Interactivity, interdependence, and intertextuality : the meaning of video games in American civil society

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Interactivity, Interdependence, and Intertextuality:
The Meaning of Video Games in American Civil Society

by

Brian McKernan

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Abstract

In recent years the video game community has undergone a drastic transformation. What began as a communal pastime for programmers in federally-funded research laboratories during the late 1950s and 1960s has erupted into a multi-billion dollar industry enjoyed by millions of Americans. Reflecting this transformation, social scientists from a wide variety of fields have begun to explore video games’ social significance. Sadly, so far very little work has examined video games from a sociological viewpoint. In this work I attempt to remedy this serious omission by adopting a cultural sociology framework to study video games’ social meanings in three different mediated spaces, including The New York Times, the popular video game media outlet Kotaku, and the internet discussion forum NeoGAF. Consistent with recent work on entertainment commentary’s capacity to function as an aesthetic public sphere, my analysis demonstrates that discussions occurring in all three spaces address broader sociopolitical concerns. However, the frequency in which these spaces engage in sociopolitical discussions, the type of topics they address, and the manner in which they do so vary. Consequently, my work adds new insight to the literature by highlighting how aesthetic public spheres are not isomorphic, but instead assume a variety of forms. Moreover, my work demonstrates how the particular type of aesthetic public sphere that an entertainment public facilitates is influenced by that entertainment public’s position in civil society, the specific meaning the space attaches to the entertainment form under discussion, and civil society’s overarching cultural structure. In this sense, my work strengthens the literature’s understanding of entertainment’s role in civil society by revealing the multiple forms
entertainment commentary can assume and the sociological factors that influence the shape of these discourses.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On March 16, 2009, a review for the latest installment in the popular video game franchise Resident Evil appeared in the Arts section of The New York Times. While a few decades ago the inclusion of a video game review in the Arts section of a prestigious American newspaper would be almost unfathomable, many of America’s most popular newspapers and magazines now devote at least a small amount of coverage to video games. Although the inclusion of a video game review in The New York Times may not be so abnormal today, it is the content of this particular article that sets it apart from what many would most likely assume to be the usual form of a video game review in The New York Times.

Rather than provide a traditional or seemingly standard video game review focusing on the game’s technological features, storyline, and level of “fun” in broad brushstrokes, the author of the article instead spends the majority of the work defining his own position in what by then had become an enduring debate within the video game community over the potential racist imagery present in Resident Evil 5 (RE5). Seth Schiesel, the author of The New York Times article expresses his intentions early on, opening the article strongly with the following statement:

Let’s get this out of the way: Resident Evil 5 is not a racist game. For at least a year some black journalists have been wringing their hands about whether the game, the latest in the seminal survival-horror series, inflames racist stereotypes because it is set in Africa. The answer is no. ¹

Schiesel proceeds to defend his position, documenting how past games in the series have taken place in different regions of the world, including the United States, Spain, and South America and pointing out that in all these past games the zombies the protagonist

combats largely mirror the demographic features of the surrounding area. For Schiesel, there is nothing problematic about moving the setting of the most recent installment in the series to Africa, and the game’s imagery simply indicates the application of the franchise’s overarching narrative to a new locale.

*The New York Times* is not the only “mainstream” newspaper to devote coverage to this debate. *The Wall Street Journal* also examines this topic, and opens with the question: “Is it racist for white people to shoot black zombies?” Before answering this inquiry, the article explores the video game industry’s potential racial bias in general, including quotes from media scholars, other game developers, and even a spokesperson for Capcom, the video game’s publisher.

