Political Conversations with Games

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Abstract

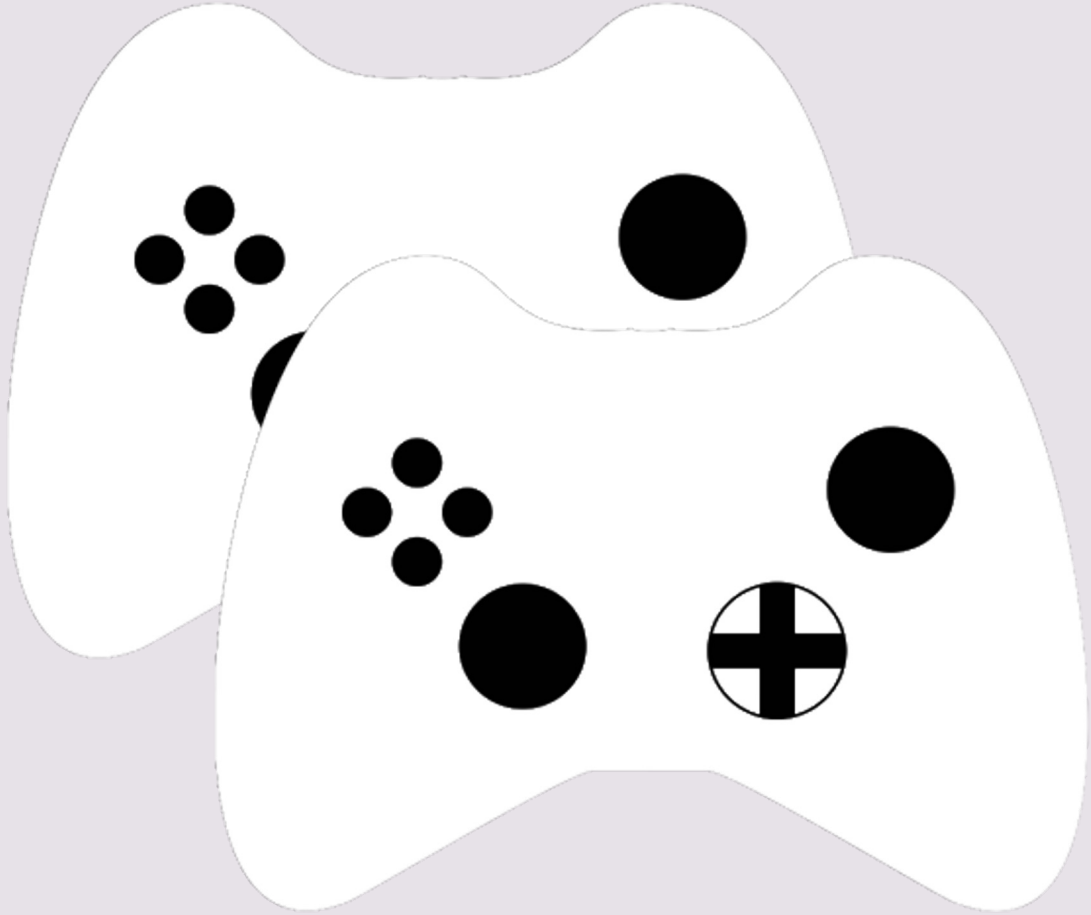
Gameplay is a conversation, and as such is a vehicle for ideological exploration. While video games by themselves as technologies do not produce new violence onto its players, I argue that in order to map the stages of gameplay that affect players, we must see political gameplay as a conversation made up of multiple ingredients: the player, the game, and the political. Each ingredient is fundamental in creating a final output: a racist, misogynist, or anti-progressive political narrative.

Hence, the object of study here is the process by which players and games reproduce a political worldview from their involvement in the emergent narrative. In doing so, I outline how spotting political conversations between player and game allows us to trace the processes which produce political features of play. This mobilises the player to digitally enact and perform far-right play, concretize the political identities of its player, and outline the breadcrumbs that lead the player towards far-right recruitment.

