulges in an intertextuality which gets its point across more through neo-baroque (even parodic) excess rather than a strict dedication to a literal representation of world events. Details like the randomly-generated American Secretary of State possibly resembling Hillary Clinton or the screen showing a speech being delivered by Barack Obama framed suspiciously like the 2009 "New Way

Forward" address which committed the United States to a surge of troops in Afghanistan,[272] set a date to begin a drawdown of the American military presence there and committed to a "stable" Pakistan, all framed by a concern with building enduring institutions for a democratic Middle East, permeate the game. Also tucked away in the background is a framed copy of the 1870 painting *Riders Crossing the Desert* by Jean-Léon Gérôme, the 19th century French academicist partly famous for depicting the Orient and whose 1880 painting *The Snake Charmer* was the original cover of Said's *Orientalism*. The reference is almost cheekily hidden as behind the painting is a literal hidden compartment from which the player can view their earned trophies and medals. Indeed, the baroque conceit of the game is in many ways hidden right in the name. Rather than a sober accounting of the consequences of the Cold War as in *Hidden Agenda*, *Rogue State* leans into an essentially satirical picture of the kind of enemies the United States targeted as part of the War on Terror; the player certainly can play as a benevolent democrat but plenty of latitude is given to emulate the caricatures of North Korea, Iran or Baathist Iraq in American media, replete with chemical weapons programs, brainwashed secret agents and a personal bank account in Liechtenstein to launder money. This winking referentiality extends into *Rogue State Revolution*, where not only the immediate story (and physical geography) of Basenji is expanded on, but the over-the-top science fiction conceit is made central to play in adopting repetitive roguelike game mechanics (explained by the player experiencing *Groundhog Day*-style time loops) (*figure 22*) and *Borat*-style jokes about Basenji's social dysfunction.[273] The result is that the intertextual references that permeate the game (and its remake) paired with the various layers of more grounded gameplay and themes seemingly lampoon the contemporary state of the

[272] Jesse Lee, "The New Way Forward – The President's Address," *The White House*, December 1, 2009,https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/12/01/new-way-forward-presidents-address
[273] Little Red Dog Games, "Visit Basenji!" Youtube, April 18, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oytg8B4OeI

Middle East, American foreign policy and politics in general as the player navigates the way they consciously contradict each other.



(Figure 22: The player character waking up after an unsuccessful playthrough)

Unsurprisingly, *Collapse* continues this theme of virtuoso complexity into more recent digital formats. Like *Hidden Agenda* and *Rogue State*, *Collapse* also explores the drama of post-Cold War Eastern Europe through the immediate complexity of its simulation. The breakdown of Republican elections and their struggle over the different provinces, the ambitious attempt to fit the Republic's history into twenty years of real events down to the day and the evolution of *Hidden Agenda*'s graphs into a plethora of lines and numbers tracking changing regional demographics, party memberships and even air quality. However, *Collapse* in some ways goes further in demonstrating the way games use both the internet and the digital format to take the neo-baroque excess beyond form and into the process of development. Having sold their games

largely on the digital marketplace Steam, developer Nostalgames have released subsequent updates and downloadable content after the initial releases of many of their works in ways that improve (often technically) or otherwise alter the way they play. Perhaps the clearest example of this is *Ostalgie*, which is supplemented by four major DLCs which add extensive additional options to the game. While the base game of *Ostalgie* essentially follows the same overall themes as *Collapse* but set in either East Germany, Bulgaria and Poland, players can purchase additional expansions like *Legacy of Hoxha* (which allows players to take over Albania, Hungary or Czechoslovakia), *Disorder in Yugoslavia*, or *Fall of the Curtain* (which makes North Korea, Cuba, and Afghanistan playable) which add extra events to deal with and endings to aim for in addition to playable countries. In addition to full DLCs, Nostalgames also regularly releases smaller patches and fixes to technical issues as well as smaller gameplay additions (*figure 23*). This process of self-replication and improvement mirrors Ndalianis' invocation of Eco's "net" labyrinth as a key feature of neo-baroque aesthetics, where the narrative form is subject to multiple/possibly infinite interpretations, and given an online digital format, games are now as finished as their developers are willing to keep working on them. While it has not received any major DLC as of yet, *Collapse* has nonetheless been subject to similar modifications. Currently on its version 2.2, certain features in *Collapse* that were planned to be included (according to earlier development diaries) were not added until the end of 2022 due to delays in Nostalgames' production schedule caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As a result, the ability of players to, for instance, form coalitions with other Republican parties or compare their progress with other former Soviet states (such as Russia or Ukraine) was a product of an ongoing relationship between developer and their work.[274] In this sense, the politics of *Collapse* is literally an

[274] r/Kremlingames, "We continue to work," Reddit, February 25, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/Kremlingames/comments/t188af/we_continue_to_work/

unfinished excessive process, subject to later changes and unexpected interruptions in its creation.

(Figure 23: The Steam store page for another downloadable content for another Nostalgame entry, *Ostalgie*)

Thus, these video games are clear examples of the neo-baroque tendency towards an almost indulgent excess that players have to navigate. The resulting picture of politics as an almost impenetrably complex phenomenon which literally spills over the limitations of a single work is in many ways fundamental to the way a player navigates the immediate experience of play. Both in the elasticity of the narrative in each game and the plethora of intertextual (and not to mention historical) references sprinkled throughout each game make the experience of playing them inextricably linked to broader cultural and political contexts they were made in or about. In this sense, ludic representations of politics are unique in resisting the streamlining effect of typical abstractions in IR theorizing; rather than being boiled down to core rational principles,

political life is restaged as a web of intertextual materials, where meaning is discerned from what the player manages to piece together from their journey through sequels, adaptations, supplementary documents and alternative perspectives. This complexity at the level of form also takes on a political salience in other ways; namely, how this complexifying effect brings the questions of political agency and temporality to the fore through play.

Chapter 13: Personalization

In addition to repetition, another theme of how these games represent politics is personification. In each game, the categorical distinctions made between the personal and the social in IR theorizing about the agency and motivations of political institutions (as in Waltz' three images of war, for example) are formally problematized as a matter of ludic representation. At first glance *Hidden Agenda*, *Rogue State* and *Collapse* all could be said to be representations that engage with more traditional representations of how international politics works by including maps and armies and great men as game elements akin to the more familiar abstractions of grand strategy titles like the *Civilization* or *Total War* franchises. However, in formalist terms a key controlling theme of what politics comes down to in each game collapses different levels of analysis into highly personalized abstractions. Aside from the basic fact of the player being a person who interacts with the game and makes decisions ostensibly not as a social institution (and even when they do, say, play as a country they do so only as a person playing as a country), the content of the games themselves is more often than not expressed as making decisions about navigating personal relationships. Whether by avatars the player works through,

particular characters with relationships to these avatars, or amalgamations of demographic and social movements personification is a recurring dominant theme in the way these games represent political life in a distinctly ludic manner.