These prestigious mainstream media outlets’ participation in this debate over the meaning of *RE5*’s imagery is striking for two reasons. First, this episode marks perhaps one of the first times a sociopolitical debate originating within the video game community permeated into broader or more mainstream media outlets, including two of the most influential newspapers in America today. As I will explore in more detail in a later chapter, *RE5*’s potentially problematic imagery had been a major topic of debate amongst video game media outlets and video game internet discussion forums ever since Capcom released its first trailer for the game in the summer of 2007. This debate intensified in 2008 after N’Gai Croal, a prominent video game journalist for *Newsweek*, criticized the game for its racially insensitive imagery in an interview with MTV’s

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The fact that *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* eventually report on and participate in a debate that originated within the video game community should not be overlooked. At least in this instance a degree of communication emerges between these two potentially isolated social spaces. In a sense, by covering a video game in this manner, widely read newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* not only recognize the existence of the gaming community’s informal public sphere, but also share discussions occurring within the gaming community with a broader audience.

This episode is also significant in a different respect. Williams’ (2003) finds that mainstream newspapers and magazines have historically viewed video games through a “dystopian lens,” treating video games as either emblematic or the root cause of many of contemporary America’s social ailments, such as violence or troubled adolescence. However, the coverage of *RE5* in both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* neither treats video games as the root of all evil in contemporary America nor evaluates the video game through the traditional aesthetic review template. Instead, both publications take this opportunity to examine whether or not the game contains racially-insensitive imagery. This episode is consistent with recent scholarly works that problematize the conventional distinction between the “serious” world of news and public affairs and the superfluous world of entertainment (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001; Alexander 2006; Jacobs 2007, 2012; Jacobs and Wild 2013, Wu 2011). Consistent with this growing body of research, the *RE5* example illustrates how video game

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commentary can address broader sociopolitical concerns and can thus function as an aesthetic public sphere (Jacobs 2007, 2012).

In general, the aesthetic public sphere literature seeks to remedy a serious omission present in much of the most prominent literature on contemporary civil society. In the past, scholars interested in exploring the strength of civil society or the quality of public discourse have either ignored entertainment’s civic functions or vilified it. Many of the most influential works in this area treat the popularity of entertainment media as a clear sign of a democratically impoverished civil society (Bourdieu 1998; Habermas 1989; Postman 1985; Putnam 2001). In contrast to the literature’s general predisposition, aesthetic public sphere scholars insist that entertainment and entertainment commentary play a powerful role in civil society. According to these scholars, both entertainment and entertainment commentary promote social solidarity by providing shared experiences and circulating society’s central codes and narratives to a broad audience (Alexander 2006; Jacobs 2007, 2012). Moreover, aesthetic public sphere scholars insist that both entertainment and entertainment commentary possess the capacity to address broader sociopolitical issues. For these reasons, aesthetic public sphere scholars argue that we must not automatically assume that entertainment always and only inhibits a strong and democratic civil society, but must instead recognize entertainment’s social capabilities and explore its various social roles in action.

The aesthetic public sphere literature that scholars have produced so far primarily explores the civic role of television and television commentary. Multiple studies document how television commentary often moves beyond aesthetic matters to explore broader sociopolitical concerns (Jacobs 2007, 2012; Jacobs and Wild 2013; Wu 2011).
Similar to these scholars’ findings, the manner in which The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal participate in the debate over RE5’s imagery indicates that video game commentary also possesses the capacity to explore sociopolitical topics. Of course, the more sociologically important question is not so much if video game commentary can address broader sociopolitical issues, but instead where are such conversations occurring and how often. Scholarly work that provides insight into these two important questions would greatly enhance our understanding of entertainment’s civic potential and the overarching structure of contemporary civil society.