To do this, I highlight the possibility of political conversation with games through two qualitative case studies from two seemingly different games: Angry Goy II (AG2), developed with politics at its forefront; and Red Dead Redemption 2 (RDR2), which allows the players to “do whatever they want”. AG2 allows political narratives via politically-charged game challenges, whereas RDR2 allows the player to bring in politics through politically-charged player actions. In either case, the emergent narrative allows the player and game to playact with politics, whether intended to or not.

Content note

There will be a lot of discussion about **violence and harassment, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia,** and **racial violence**



Select 1
Double Click
To Select

DEATH SQUAD

Select 1
Double Click
To Select

Varg

Return

Chris Cantwell
100/100
Kills: 0
Wave: 1
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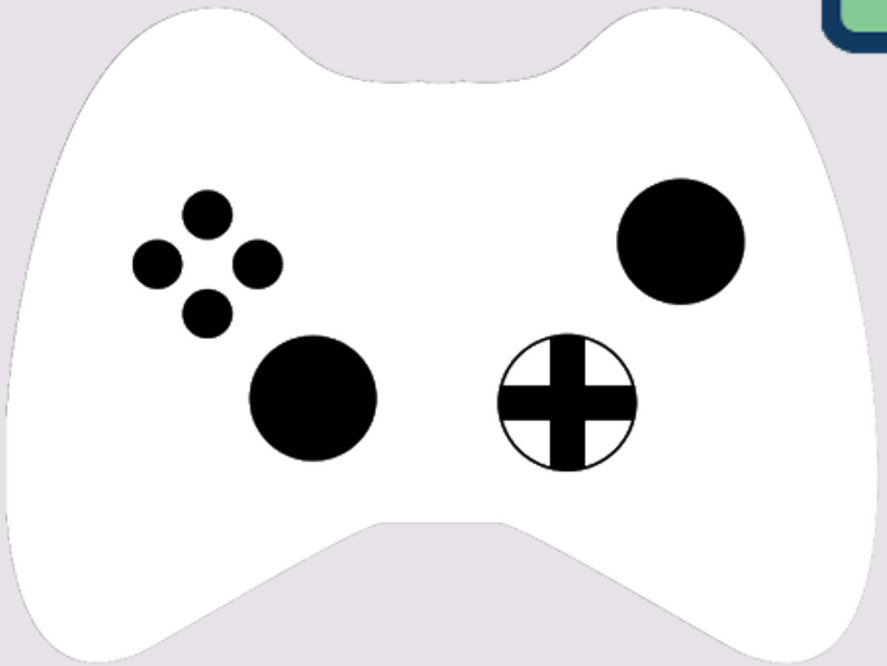
x0
Pepper Spray
262 /600
Robert E Lee