The personal nature of these representations of politics become particularly notable given the recurring question of political agency in IR theory. As Cohn argues, the realist attempt to rationalize international security (nuclear policy in particular) also serves to subsume the messy reality of politics into something understandable, scientific and above all controllable. Within a "world that claims as a sign of its superiority its vigilant purging of all nonrational elements, and in which people carefully excise from their discourse every possible trace of soft sentimentality[275]" Cohn points out that the effect is to "feel in control.[276]" Streamlined into a technostrategic language, rationalist expertise depersonalizes the political and renders it a structural abstract where knowledge and planning subtly excise the embodied experience of the consequences of policy. For Cohn, "speaking the expert language…offers escape-escape from thinking of oneself as a victim of nuclear war,[277]" since for the subjectivity of a rational actor "there is neither need nor way to see oneself as a victim; no matter what one deeply knows or believes about the likelihood of nuclear war, and no matter what sort of terror or despair the knowledge of nuclear war's reality might inspire.[278]" Of note here is the way the subjectivity of rationalist politics is effectively depersonalized, stripping not only the subjects of politics of a say in their annihilation by reducing them to a statistic, but also he rational actor of their embodied relationship to events through the distance of the abstract discourse of strategy. What

[275] Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs* 12 (1987): 702.
[276] Cohn, "Sex and Death," 704.
[277] Cohn, "Sex and Death," 706.
[278] Cohn, "Sex and Death," 706.

emerges out of playing political simulators, however, is a formally different relationship to the personal that builds out of the procedural details of reconstructing politics for play. As shall also be shown in the subject games (and for similar reasons likely other games as well), these ludic presentations of politics bring personal relations to the forefront.

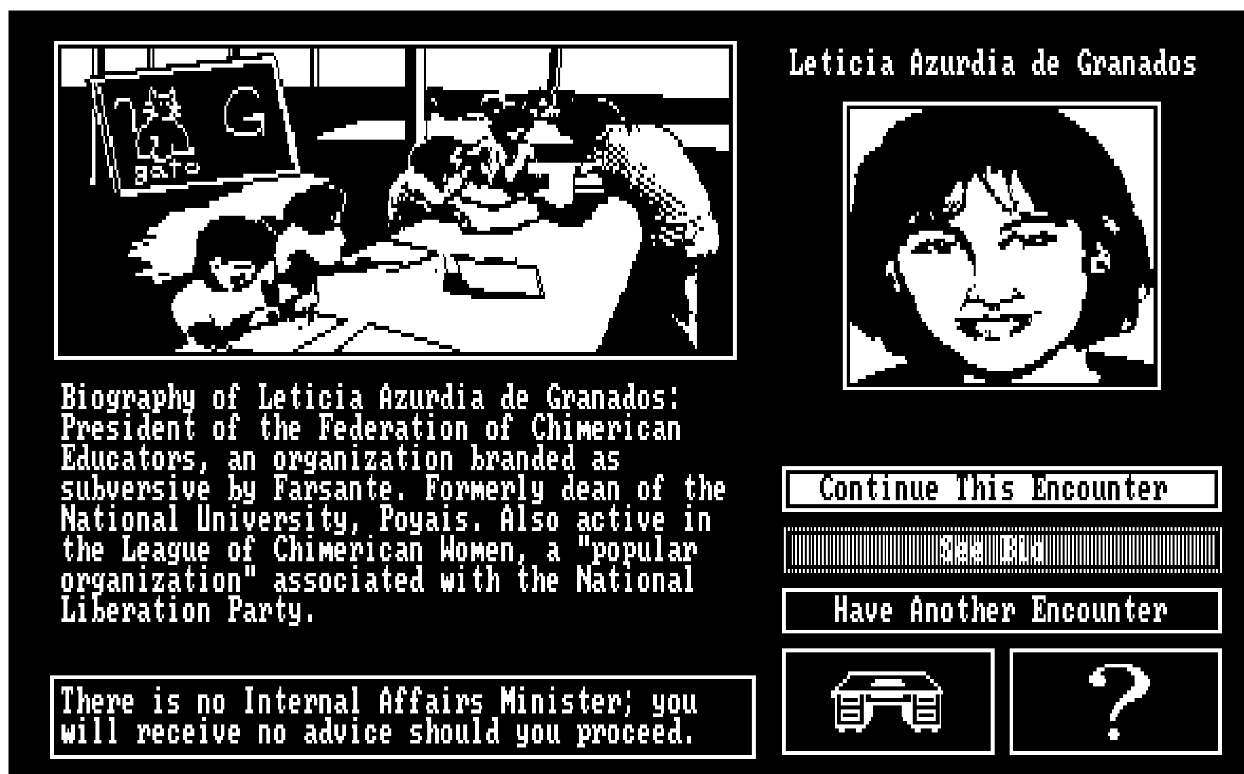
On the one hand, the way *Hidden Agenda* filters its politics mechanically through personification is obvious in the way much of the game is spent interacting with different characters as stand-ins for social, economic and political viewpoints. While the player ostensibly aims to change Chimerica's social institutions and laws, they do so almost exclusively through interactions with people. Each of the 30 or so characters who populate Chimerica are surprisingly fleshed out, given a name, a portrait and a short biography which explains their involvement in Chimerican politics (*figure 24*). For instance, L. Quentin Buffard is described as the "newly appointed Ambassador of the United States to Chimerica, Graduate of Georgetown University. Career Foreign Service officer, worked for many years as "political officer." Chimerica is his third post at ambassadorial rank, after two-year stints in Liberia and Laos." Conversely, the potential National Liberation minister Gloria Jimenez Fleming is described as:

> National Liberation. Daughter of a doctor…Professor of Sociology at the National University of Chimerica… published a book-length analysis of the Chimerican peasantry… contributing editor of the French Marxist journal "Dialogue Dialectique"… forced to go underground when the University shut down by the Farsante Guard… sub-commander of an important raid on Guardia headquarters, which gave her prominence in the growing revolt.
>
> Age: 36