In this work, I provide a rigorous analysis of video game commentary’s capacity to function as an aesthetic public sphere. First, I use a cultural sociology framework to explore the codes and narratives present in discussions on video games in The New York Times, the popular video game media outlet Kotaku, and the video game internet discussion forum NeoGAF. My analysis of the discussions occurring in these social spaces over an extended period of time provides a strong indication of when and how often these conversations on video games move beyond strictly aesthetic concerns. I find that all three spaces do include discussions that address broader sociopolitical concerns, thus lending support to the aesthetic public sphere literature. However, the frequency in which these spaces engage in sociopolitical discussions, the type of topics they address, and the manner in which they do so vary. Consequently, my work adds new insight to the literature by highlighting how aesthetic public spheres are not isomorphic. Instead, much like political public spheres, the sociopolitical discussions occurring in entertainment publics assume a variety of forms.
Chapter Overview

In the following chapters, I explore the multiple meanings of video games in American civil society, the capacity of video game commentary to facilitate the construction of an aesthetic public sphere, and the variety of discursive forms these discussions assume in different media spaces. In Chapter 2, I review the scholarly literature on video games’ potential social meanings. Although scholars working from a wide variety of disciplines have provided valuable insight into the medium’s potential meaning and significance, I argue that a cultural sociology framework particularly attuned to entertainment commentary’s capacity to function as an aesthetic public sphere is necessary for us to gain a stronger understanding of video games’ multiple meanings and roles in contemporary civil society. In Chapter 3, I describe the three media spaces I have chosen to analyze in this study and the methods I utilize in order to do so. I have deliberately chosen these three media spaces in order to explore how different types of entertainment publics may construct different types of aesthetic public spheres. Additionally, I explain why my combination of techniques from narrative analysis and discourse analysis results in a methodology perfectly attuned to studying the various meanings of video games in civil society and the type of aesthetic public spheres that form around video game commentary.

In Chapter 4, I specifically examine The New York Times’ video game coverage from 1980 until the end of 2009. I find that the majority of the evaluative articles during this time period primarily treat video games as a major threat. However, the specific threat video games pose somewhat changes during each decade. Moreover, a small subset of articles rejects this portrayal and instead characterizes video games as a valuable form
of cultural expression. During the 1980s and 1990s, this alternative account identifies video games’ functional benefits. This narrative changes in the 2000s to celebrating video games’ artistic merits. Moreover, my analysis during this chapter contributes to the social construction of technology literature by highlighting how civil society’s cultural understanding of children and entertainment influence the specific narratives *The New York Times* attaches to video games.

In Chapter 5, my analysis shifts to an exploration of *Kotaku*’s video game coverage. Overall, I find that the publication predominantly treats video games as a serious art form. This narrative appears in a variety of different discussions, including articles that explore video games’ connection to other legitimate art forms, the medium’s unique attributes, and perhaps most strikingly in articles that vehemently rebuke public figures who criticize video games. Besides this different portrayal of video games, *Kotaku* discusses a much broader range of sociopolitical topics relative to *The New York Times*’ video game coverage. The chapter concludes by comparing both publications’ discursive attributes.

In the final two analytical chapters, my focus moves away from video game commentary in news media outlets to the conversations occurring amongst fans in the internet discussion forum NeoGAF. In Chapter 6, I specifically analyze the types of interactions taking place in the forum’s most popular threads. I find that posts rarely touch upon broader sociopolitical concerns in these discussions. Instead, much of the conversation centers on whether or not a specific video game is fun to play. That being said, disagreements over the proper assessment of a particular video game do occasionally expand the subject matter into intensely critical explorations of what
constitutes quality video game journalism and the type of video game fan that is welcome in the forum.

In Chapter 7, I examine NeoGAF members’ debate over the meaning of *RE5*’s imagery in order to explore how the forum’s dynamics may change during a discussion of a more overtly sociopolitical issue. The heated, contested debate that takes place over *RE5*’s imagery illustrates NeoGAF’s capacity to function as an aesthetic public sphere, even if such instances do not appear to happen frequently or in the forum’s most popular threads. During this event, posters divide into two separate factions that possess competing positions over whether or not the game contains problematic imagery. Despite this difference in interpretation, both treat this debate as a serious issue worth the video game community’s interpretation. Interestingly, NeoGAF is the only one of the three media spaces I examine to extend this debate into a broader examination of the state of racism and race-relations in the present day United States. Although in certain respects NeoGAF’s debate over *RE5* clearly departs from the interactions occurring in the forum’s most popular threads, the manner in which NeoGAF users engage with this issue exhibits certain dynamics found in the most popular threads, including posters’ tendency to strongly rebuke video game media outlets and depict dissenters as casual or inauthentic video game fans.