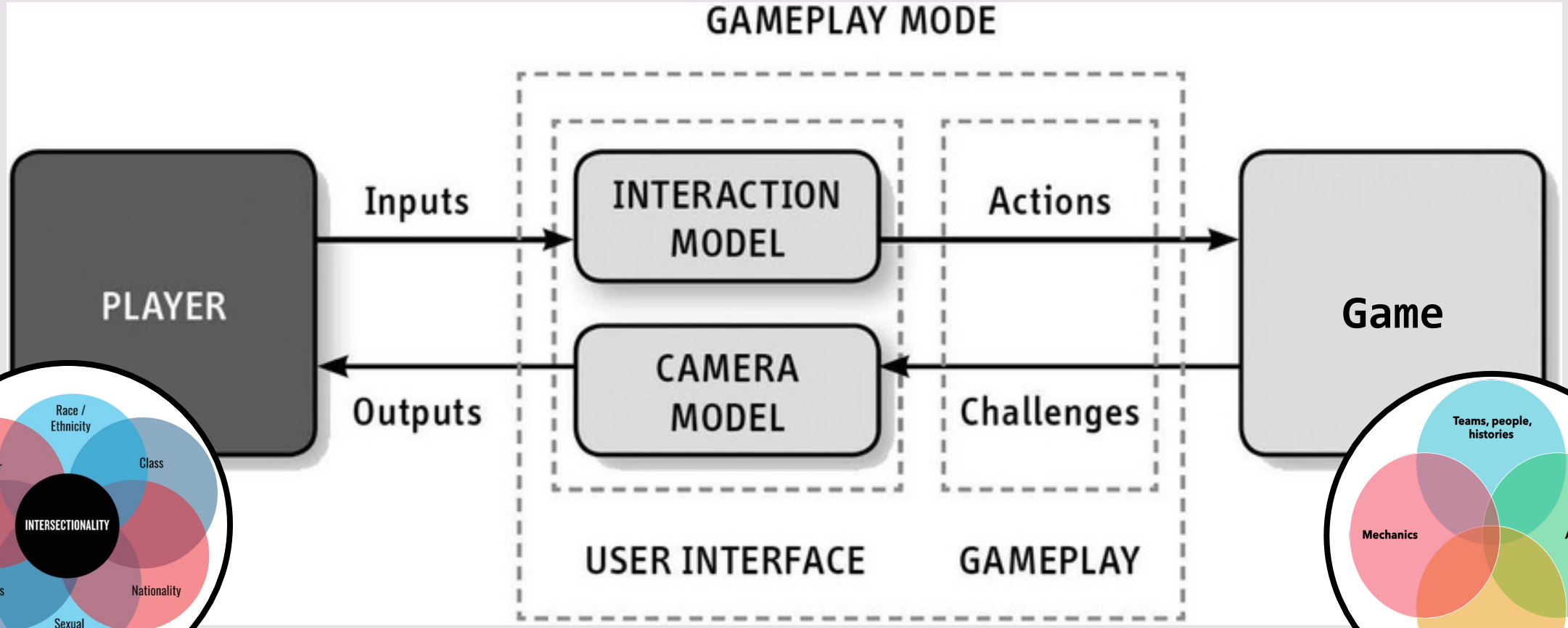
You failed to save the West...

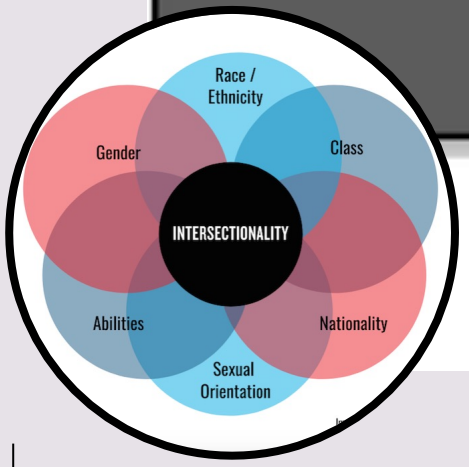


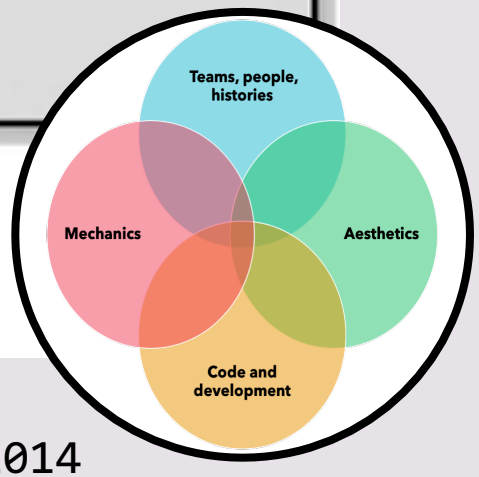
- Will the game turn me into a right-wing individual?
- Will I feel the need to take these violent politics and practices offline?
- And, am I actually now right-wing and infiltrating this conference?

Short Answer: No
Long Answer: Convoluted, but I take with me the knowledges of extremist politics

How Games and Players Talk (Politics)







Brett 2021 & Adams 2014

How Games Talk: Challenges

How Players Talk: Actions

When the Game Starts the Conversation: Politically Charged Challenges

Moments of Political Gameplay:

The Political Conversations We Have with Games

Moments where the game and the player *interact* to ***reproduce*** political practices.

Players and games ***mobilize*** each other to ***learn***, ***act***, and ***practice*** Far-Right politics.

Games configure their players, allowing progression through the game **only if the players recognize what they are being prompted to do, and comply with these coded instructions**. The analysis of the pleasures of gameplay must take the agency of the players and the game technologies as central, as well as those between players and the game

-- (Giddings & Kennedy 2008)

Conversations of White Supremacy are About Love, Not Hate

The depths of Love are rooted and very deep in a real white nationalist's soul and spirit, no form of "hate" could even begin to compare. At least not a hate motivated by ungrounded reasoning.