In addition to these biographies, that the regular flow of gameplay in *Hidden Agenda* revolves around interactions (if limited to binary choices) with these characters highlights how this ludic

representation of politics ultimately revolves around a personified relationship between people. Rather than indulge in the mimetic abstractions of states with discernible interests, the player (themselves a named character in the game) is invited to open up the opaque picture of the state and navigate Chimerican politics as a complex web of interpersonal relationships. The result is that their decisions are as grounded in how they relate to the histories and social concerns of reconstructed "people" as much as they are in broader ideological commitments or pragmatic concerns. Beyond the direct experience of what are represented as personal relationships in the game, *Hidden Agenda*'s politics also express themselves in the personal relationship of the player to the game, akin to the break in the magic circle Bogost refers to as part of simulation fever. In one sense the player mechanically puts themselves in the game by naming their president and committing to three major priorities of their administration to the press at the beginning of the game (*figure 25*). While the player's commitment to these promises may or may not pay off later during the potential elections the player can set up, they also invite the player to think about how they may want to play the game. *Hidden Agenda* subsequently eschews the presentation of Chimerican politics as bound to maps and borders and sits the player at a desk facing a window from which they make calls and read reports. Beyond the immediate mechanical investment, however, the pedagogical angle that inspired Gasperini also bleeds over to how the player is repeatedly confronted with references to the real-life analogies Chimerica stands in for. While the characters of the Bishop and the National Liberation member Julio Las Casas offer the player different ways of approaching social issues from the standpoint of the Catholic Church their backgrounds pointedly place them in relation to the liberation theology movement, just as the Rights Activist Gloria de Lerma and the former Farsante Guard commander Roberto Pasquale highlight different poles of issues surrounding disappeared people under authoritarian regimes.

The player is as a result almost constantly confronted by the historical implications of the game's setting.



(Figure 24: An example of the biographies given to characters)

(Figure 25: The press conference which begins the game after the player names their avatar)

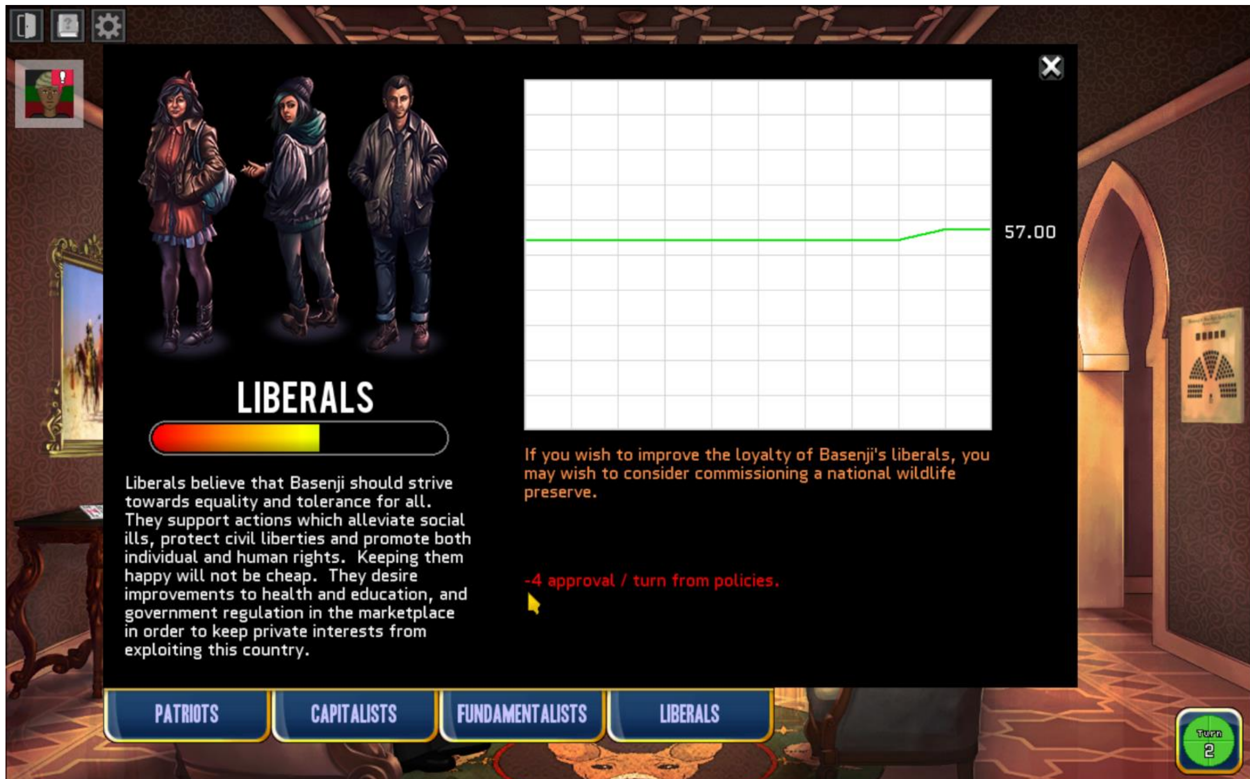
Much like *Hidden Agenda*, *Rogue State* presents the play of its politics in similarly intimate and personal ways. While *Rogue State* does so similarly in some respect to *Hidden Agenda* in grounding much of the gameplay in interactions with discernible characters, it also foregrounds the player's embodied relationship to Basenji's politics through both their avatar and their relationship with the avatar's brother Farouk. Like in *Hidden Agenda*, players in *Rogue State* are also given a presidential avatar to name and role-play (*figure 26*). However, in *Rogue State* the personal connection to politics is developed further by providing the player with a customizable avatar who physically moves around the presidential office which serves as the setting for the game. While little of Basenji is seen beyond this office and more traditional top-down maps of the country and its borders, it is nonetheless in line with the intimate presentation of political decision-making in political simulators when the player has to watch their president walk over to different items of interest and sit down to have conversations. Indeed, even dealing

with neighbouring countries can be an involved process that involves calling heads of state on the phone as much as it does moving troops on a map. Unlike in *Hidden Agenda*, however, many of the social and political institutions the player interacts with in Basenji are represented by abstract demographics (who are nonetheless distinguished by nameless individuals) (*figure 27*). However, the player still regularly interacts with named individuals as a matter of gameplay. Particularly during initial playthroughs, the player can call on their parliamentary aide Tariq (hinted at being a Qarifii who continues a career in Basneji politics in *Revolution*) for general updates on their progress or ask the General Nader Addad for updates on their military in the adjoining situation room. While the parliament the player contends with in the game is represented abstractly by a breakdown of the seat share in the legislature, like in *Hidden Agenda* players in *Rogue State* also choose a cabinet of randomly-generated ministers at the start of a game who are named and come from one of the four different social backgrounds in Basenji. These ministers regularly make requests of the player, and can be disappointed if their interests aren't properly represented in the player's government. Perhaps the most important of the personal relationships the player has the game is with their brother Farouk. While he never appears directly in the game, Farouk nonetheless looms large as a competitor for power, and is described in-game as:

> Farouk is your older brother by three years.
> As a senior member of the Basenji Communist Alliance, he directed two attempted coups against King Salman in the decade leading up to the Revolution. He was imprisoned in 2006 but escaped in late 2008. At the beginning of the Revolution, he was instrumental in the coordination of demonstrations, marches, occupations of plazas, riots, non-violent civil resistance, acts of civil disobedience and strikes. He grew the Revolutionary movement to hundreds-of-thousands in size from a range of socio-economic and religious backgrounds demanding the overthrow of King Salman. Most noteworthy, he alone was able to broker consensus between Qarifii, liberal, anti-capitalist, nationalist and feminist interest groups. When Salman ordered the army to open fire on the Revolutionary movement, his leadership is cited as a critical factor to keeping casualties low.

