**Falling Out of the Real-World and into Right Wing Inceldom:**

**Redditors' (Mis)reads of Political Themes in *Fallout 4***

**Extended Abstract**

This work in progress examines Reddit communities' discussion of political themes in the game *Fallout 4*. Very much in line with backlash against political topics in other media, a common criticism levied against video game design studios is "get politics out of my games!" (Mayar & Schubert, 2021). What commenters mean by this statement is unclear, though it behooves communication, media, and cultural studies scholars alike to acknowledge video games have featured political themes since the medium's creation (Nove, 2020). Successful franchises like *Call of Duty, Sid Meier's Civilization* and *Age of Empires* have each implemented political over/undertones to varying degrees of success (Gish, 2010; Pötzsch & Šisler, 2019; Quiroga, 2018; Salvati & Bullinger, 2013). However, games set in alternate history or near-future settings - like *Fallout 4* - may not be recognized by players as inherently political. A dismissal or fundamental misunderstanding of these themes may have deleterious effects on American civic literacy and political engagement, as interaction with traditional political news and discourse has shrunken over the last several decades. Instead, America's youth may be turning to social media or interactive media, like video games, to formulate their political beliefs and inform their political action (Akbar & Kusumasari, 2021; Bacovsky, 2021).

A review of recent communication studies literature shows a number of articles documenting political and historical themes in video games, political literacy in contemporary American society, on game-adjacent spaces as arenas for political discourse, and the *Fallout* series itself (Bennett & Segerberg, 2015; Bezio, 2018; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Zendle et al., 2018). Intersectionality is a common thread throughout - there is interest in this topic in areas as

varied as game studies, critical media studies, cultural studies, political communication, and

sociology. As such, our work blends a number of converging interests into a case study that

thematically examines *Fallout 4* Redditors' understandings of the game's basic political themes.

Since video games may serve as a first point of contact for learning about politics, this study

highlights the extent to which themes and ideologies may be misunderstood, and their

implications. Politics may be aesthetically represented in games, but through their play, they can

also exhibit a practice of political action. Other than *Fallout*, the *Tropico* series, for example,

allows players to enact political and economic scenarios as a primary gameplay loop. Thus,

games where politics are enacted may indeed be a first point of contact for civic engagement,

too, as well as general political exposure.

From a theoretical perspective, we turn to Adrienne Shaw's application (perhaps "modification"

is a better term) of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to digital and interactive media

technologies (Shaw, 2017). Shaw's application utilizes an "affordances perspective," one that

considers what interactive media allow audiences to do, which actions are

encouraged/discouraged, how these technologies are designed and so on. The role-playing

nature of *Fallout 4*, for example, affords users a myriad of choices regarding in-game action(s),

options for character association, and what values to embody. In this specific instance, siding

with one pre-existing faction or another, which are roughly modeled after real-world political

groups and ideologies, can change the course of gameplay and the entirety of its subsequent

narrative. Paired with Hall's reading positions - hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional - this

applied model therefore asks us to consider how texts/technologies are used "correctly," their

emergent uses, and even incorrect or unexpected applications. In terms of video game play, this model can be used to explore how actions like cheating, third-party modding, and/or in-game exploits can be used to consume a game otherwise unintended by designers. Further, the model can also be used to contemplate how digital artifacts (e.g., memes, videos, gifs, pictures) are read and used in/correctly in contexts outside of their original creation (Shaw, 2017). As such, we apply this encoding/decoding affordances model to Reddit screencaptures concerning political themes in *Fallout 4*.

Our study adds to and accompanies existing literature by extrapolating upon how gamers adapt, modify, and misunderstand narratives from games to express real-world attitudes. Further, this study may provide more insight into how discourse surrounding games, in game-adjacent spaces, could lead to the formation or molding of political ideology for users (Ferguson & Glasgow, 2021; Fletcher et al., 2021; Jensen & de Castell, 2021). Especially in the wake of the 2021 United States Capitol insurrection, this analysis may also shine light on radicalization processes that gamers are exposed to and undergo as a consequence of activity on gaming forums, particularly subreddits (Massanari, 2017; Mortensen, 2018; Salter, 2018). As a result of this study, gamers may be enticed to examine the narratives and context of the games they play with a more critical lens. Developers may gain insight as to how they may design their games and subsequent narratives in ways that will be less likely to be misconstrued for anti-social purposes. Lastly, scholars will ascertain a better understanding of the link between video games and political ideology, expression, and action.

*Keywords:* Gaming, game studies, *Fallout 4*, political communication, Reddit, thematic

analysis

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