It is not hate that makes the average white man look upon a mixed race couple with a scowl on his face and loathing in his heart. [...]

It is not hate that makes the white workingman curse about the latest boatload of aliens dumped on our shores to be given job preference over the white citizen who built this land. [...]

No, it's not hate. It is love.

— Aryan Nations Web site

Ahmed 2004

Love Creates Invisible Others

- ***Who*** is the target and ***why***

It is the **love of white**, or those recognizable as white, that supposedly explains this shared "communal" visceral response of hate. – Ahmed

Ahmed 2004

Effects of Moments of Political Gameplay

Participating and **recreating game far-right talking points**.

Players learn the political narratives and messages of the game

The player reformulates their political identity in relation to the conversations enabled both by the design of the game, and the player's initial positionality

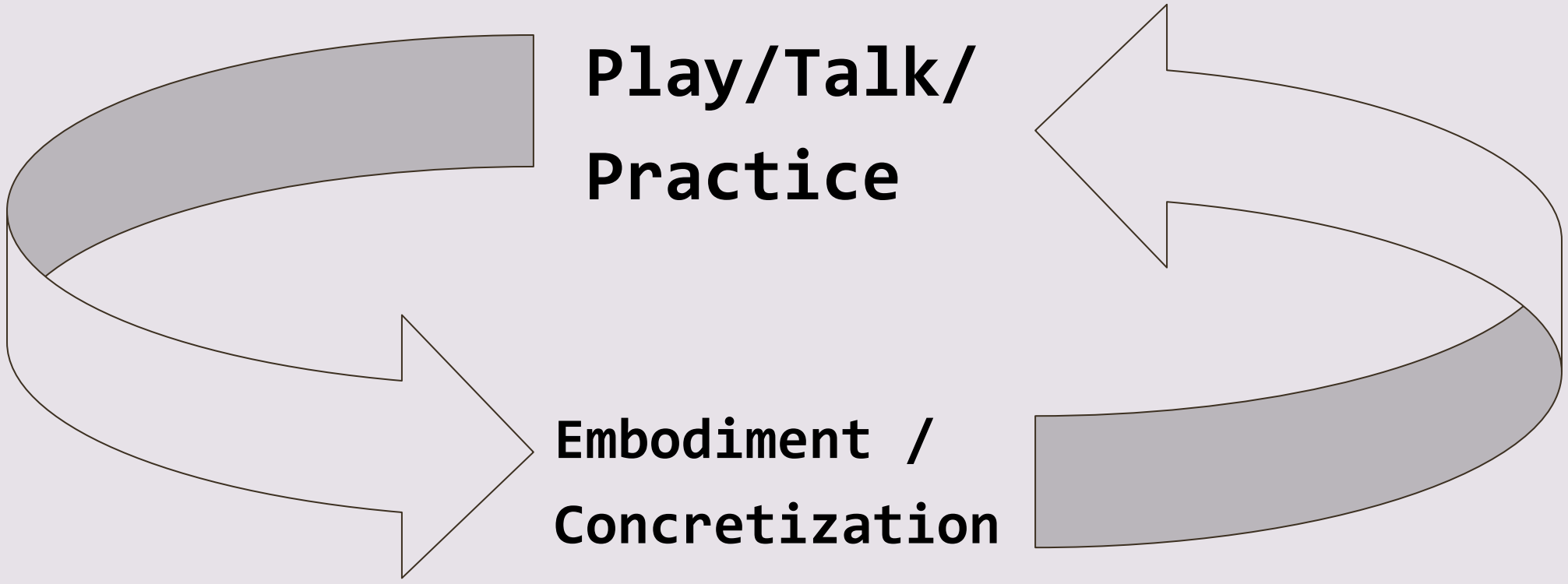
Making the "Others" Real: Repeated Political Conversations

Collective Action & Repeated Conversations

- **Generating scripts** on how to talk, collectively built through digital interactions
- People **taking the ideologies** of the conversation with them
- A **political identity, built from repeated practices** (think Butler)