While the player can't interact with Farouk or dissuade him from his inevitable coup, that the arc of a given playthrough is structured by a sibling rivalry highlights the intimately personal way these representations of politics play.

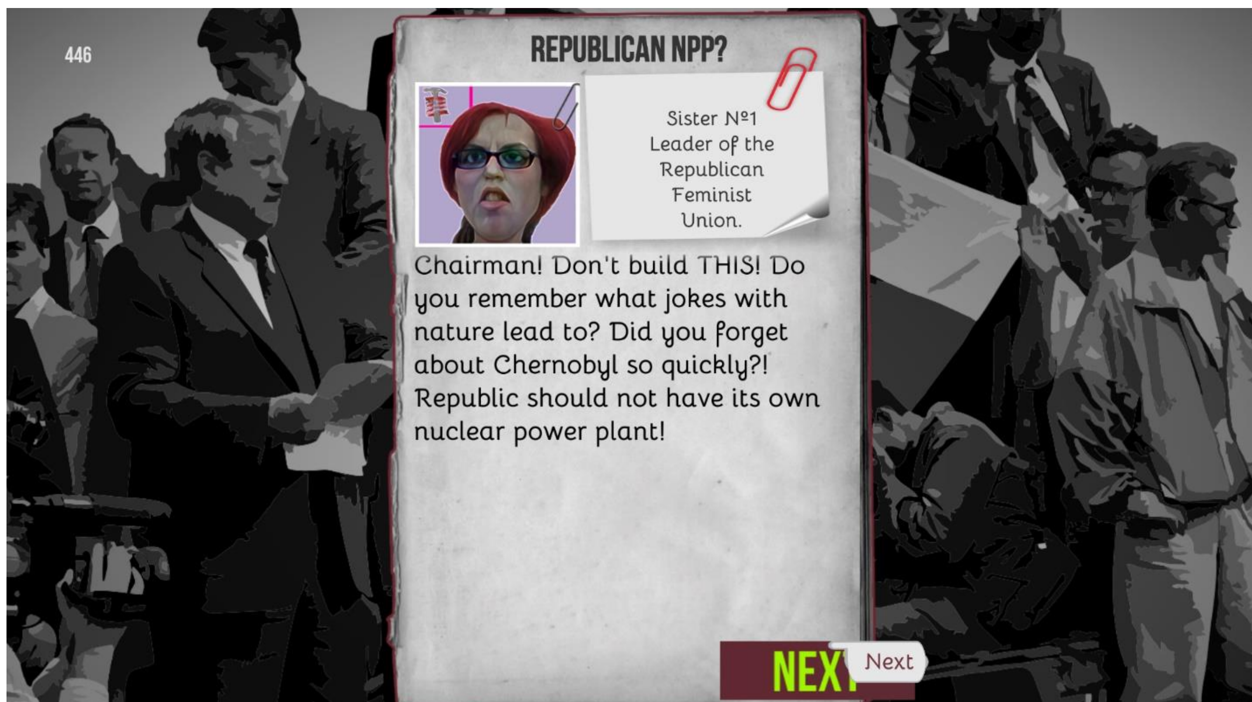
(Figure 26: The options players have to customize their avatar)



(Figure 27: A description of a Basenji interest group)

Like both *Hidden Agenda* and *Rogue State*, *Collapse* also personalizes the way its politics are filtered through play. While *Collapse* differs in that the player interacts directly with markedly fewer characters and spends much of the game with a more traditional presentation of the Republic of a political entity through the main map of the game, it nonetheless shares the tendency in political simulators to foreground the personal dimensions of politics. While Collapse similarly abstracts the political landscape of the Republic into interest groups, demographics and named politicians (*figure 28*), this is especially obvious in the extensive way *Collapse* allows the player to flesh out the background of their avatar. While these early choices are skippable and make clear mechanical impacts on gameplay, they also contextualize the player's relationship to the historical context of a former Soviet society over the course of an individual life (*figure 29*). Starting from their birth in 1951, the player has the opportunity to choose their gender, the kind of family they came from (from party insiders in the capital to rural

miners), the kind of education they pursued (from training in Marxist-Leninist doctrine to military service) and how they rose through the ranks of the Republic's party apparatus (from a Russia-aligned communist ideologue to a Western-facing reformer). Apart from their own background, this introduction also provides the player with characters they can define their roleplaying against (in addition to references to historical figures). While studying the player becomes friends with Sergei Vinogradov in 1971, and can choose to get involved with an underground Trotskyist student group (dedicated to readings of *The New Course*, *The Revolution Betrayed* and criticizing the suppression of the Prague Spring) that is broken up later that year. They later encounter Vinogradov in 1988 after last hearing about their defection to the West, and are given the opportunity to get involved in their scheme to smuggle gaming consoles into the Republic. The player even gets married to a mutual friend of Vinogradov's (named Vladimir or Nina depending on the player's gender) in 1977, starting a family that they can struggle to devote time to while dealing with career opportunities until the start of the game.



(Figure 28: An example of a Republican interest group)

(Figure 29: The playable backstory for the player's avatar)

In this way, personification is a dominant theme in these games which mediates their representation of different political and historical contexts. While more traditional representations of international politics are certainly part of these simulators, at a formal level the basics of both the procedural and narrative elements bring people to the center of their analysis in a distinctly ludic way. As Sylvester points out, the neorealist tendency to "journey into the deductive, the systemic, and stay relatively clear of clear figures" purposely tries to separate and obviate the influence of individual experience in international politics, whether the behaviouralism of prior realist tendencies or the "anti-war protesters, civil rights militants, and feminist marchers[279]" which surrounded him during the 60s and 70s. However, the way these

[279] Sylvester, "Art, Abstraction, and International Relations," 540.

video games insist on translating social forces and political systems through people with names, faces and stories complicate these categorical distinctions between levels of politics as a matter of aesthetic form. The result is that these games (and likely other ludic representations of politics, given even some of the most map-heavy grand strategy often deploy similar devices to personalize what they depict) resist the sense of control Cohn suggests a more doctrinaire sense of rationalism tries to obviate when it tries to marginalize the human dimension of the international,[280] in the basic sense that a representation of politics based on navigating a labyrinth of personal interests, ambitions and agendas is part of the fun.