Overall, my work reveals how different media spaces located with connections to different segments of civil society attach various meanings to video games. Although all three spaces function as aesthetic public spheres in certain instances, the frequency in which they do so, the topics they address, and the manner in which they do so somewhat varies. In Chapter 8, I adopt principles from cultural sociology and media sociology to
help explain the differences that emerge between these different media spaces in terms of how they treat video games and the topics they address in their conversations on video games.
CHAPTER 2: THE NEED FOR A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO STUDYING VIDEO GAMES

Today, the video game medium occupies an important position in the entertainment market as well as America’s overall cultural landscape. Both economically and socially, the video game industry has grown immensely from its rather humble roots as a communal pastime for programmers in federally-funded research laboratories during the late 1950s and 1960s (Poole 2004). The birth of microprocessors in the early 1970s, the emergence of personal computers and home console systems in the 1980s, and the arrival of the internet in the 1990s have all contributed to the video game industry’s ascendance into a prominent position within the cultural industries as well as a popular pastime for a large proportion of America’s population.

Towards the end of 2008, the PEW Internet & American Life Project released two studies highlighting the video game industry’s important social position within contemporary American culture. Focusing on youths, the first PEW survey found that 97% of the respondents (ages 12 to 17) play video games, including 99% of boys and 94% of girls.4 A few months later, the project followed this up with a second study which found that 53% of adults aged 18 and older reportedly play video games. As these studies help illustrate, playing video games is now a popular leisure activity for Americans in general.5 So popular in fact, that in 2008 annual software sales reached $11.7 billion in America alone.6

While focusing on industry figures and audience size are certainly important in justifying the need for a sociological examination of video games, we should not lose sight of some of the potentially unique and socially significant features that distinguish video games from other entertainment mediums. For more than a decade, a group of scholars have taken on precisely this enterprise, attempting to identify and examine what they consider to be the essential elements of video games relative to other entertainment forms such as film or literature. Initially referring to their approach as “ludology” (Frasca 2003), these scholars contend that unlike other entertainment mediums such as film, television, or literature; video games must be played to be fully experienced. Gonzalo (2003) explains this distinction in the following statement:

[T]he player is not an external observer. Observers are passive, the player is active. If the player does not act, there will be no game, and therefore no session at all. It is a completely different activity to watch a game and to play the game.

Aarseth (2001) endorses a similar position, noting that for video games “playing is integral, not coincidental”. The key insight for both these scholars is that video games are an inherently interactive form of cultural expression. As opposed to the “passive” experience of watching a film or reading a book, scholars from this school of thought insist that video games force their audiences to navigate and interact in a simulated world involving complex systems based on logical rules. According to these scholars, in order to fully experience a game, all players must first attempt to understand the logic that underpins the entire virtual world and then act on this logic.

A second element that ludologists claim distinguishes video games from other mediated forms of cultural expression is its capacity to facilitate direct interaction between participants. Reflecting this sentiment, Aarseth (2001) explains:
The old mass media created mass audiences, who shared values and sustained markets, but the mass media communities remained imagined (in Benedict Anderson’s sense), with little or no direct communication between participants. Clearly, multi-player games are not like that. In games like MUD1, Ultima online, or Quake Arena, the aesthetic and the social are integrated parts, and this could be regarded as the greatest innovation in audience structure since the invention of the choir, thousands of years ago.

Although not all video games provide this type of interaction, a growing number of the most popular video games in American and much of the world are “multiplayer” experiences, designed in a manner that allows (if not outright compels) players to communicate and interact with one another in a shared virtual world.