Devries 2021 & Brett 2021

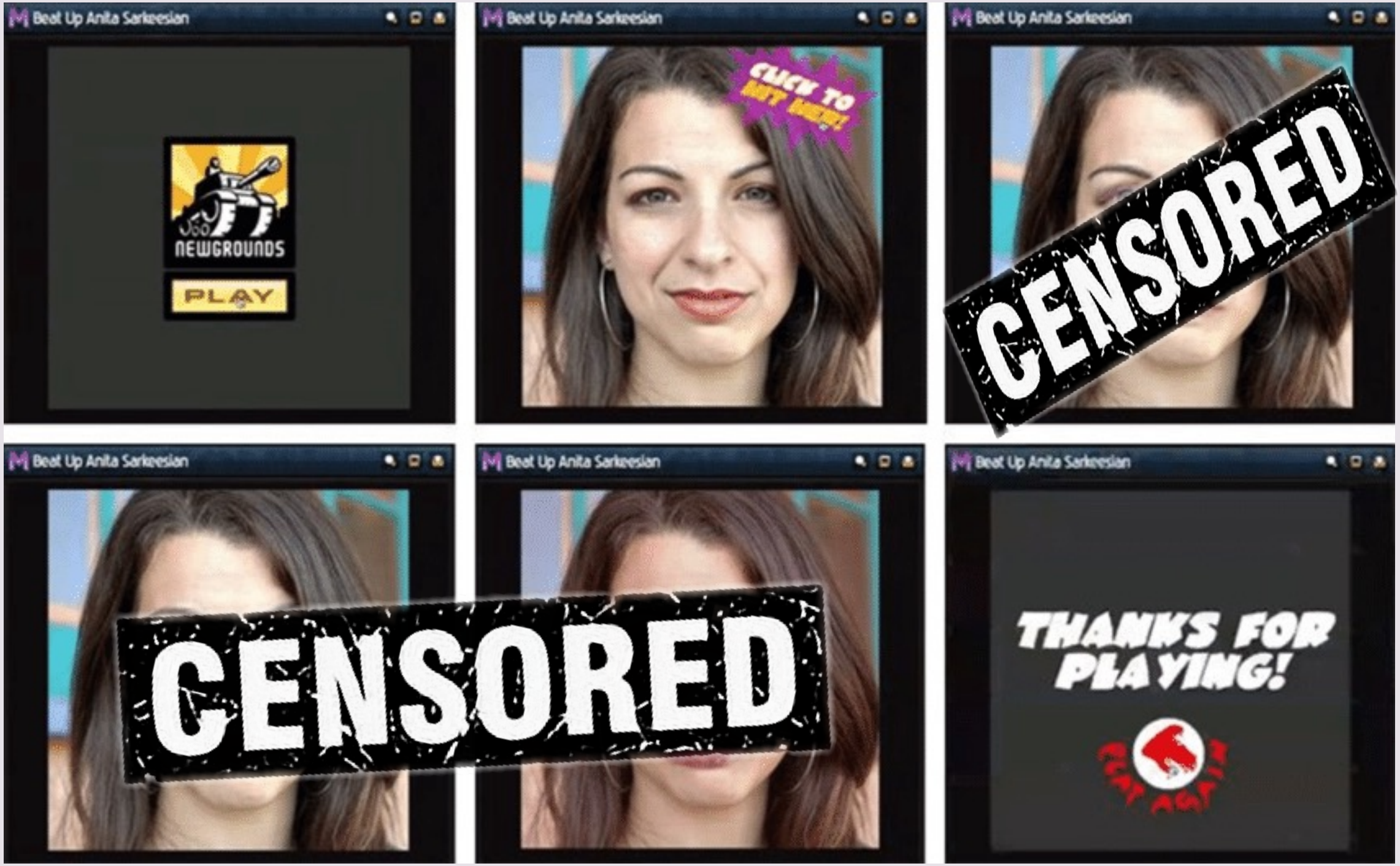
Effects of Moments of Political Gameplay (2)



Red Dead Redemption 2

When the player begins the political conversation:

Red Dead Redemption 2 and Political Violence


Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian
NEWGROUNDS
PLAY
Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian
CLICK TO HIT HER!
Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian
CENSORED
Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian
CENSORED
Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian
Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian
THANKS FOR PLAYING!