Chapter 14: Repetition

One of the major dominant tensions that emerge out of taking stock of how these games work is the curious ludic relationship to time. In line with the "magic circle" understanding of game rules, games (digital or otherwise) often rely on a kind of parallel temporality that weighs on ludic meaning-making (i.e. time out rules in sports, or the repetitive structure of arcade games). Meanwhile, the structure of time and history has been a recurring question in IR theory as it has returned to historiography as a means of interrogating the historical narratives underpinning political theory. In this section the theme of "repetition" is identified as a way these political simulators organize their formal properties and subsequent representations of politics, Specifically, the repetitive structure of play in these games encourage thinking about politics and

[280] Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs* 12 (1987): 702.

political time in decidedly non-linear ways, procedurally encouraging a neo-baroque exploration of different possibilities that addresses the question of historical time in distinctly ludic ways.

In their attempt to call greater attention to the use of the philosophy of history in IR "[c]ontra the field's putative recent turn away from metatheoretical concerns,[281]" Mackay and Laroche outline a typology of approaches to history in IR thinking. They argue that thinking about history broadly breaks down into nonlinear, linear and multilinear approaches. Where history can be learned from, nonlinear approaches tend towards understanding history as cyclical (typical of the tragic view of politics in realism), linear approaches tend to be teleological (typical of liberal idealism or Marxism) and multilinear approaches tend towards understanding history as having "several knowable paths" (typical of an "English School plurality of international orders"); on the other hand, where history is not a guide to the future nonlinear approaches understand history as being basically unpredictable (typical of constructivism and poststructuralism), linear approaches understand history as unpredictable but unidirectional (typical of Hegelianism) and multilinear approaches understand history as radically open (typical of postcolonialism).[282] As Çapan points out, however, the predominant tendency in IR's treatment of historical time continues to rely on unitary epistemologies that enforce "spatio-temporal hierarchies[283]" that separate world history into distinct (and Eurocentric) conceptions of time and progress. On the other hand, the way games like *Hidden Agenda*, *Rogue State* and *Collapse* present their historical cases by incentivizing repeatedly playing their scenarios over

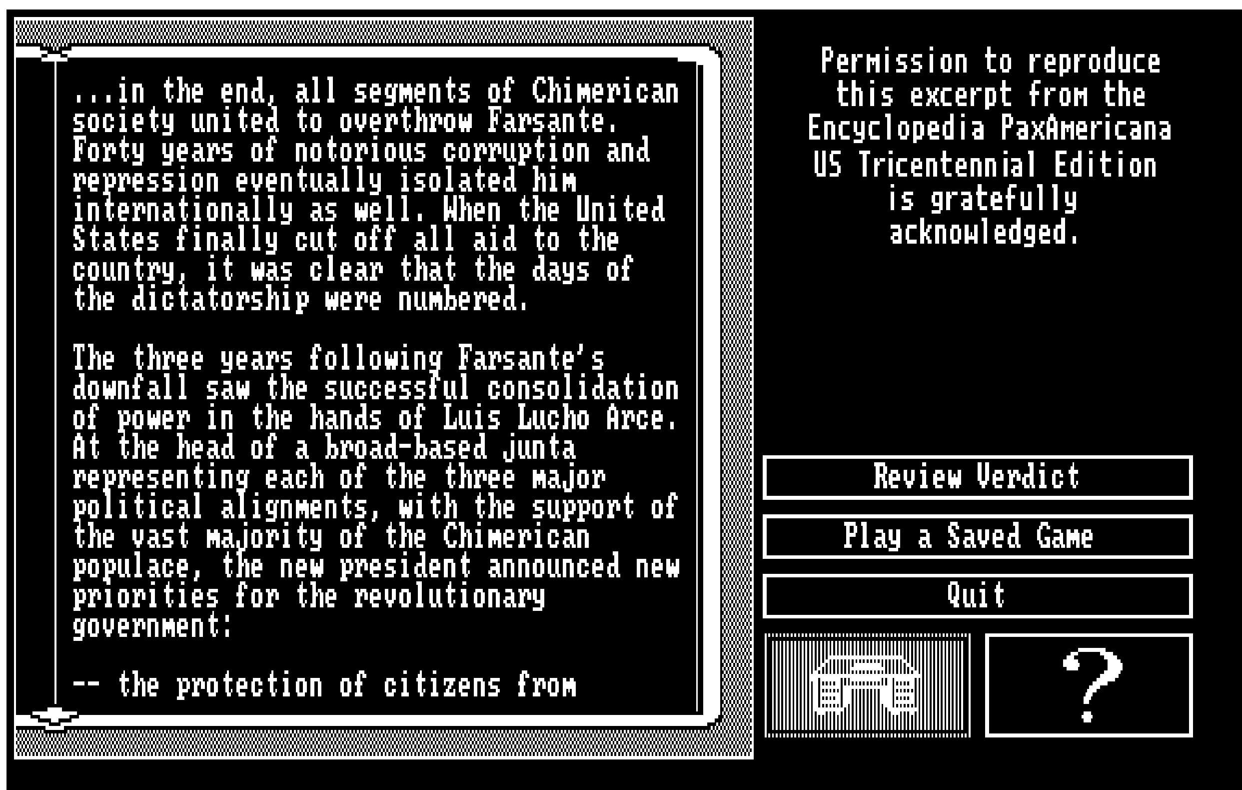
[281] Joseph Mackay and Christopher David Laroche, "The conduct of history in International Relations: rethinking philosophy of history in IR theory," *International Theory* 9 (2017): 229.
[282] Mackay and Laroche, "The conduct of history," 212.
[283] Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, "History in the plural: Reconfigurations of past-present-future," *Review of International Studies* (2024): 1.

again makes this question of time a central one in thinking about politics. Time in these games is neither particularly linear or outright recursive (though these styles of play are certainly possible) but iterative; players are encouraged to play the same scenario over again, making different choices hoping (or outright knowing) they achieve certain end states. Given the wide-branching matrices of often exclusive decisions a player can make engaging with any of these games, they evoke the neo-baroque complexity of a labyrinth players need to navigate. However, besides the many choices available to a player over the course of a single playthrough these political simulators also incentivize players to play these games repeatedly. Whether through offering different endings to uncover, unlockable options for modifying future playthroughs or badges that can be won through achieving particular game-states each of these games open their presentation of politics up to experimentation over the course of repeated engagements. While each game has a consistent overall structure and picture for how political systems work, each game also nonetheless presents alternative pictures of what different political ideologies want and the futures they might have brought about would have looked like. The result is that at a formal level thinking about politics through these games means thinking iteratively, where the fun is all about exploring different discrete endings.