One such game that fits this “multiplayer” archetype is World of Warcraft. Developed in America, the game accumulated a global subscription base of 11.5 million players in 2009. World of Warcraft provides players with a customizable virtual avatar and a highly complex fantasy world inhabited by the avatars of other players in which to explore. The game does not directly force players to interact with other players and players are free to ignore all the other avatars scurrying around the virtual world. However, many of the experiences the game offers can only be achieved through the active coordination and assistance of a large group of players. As Williams et al. (2006) discover, this aspect of World of Warcraft compels many of its players to create highly complex and dynamic “guilds” (associations of players) that work together to achieve mutually agreed-upon goals. These scholars find that these guilds often possess a complex organizational structure and a sophisticated division of labor, and that the in-game interactions facilitated through these guilds often promote meaningful friendships across a wide geographical area.

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Buildings from ludologists’ early work on the value of interactivity, many scholars today suggest that video games possess the capacity to provide players with profound and potentially beneficial psychological and sociological experiences. The linguist and educational scholar James Paul Gee is one of the most prominent figures to espouse this position. In such works as *What Video games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003) and *Good Video Games and Good Learning* (2007), Gee argues that video games may offer simulations that challenge players’ taken-for-granted perspectives on the world, providing them with opportunities to explore new identities or new experiences that they would most likely not encounter in the “real” world.

While Gee’s principal focus rests on how we harness video games’ powerful potential to promote “good” learning techniques, his work has also inspired a group of scholars interested in studying identity performances. These scholars attempt to empirically evaluate the ability of particular video games to provide players with opportunities to practice or explore gendered identities not possible or at least not socially acceptable in the real world. For example, Taylor (2003) describes how the multiplayer online game *Everquest* offers female players the opportunity to play or perform gender identities not possible or at least strongly stigmatized offline. Taylor finds that unlike in the “real world,” where gender often plays a significant role in the perception and actuality of one’s personal safety, in *Everquest* female gamers are free to roam the virtual world with the knowledge that “they are no more threatened by the creatures of the world than their male counterparts are” (p. 32). Additionally, Taylor claims that *Everquest* grants players the ability to collaborate or “group” with other players regardless of gender, allowing female players an opportunity to not only participate in a team but also
to work closely with men, an experience Taylor suggests is not open to many women outside of the world of video games to this day. Finally, Taylor notes that *Everquest* grants female players an opportunity to enjoy “violent” actions, a behavior often considered socially unacceptable for women to exhibit. Hayes (2007) arrives at similar conclusions in her research on the single-player role playing game *Morrowind*.

Overall, scholars from these fields provide valuable insight into how video games may facilitate powerful social experiences. Accepting this premise opens video games up to sociological investigation. If video games provide and stimulate socially meaningful experiences, it thus becomes the responsibility of sociologists to examine the social implications of such experiences. Sadly, while the literature discussed so far provides a provocative exploration of video games’ social potential, these works ultimately fail to provide any insight into the broader social implications of such experiences. By focusing on the medium’s potential or the “in-game” behavior of players, these works fail to provide much insight into this popular medium’s social ramifications. This work will attempt to address this shortcoming by moving away from an emphasis on the “in-game” behavior and instead explore social outcomes of these experiences.

**Video Games and the Sociology of Culture Approach to Studying Entertainment**

As ripe as this new medium may be for sociological investigation, there remains very little sociological work on video games. Although researchers from a variety of fields such as communication, education, and cultural studies have been conducting promising work on the medium for roughly the last decade, sophisticated sociological examinations on video games are currently lagging far behind.
This is not to say that the discipline is ill-equipped to study video games. Although there may be few sociological works substantively studying video games, for years now sociologists working from a “sociology of culture” framework have provided one possible blueprint for studying popular culture. Whether examining popular music, film, or television, the sociology of culture approach operates under a central premise, namely that the best way to understand a cultural text is to examine the institutional context in which the texts are produced (Bielby and Bielby 1994). For most sociology of culture works, this translates into an investigation of how market features shape the production of cultural texts (DiMaggio 2002; Peterson and Berger 1975). Illustrating this principle, DiMaggio (2002) insists that sociologists need to first recognize that popular culture is “produced by profit-making firms operating under the constraints of the marketplace” (p. 152).