This entry was deleted.

Here is its eulogy, a collection of the kind words written about it while still among the living. They shall live on forever in its place.

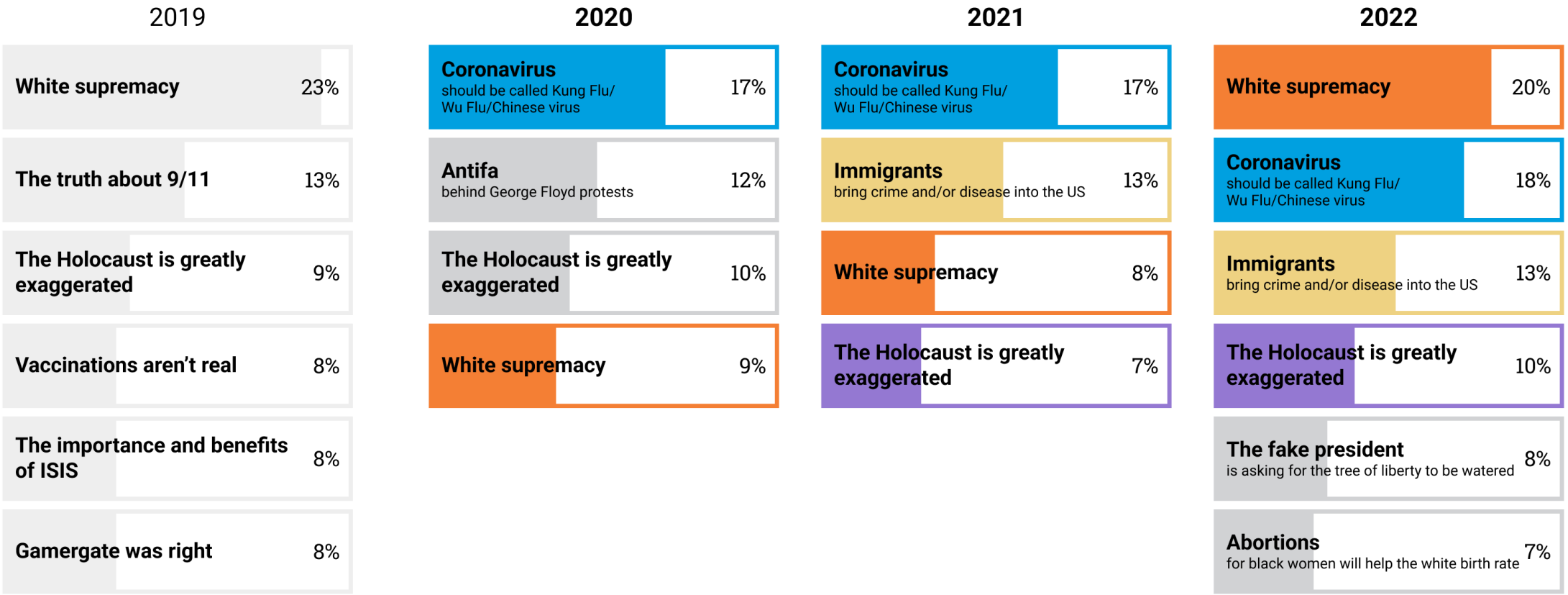
Hate is Profitable: White Supremacy Conversations are Part of Game Design