As an example of this approach to politics through repetition, *Hidden Agenda*'s many moving parts and modular ending encourage repeat playthroughs. At the end of a given playthrough, the player is given a summary of their tenure as president of Chimerica framed as an excerpt from the tricentennial edition of an "Encyclopedia PaxAmericana" (whether a joke about the Encyclopaedia Britannica or an edition of a future imperial encyclopedia is left unspecified) (*figure 30*). While the introduction and conclusion of this summary remains largely

the same, explaining how the player's administration wasn't expected to last long but nonetheless overcame adversity to make it to the end of the three in-game years, much of the body reacts to the different decisions the player makes over the course of a playthrough. Whether the player goes through with the land reform policy, whether they provoke reactionary guerillas enough to oppose them, whether they win (or even implement) elections, whether they sue the United States at the International Criminal Court, how they manage Chimerica's debt or whether they even make it to the end of their first tenure by the end of a game are all marked down as part of the player's story. From a procedural standpoint, this modular ending encourages multiple playthroughs as a player can experiment with different approaches to the game in search of different ending states for Chimerica. While a player might spend especially initial playthroughs trying to experiment with achieving particular policies or political ends through to the end of the game, Walsh's various solutions to *Hidden Agenda* point to concrete examples of this kind of experimentation in pursuing all possible endings almost for their own sake. Of note is the way many of Walsh's solutions rely on advance planning, either by making certain decisions as early as possible (such as needing to encounter the Campesino in the first in-game year to enact policies on food shortages as they bring it up before your ministers do) or planning around encounters which crop up on their own as a result of particular paths (such as the year or so it takes for related characters to realize the state-owned farming cooperatives made out of seized land aren't productive and start suggesting alternatives). On the one hand getting a sense of the timing around these events and the causal relationship between narrative choices obviously require repeat playthroughs, but combined with the modular nature of the ending summary the player is thus encouraged to go beyond simply making it to the end of the game or making it to

the end of the game with particular goals in mind and explore the various branching narrative paths.



(Figure 30: An Encyclopedia PaxAmericana entry)

Much like *Hidden Agenda*, *Rogue State* also encourages repeat playthroughs and experimentation through play. While *Rogue State* lacks *Hidden Agenda*'s varied endings, the game nonetheless procedurally encourages repeated playthroughs and experimentation. In one sense this is due to its difficulty; *Rogue State* can be a much more challenging game than *Hidden Agenda*. While a playthrough of *Hidden Agenda* can end prematurely if the player leans too heavily into the demands of one of Chimerica's political factions without preparing in advance, it is entirely possible to run much of the rest of the country's economic, social or political life into the ground and limp into the endgame. *Rogue State*, meanwhile, makes losing much more likely

in tying the player's political fortunes to public opinion (as well as far more randomized elements) and as a result makes coups dependent on far more mistakes the player can make. Compounded by deliberately challenging events like the major crises, *Rogue State* makes simply finishing a playthrough difficult and may require repeat playthroughs and advance planning in order to see the end. Beyond the difficulty of making it to the end, the range of decisions available to the player to stay in power in Basenji invite experimentation even if the ending itself does not. In navigating the demands of the different social constituencies in Basenji, the player can pass different kinds of laws and invest in different kinds of infrastructure to effectively create different Basenjis. Perhaps the most direct way in which *Rogue State* invites repeat playthroughs is its use of achievements and unlockable badges which modify the game (*figure 31*). On the one hand, the score the player receives at the end of each game derive from different aspects of their performance (such as their support with the public, the budget they end with, or their relationship with international partners) is converted into points the player spends on these unlockables, so the only way to win more is to play the game again. But the way the unlockables themselves modify subsequent playthroughs also encourage returning to the game to experiment with different approaches and uncover more about Basenji. For instance, without the appropriate badge the player can't understand the chicken-based country that can be randomly generated as one of their neighbours, and as a result whole potential conversations and diplomatic avenues available to more clearly human factions that otherwise appear as clucking can only be understood after returning to the game, much like how the jokes the "Comedian" badge unlocks can only be told on repeat playthroughs.

(Figure 31: The badges players can unlock with points gained from prior playthroughs)

In sharing many of the procedural or mechanical representations of political decision making *Hidden Agenda* and *Rogue State*, *Collapse* also invites exploration of its themes through repeat playthroughs. While *Collapse* does so in ways that are similar to the other games, offering different avenues for ideological or narrative to play the game over again or achievable badges to earn over different playthroughs the game also incentivizes replaying the game with modifications to the start conditions of each game. Similar to *Hidden Agenda*, *Collapse* also has varying endings which provide a summary of the player's game and give a picture of their different consequences on the Republic's future (*figure 32*). Given that the only way to discover how many variants there are, or what making it to the end of the game in a given state looks like, is to play the game and find out, the incentive to do so is clear. Alternatively, the initial range of choices the player is faced with regarding their political party and character background in some sense makes the different ideological narrative routes in *Hidden Agenda* or *Rogue State* much

more explicit, and clearly invites reengagement in exploring how the different political projects and starting conditions can lead to different kinds of playthroughs. Different parties in the Republic begin a game with different relationships to the various factions and social classes in the country, as do the different options of the short backstory the player chooses for their avatar. For instance, the established Republican Communist Party begins the game with high approval ratings among the Republic's ethnic minorities and revolutionary terrorist cells, and many of the choices favouring the former Soviet establishment in the build-up to the player's career ingratiates them with the Republic's party-affiliated upper class. Meanwhile, other factions like the local trade union organization or the feminist league will only work with "non-totalitarian" parties like the Liberal, Social-Democratic or Socialist parties, and background choices that lean into Gorbachev-like reformism start the player with boosts to relations with the Republic progressive middle class. Beyond the different narrative avenues available to the player to explore, *Collapse* also incentivizes repeat and myriad playthroughs in the diversity of Steam awards which offer their own goals to aim for in addition to rewarding experimenting with the ostensible goals of the different in-game parties. Somewhat like *Rogue State*, *Collapse* also mechanically encourages repeat playthroughs with selectable modifications to the start of the game, namely difficulty modes at the beginning of the game. While a "standard" version of the game exists, players can also make the game easier or harder (being given more or fewer resources to work with and modulated overall economy in the Republic), and even attempt to play in a "Collapse" mode. Perhaps the most extreme of these examples is the "Mystic" mode, which introduces an entirely new angle to the game which recasts the player as a player in a Lovecraftian struggle. Thus, while *Collapse* is a dense game the complexity of its portrayal of politics lends itself to repeated engagements and experimentation.