However, this is not to say that culture of sociology scholars simply reduce the creation of cultural texts to general market principles. Many of these works recognize that the cultural industries possess unique social characteristics or constraints that distinguish them from other industrial enterprises. For example, works by DiMaggio (2002), Peterson and Berger (1975), Peterson (1990), and Bielby and Bielby (1994) highlight how cultural industries must grapple with producing “creative” or “artistic” products that are also profitable for an often ambiguous or unpredictable audience. Additionally, Becker (1982), DiMaggio (1992), and Bauman (2007) highlight the important role intellectuals often play in legitimating particular forms of popular culture.

Sociological works employing this framework provide valuable insight into the process of creating cultural texts, highlighting the various tensions and demands that help
shape their production. For example, Peterson and Berger (1975) illustrate how the degree of market segmentation in the music industry largely determines the amount of independence given to the actual creators of popular music as well as the level of innovation and diversity in the products offered by the music industry in general. Similarly, Bielby and Bielby (1994) demonstrate how to confront the highly ambiguous network television market, network executives employ specific institutional frames related to genre, reputation, and imitation to help select, justify, and market new television pilots. More recently, Shyon Bauman (2007) employs this framework to explain why mainstream America suddenly recognized Hollywood films as “art” in the 1960s. To answer this question, Bauman identifies the three major social factors that must be present for any cultural product to be considered “art,” including: the presence of an opportunity space, institutionalized resources/activities, and a process Baumann refers to as the “intellectualization” of the cultural form. Based on this perspective, Baumann argues that Hollywood film could not successfully be classified as art until the 1960s, when for the first time in America all these necessary criteria were finally met.

Beyond providing insight into the production of cultural texts, scholars have also used the sociology of culture framework to examine how the social reception of cultural texts may promote or legitimate social distinctions. Many of the scholars pursuing this line of inquiry draw significant influence from Bourdieu’s groundbreaking work *Distinction* (1984). In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) explores how cultural tastes legitimate class differences. According to Bourdieu, there is no “natural” cultural hierarchy or moral ranking for the various forms of culture. Instead, Bourdieu asserts that any claim to a moral ordering of culture is a social construction and serves primarily to
legitimate the dominant classes’ privileged social position. In possession of a disproportionate amount of cultural resources, the dominant classes are able to have their own cultural tastes held in highest regard by society. Consequently, Bourdieu argues that the dominant classes legitimate their privileged social position by claiming moral authority in the field of culture.

In certain respects, examining the field of culture from this perspective mirrors the manner in which sociology of culture studies the production of cultural texts. Just as these works treat the production of cultural texts as shaped by their institutional context, a Bourdieuan approach draws attention to the social forces that influence the consumption of different types of cultural texts as well as their social impact. Perhaps not surprisingly, many sociology of culture scholars have adopted a similar framework to study the reception of cultural texts and how they may help construct or legitimate social distinctions. For example, after observing a strong association between a respondent’s musical preferences and their occupational status, Peterson and Simkus (1992) conclude that musical taste continues to act as a status marker in contemporary America. Similarly, DiMaggio and Useem (1978) uncover a significant correlation between “high arts” consumption and indicators related to levels of income, occupation, and education. Finally, DiMaggio (1982) finds that cultural capital factors such as interest and participation in “high arts” has a significant impact on students’ high school grades.