The White Supremacists Within

ADL 2022

Controversial Topics Among Adults

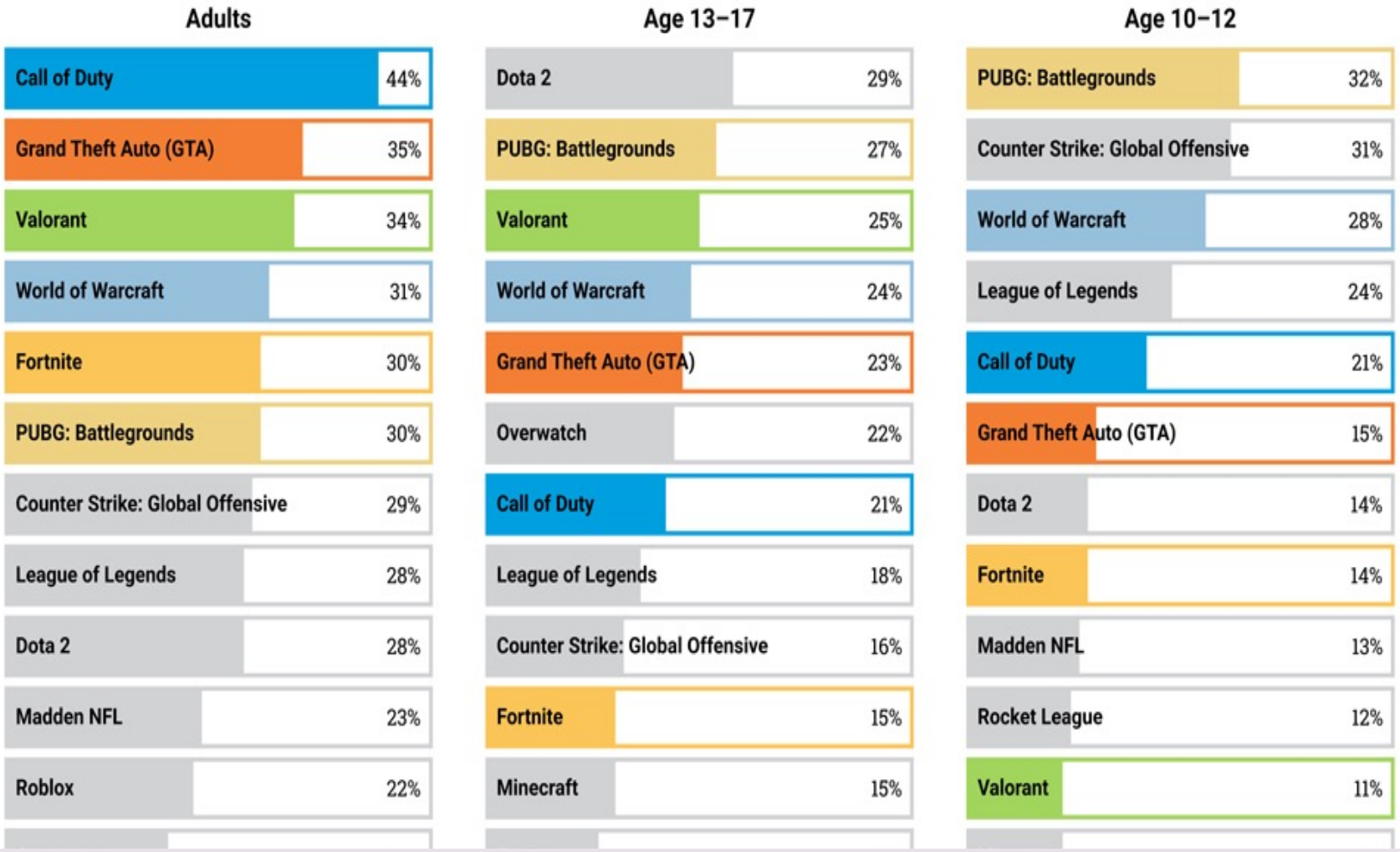
Share of adults who reported the following topics, by year



ADL
FIGHTING HATE FOR GOOD

White-Supremacist Extremist Experiences by Game

Share of people who reported experiencing white-supremacist extremism in the following games, by age group



ADL 2022

Talking Politics with Games

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- Moments of political gameplay are political conversations and interactions *between* player and game
- Players and games are laden with political elements
- Politics come into gameplay via politically charged actions or challenges
- Talking about these politics concretizes the politics of the player

References

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- Devries, M. (2021). Mobilized but not (yet) recruited: The case of the collective avatar. *Rise of the far right: Technologies of recruitment and mobilization*, 237-260.
- Giddings, S., & Kennedy, H. (2008). Little Jesuses and*@#?-off robots: On cybernetics, aesthetics, and not being very good at Lego Star Wars. *The pleasures of computer gaming: Essays on cultural history, theory and aesthetics*, 13-32.