(Figure 32: Another end game summary, this time more successful)

In this sense, repetition and complexity play a distinct role in how these games present their procedural arguments about politics. Given the wide-branching matrices of often exclusive decisions a player can make engaging with any of these games, they clearly evoke the neo-baroque complexity of a labyrinth players need to navigate. However, besides the many choices available to a player over the course of a single playthrough these political simulators also incentivize players to play these games repeatedly. Whether through offering different endings to uncover, unlockable options for modifying future playthroughs or badges that can be won through achieving particular game-states each of these games open their presentation of politics up to experimentation over the course of repeated engagements. The way repetition is thus woven into the way games represent politics presents a form of engagement with the political imaginary that leans into critical multilinearity outlined by Mackay and Laroche but is also

evocative of Hamacher's interpretation of historical time in Benjamin's "On the Concept of History." According to Hamacher, Benjamin emphasizes possibility as the defining feature of material historical analysis, where rather than a fixed continuity reducible to a "substantial quantity or as a continuum founded upon transcendental forms" history is understood as "only possible at the risk of not being history.[284]" By being invited to repeatedly enact the fictional histories of these games, players thus engage with political history not as it happens but as a series of overlapping and even conflicting potentialities. In exploring the labyrinthine paths each game lays out, players explore many Chimericas, Basenjis and Republics that contrast different avenues of political development and history as a key part of play that is clearly distinct from a vision of politics a more linear aesthetic form would require.

Conclusion

This dissertation was broken up into six overall parts; first, it examined the IR literature on incorporating art and art theories in IR theory. This meant providing an overview of the "end of IR" arguments about critical reappraisals of mainstream IR theoretical approaches since the turn of the millennium, an overview of the "aesthetic turn" and various attempts to incorporate art theory into analyses of the international, as well as an overview of the "pop culture and world politics" agenda aimed at examining the role of pop culture in forming contemporary political life (among other things). Second, it engaged in a literature review of how games and video games have been treated within existing IR literature. This meant providing an overview of the

[284] Werner Hamacher, "'Now': Walter Benjamin on Historical Time," in *The Moment: Time and Rupture in Modern Thought*, ed. Heidrun Friese (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 169.

role game theory has played in IR theory as a heuristic for rationality as well as examining the different approaches thinkers in IR have written about with regards to video games while highlighting the opportunity for a more systematic engagement with scholarship on video games. Third, this study examined some useful conceptual treatments of video games pulled from game studies and media studies more broadly. This meant providing an overview of how games and play have been conceptualized in philosophy and the social sciences in the past, as well as providing an overview of how video games are construed as aesthetic objects through approaches like Bogost's procedural rhetoric and Ndalianis' account of the neo-baroque. Last, this study broke down three video games for a close analysis informed by insights from videogame formalist literature: Trans Fiction Systems' 1988 game *Hidden Agenda*, LRDGames' 2015 game *Rogue State* and Nostalgames' 2021 game *Collapse: A Political Simulator*. Ultimately, while this kind of interpretive project has clear limitations (which even Bleiker points out are latent in any interdisciplinary effort), the way the three themes of repetition, intimacy and complexity that emerge out of filtering the subject games through a formalist lens in turn critique or reformulate recurring questions of political abstraction in IR are nonetheless both a unique contribution to the field and a potential opening for future lines of inquiry.

This dissertation sought to explore the theoretical benefits of a sustained interdisciplinary engagement with video games and game studies literature to a discipline of international relations in a state of epistemological and ontological fracturing. Contextualized by the aesthetic turn, this dissertation sought to engage with the political character of the representative gap that sits at the heart of aesthetic abstraction in an attempt to offer a way to address this state of epistemological confusion. Through a systematic engagement with an epistemology and medium

of play, this dissertation presents a unique contribution to the field in turning prior IR investigations into gaming back on to the discipline. While IR may be replete with theories about how political institutions, actors and systems work, these theories largely relegate pop cultural and art objects like video games to the margins of study, either as representations qualitatively outside the discipline to be criticized or pedagogical tools. The purpose of this dissertation, however, was to seriously engage with the representative practices that come out of video games and game studies and take their arguments seriously as theoretical abstractions of reality. Concretely, Bleiker gives a handy metaphor for thinking about how this process of abstraction might work:

> Paraphrasing Gadamer, we could then recognise how we make every interpretation of world politics into a picture. We choose a particular representation and detach it from the world it came from. We then frame it and hang it on a wall, usually next to other pictures that aesthetically resemble it. We arrange them all in an exhibition and display them to the public. In this manner we have all admired 'blockbuster' exhibitions of realist and liberal masterpieces of world politics. Some of us may have visited the occasional smaller exhibit of, say, feminist and postmodern sketches of the international. Or perhaps we have stumbled upon an opening of a new postcolonial gallery, or caught the occasional glimpse of a radical experimental installation. Such aesthetic adventures do not tend to be very popular with a public used to figurative eye-pleasers. The most admired paintings remain the old masterpieces: the massive and heroic realist canvases. Indeed, we love them so much that we have embarked on extensive and costly attempts to restore the gargantuan Thucydides and Machiavelli frescos that adorn the intellectual temples of our discipline. Some parts of the original paintings were faded, damaged or at times effaced altogether. Fortunately, though, the skilful restoring experts interpreted the missing brush strokes confidently and repainted them with gusto. All new and shiny again, our old and cherished masterpieces have meanwhile been displayed so often and admired for so long that their figurative form of representation has come to be viewed as real. We have forgotten that they too are, in essence, abstractions: representations of something that is quite distinct from what they represent.[285]

This dissertation takes precisely this point about the levelling power of aesthetic abstraction to social science theory quite literally, and ultimately found that ludic abstraction does, indeed,

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[285] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 46-47.

have distinct things to say about how political institutions, actors and systems work. While video games may not be abstractions that produce strictly empirical data, they are ultimately no more abstract hanging in Bleiker's gallery than the canon texts of IR theory that purport to do so. As fellow aesthetic abstractions, games also seem to be as engaged in many of the same topics as that of more orthodox approaches to IR, and while the method of their abstractions may be qualitatively different a sustained engagement with academic thinking on games, video games and play reveals a not-unserious discussion about the nature of political life that is distinctly ludic and even critical of theoretical tendencies in IR. Far from cultural objects upon which IR analyses simply cast judgement, video games in this analysis appear as media capable of responding. The themes of repetition, intimacy and complexity that emerge out of this analysis are a few examples of aesthetic thinking about the politics of very particular times and places, and crucially do so while in the experience of play. Rather than the pursuit of mimetic objectivity the work done in game studies on the particulars of ludic representation (such as proceduralism, formalism, or the neo-baroque) offer a way to engage with politics that jolts analysis out of the typical rationalist frames of reference.