The sociology of culture framework provides one possible approach to sociologically studying video games. Similar to past examinations of other forms of popular culture, scholars can employ this framework to uncover the institutional factors that shape the production of video games as well as to examine how external social
factors may guide the reception of video games by particular social groups. There is no question that these are important academic pursuits. Creators of cultural texts certainly do not create their works in a social vacuum, and an examination of these traits provides valuable insight into the social factors that influence the production of cultural texts. Moreover, the sociology of culture literature reminds us that the consumption of particular forms of popular culture may entail more profound social implications than simply the exercise of personal choice in choosing desirable leisure activities.

However, as insightful as the sociology of culture literature may be, it is not without potential shortcomings. Although the approach provides an excellent account of the relationship between the field of cultural production and other social fields, by itself it is ill-equipped to examine and understand alternative but still sociologically significant aspects of popular culture. Namely, sociology of culture provides little insight into the social meanings of cultural texts. At its best, the approach highlights how social groups may use cultural texts to legitimate class distinctions. But the scholarly literature on the potential of video games indicates that social groups may use cultural texts for much more than an exercise in social distinction. Moreover, a theoretical framework focuses solely on status or class legitimation is ill-equipped to fully answer why some forms of popular culture enjoy such great popularity or why certain fan communities devote so much effort to consuming and enjoying particular cultural texts. By focusing so heavily on external social forces, sociology of culture fails to illuminate the complex role popular culture plays in facilitating collective meaning and thus promoting social solidarity. If sociology is to understand the capacity of video games to create new and potentially meaningful experiences as the ludologists and educational scholars suggest, and if the
discipline wishes to comprehend the dynamics underlying instances such as the debate over the meaning of *RE5*’s imagery within the gaming community and its penetration into discussions occurring in broader civil society, sociology needs to move beyond simply using popular culture to read “larger” social forces. An alternative approach must be fashioned that provides room to examine how the cultural fields potentially influence other social fields, rather than only focusing on how other fields shape culture. This project embarks on precisely this alternative enterprise, adopting principles from cultural sociology to hermeneutically examine the meanings of video games in different social spaces as well as the social significance of these collective enterprises.

*The Social Meaning of Video Games: “Interpretive” Work*

To be fair, this work is not the first to propose an examination of the social meaning of video games. In recent years, researchers from a wide variety of fields outside of sociology have explored this subject matter. Within this broad area, scholars issue a broad range of claims about video games’ social meanings. This next section illustrates the major themes that emerge from these works, while also providing some insight into where they fall short of offering a full understanding of the socially embedded meanings of video games and the social implication of these meanings.

Perhaps aligning itself closest to the original work of the culture industries approach as fashioned by Horkheimer and Adorno (2001), much of the recent research in this area focuses on how particular video games promote the ideals of capitalism while further commodifying leisure time. In a sense, scholars working in this area reveal how video games contain pro-capitalism or pro-consumerism messages that result in the further commodification of the social world. One video game franchise that often falls...
under this lens is *Pokemon*. For example, Jordan (2004) describes how the commercial success of *Pokemon* reflects capitalism’s current emphasis on “hyperdifferentiation.” Similar to the global market’s shift from mass production of single goods towards more flexible and multiple forms of production, *Pokemon* as a franchise relies on multiple forms of production and multiple means of consumption. As Jordan illustrates, in order to fully complete the video game, players must purchase numerous yet slightly different copies of the game as well as the corresponding films, television shows, and trading cards. Keeping in mind that the franchise is mainly popular with adolescents, Jordan argues that *Pokemon* makes youths more comfortable with buying an endless supply of products in pursuit of the often promised but always deferred full experience. Allison (2003) also views the success of *Pokemon* as an example of the further commodification of childhood, explaining that the franchise teaches children to rely more and more on the consumption of commercial goods to fulfill their emotional needs.