In this analysis, the three themes of repetition, complexity and intimacy that emerge out of a videogame formalist analysis of these political simulators are three examples of what this kind of analysis can produce. As ludic abstractions of politics, political simulators stage familiar conflicts about ontology, institutions and time in nonetheless novel ways. When filtered through a videogame formalist analysis drawn from game studies literature, the experience of play can be broken down into variegated parts that preserve the mechanical aesthetic character of the medium but allow for a systematic interpretation of what these parts mean as a player interacts

with them over the course of gameplay. In this dissertation, the political representations in question are thus approached as parts of a game rather than as strictly political texts, in turn allowing for the kind of playful reinterpretation of their attempts at political abstraction. As is developed in this dissertation for example, the treatment of time in political analysis takes on a different character when considered in the medium of games, where strict historical accuracy gives way to the fun of iterated experimentation and exploring alternative political horizons in the same moment. The traditional questions of political ontology in IR about institutional agency are similarly treated fundamentally differently in a medium where narrative and procedural demands require political issues to be personalized, and ultimately questions of theoretical abstraction and complexity are central to a medium defined by proliferating excess. Each of these insights were derived from observations about how the constituent parts of the subject political simulators interact as formal elements of a broader work, defamiliarizing and "making strange" what might be familiar about more typical abstractions of politics. In this way, games and game studies present some potentially novel ways to approach political questions through the ludic as a medium.

That said, there are clear methodological and epistemological limits to the kind of analysis undertaken in this dissertation. Bleiker, for instance, highlights the risk any interdisciplinary project runs of oversimplifying the literature it is appropriating. As a result, the prior discussion of game studies literature may "not look anything but dilettantish" in comparison to the work of a more dedicated game studies researcher.[286] While Bleiker suggests that such superficiality may be overcome by maintaining a focus on the takeaways for

[286] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 174.

understanding international politics, relying on interpretive methodologies found in art disciplines have their own problems. Additionally, even when one takes an interdisciplinary methodology seriously the nature of interpretive work is to some extent always going to be limited; as Mitchell and Van Vught point out the ultimate subject of the formalist analysis is the player-critic reader, who themselves balances the material limitations of studying games. For Mitchell and Van Vught, crucial methodological questions in formalism include what is intriguing in a game to an observer as a player, overcoming the gap between the player-critic and the implied player of a general audience, or what a player-critic considers crucial in navigating the complex mechanical labyrinths of games, and even acknowledge that their list of devices is not necessarily going to operate the same way in every game (preserving the initiative of a particular game to spur a particular aesthetic encounter).[287] The result is clearly a degree of subjectivity in an interpretive analysis that no amount of methodological rigour will overcome. As Ciuta describes aesthetic inspiration: "[s]ometimes, some games may do that for some people. Often, they probably won't.[288]" While this dissertation has attempted to address these limits by engaging game studies literature and methodology seriously and hopefully systematically, the broad scope of the argument and the ultimately subjective character of aesthetic interpretation remain clear limits to what this kind of analysis can produce.

However, as long as aesthetics and art theory are considered fruitful grounds for rethinking canon approaches to conceptualizing the political a sustained engagement with a medium that continues to grow in worldwide popularity is likely necessary, and these issues potentially offer opportunities for further research in addition to limitations. On the one hand,

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[287] Mitchell and Van Vught, *Videogame Formalism*, 70-71.
[288] Ciută, "Call of Duty: Playing Video Games with IR," 213.

much of the argument of this dissertation is that games as aesthetic representations of politics often begin where more critical or unconventional theorization might be marginal. When Morefield, for instance, critiques the imperial dimension of early 20th century liberal thought by pointing out the "alternative visions of the possible – of different kinds of local and global politics – circulated right alongside[289]" the hierarchical thinking of the interwar period they suggest an openness about thinking through the historical record key to ludic experimentation. Zarakol similarly opens their sweeping epistemological critique of IR history with a flight of fancy one could easily imagine as a product of thinking through gaming:

> Imagine you are in one of those situations often depicted in fantasy novels where you discover a portal that will take you to another parallel universe. You step through to find a world that is in many ways very much like ours. Most of the superficial details are the same: there are roads, houses and bicycles. The technology is familiar. The sun, the clouds, the trees, they all look the same. Yet something feels different. To figure out what, you step into a bookstore and pick up a general history book to understand this world better (your old phone does not work in this universe, though you see other people using theirs). You order a bubble tea and settle in the bookstore's café. Soon you make a startling discovery. In this universe, it was not England that was the first site of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century but Japan! What is more, in this universe, the Third Estate Rebellion had gone nowhere in France, but the Chinese Revolution of 1794 had succeeded, fundamentally transforming the Chinese state in directions (republican, vegetarian, anti-tax) later emulated by other states in Asia and the rest of the world. To make a long story short, in this world, it had been Asia that experienced the radical lift-off in the nineteenth century that we associate in our universe with 'the West'. It is 'the East' that is considered to be the centre of gravity in this parallel universe, not Europe or the West.[290]

For those familiar with games (and especially the games in this dissertation no less), this kind of speculating is often the fun of playing games, and political simulators in particular. On the other hand, proceduralism, formalism and the neo-baroque (and the connections to questions in IR

[289] Jeanne Morefield, *Empires Without Imperialism: Anglo-American Decline and the Politics of Deflection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 239.
[290] Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022): 2.

about time and agency drawn out in this analysis) are only some ways of understanding what video game aesthetic insights might look like, but are by no means an exhaustive list and there remains room to examine what appropriating different perspectives might add. Similarly political simulators are a small slice of an industry increasingly called upon to grapple with serious contemporary issues at increasingly diverse levels of development, and a plethora of different kinds of games remain to examine as political works. While the scope of this dissertation kept to games very explicitly about the political dynamics of particular historical contexts, for instance, a deeper engagement with video games might examine what a formalist/proceduralist/neo-baroque analysis of games that are about fictional contexts might turn up. Perhaps most ambitiously, the emphasis in this dissertation on the question of form and abstraction also suggests the possibility of a creative intervention not unlike Bleiker's own notes on writing on IR through poetry; besides what IR theory has to say about video games or what video games have to say about IR theory, what IR theory would look like expressed through a video game falls within the possibility of the kind of analysis suggested by this dissertation. As such, being both increasingly artefacts about the politics of their time and artefacts that all kinds of different communities engage with, they clearly deserve a place in the gallery.

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