In addition to concerns with video games potential endorsement of capitalism, a growing literature in cultural studies has emerged that explores how video games promote gender and/or racial stereotypes. For example, Beasly and Standley (2002) find that female characters are more likely than male characters to be bare-armed and adorned in low-cut clothing. They also note that over half of the female characters observed were “big-busted.” Taking these observations together, the authors conclude that children exposed to these highly sexualized gender portrayals are likely to grow up expecting similar gender roles in the real world. Additionally, Šisler (2008) finds that many popular American video games consistently portray Muslims and Arabs according to Western stereotypes, flattening the religious and social complexities of the region into a generic
population symbolized by terrorism, hostility, and/or backwardness. Similar in tone, Kirkland (2005) and Sze-Fai Shiu (2006) find that several popular American video games exhibit or promote fear of the racial other among whites in America.

However, not all the scholarly work in this area produces such critical findings. For example, Wills (2002) treats video games as illustrations of society’s complex and multifaceted understanding of nature. Wills argues that popular games such as *Final Fantasy VII* and *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* depict nature as the peaceful alternative to the polluting world of humanity depicted in the games themselves. Moreover, Miller (2008) describes the immensely popular *Grand Theft Auto 3: San Andreas* as modern day Brothers Grimm fable. According to Miller, the game’s violent narrative allows players to explore sensitive but important subject matters, including racism, urban poverty, and America’s “culture of violence.”

As this brief review illustrates, scholars provide a wide variety of accounts on the possible meanings embedded within many of the most popular video games. This lack of consensus highlights some of the major pitfalls in utilizing only “virtuoso” interpretations (Smith 1998:11; Alexander and Smith 2002:145) to explore the potential meanings of any cultural text. Although such interpretations are insightful and potentially valuable, scholars utilizing this form of analysis ultimately limit the sociological scope of their projects by failing to empirically examine the meanings audiences attach to video games and instead base their conclusions solely on their own readings of particular video games. As interesting as some of these scholarly readings may be, such interpretive work must be coupled with an examination of how individuals and social groups use these video
games and the significance they attach to these video games and the medium in general in order to gain a stronger understanding of video games’ role in civil society.

**Audience Reception Studies**

The work of Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Birmingham School has had a lasting effect on cultural studies. In the seminal work *Encoding/Decoding*, Hall (2001) identifies three different moments of meaning-making in the production and social reception of cultural texts. According to Hall, the meanings of cultural texts are first shaped by the structural/technical limitations of the specific medium. Secondly, Hall argues that all cultural texts are then molded in order to portray certain desired messages by the hegemonic class. Hall refers to this instance as the moment of encoding. Finally, audiences themselves embed cultural texts with their own particular meanings. Hall labels this third site of meaning-making as the moment of decoding.

One of Hall’s key contributions to cultural analysis in *Encoding Decoding* is that there is no guarantee that the meanings produced at these three major sites or moments of meaning-making will correspond with each other. In other words, all cultural texts possess a multiplicity of possible meanings, which may fluctuate or change from moment to moment throughout the meaning-making process. The implications of this approach for the study of cultural texts are quite profound. If Hall is correct in asserting that all cultural texts possess a multiplicity of possible meanings that may change from one moment of meaning-making to the next, then scholarly works that ascertain the meaning of any cultural text simply through their own interpretation of the text are privileging only one site of meaning-making and ignoring the other moments in the overall process. As Hall’s approach dictates, one must accompany such an account with an examination
of the meanings individuals and different social groups instill into the cultural text to gain a more thorough understanding of the text’s social significance. For Hall and his contemporaries (for two influential examples, see Ang 1985 and Press 1991), this theoretical axiom leads to the powerful realization that audiences often use cultural texts in creative and unpredictable ways, some even in stark contrast to the intentions or preferred readings of the hegemonic class.

Perhaps reflecting Hall’s valuable contributions, a growing body of research is developing that examines the audience’s reception of video games. One of the immediate insights gained from such an approach that should be incorporated into all future meaning-focused research on the medium is the finding that many video game players consume video games in a highly critical fashion. For example, Malliet (2006) finds that respondents who reportedly play a “moderate” to “heavy” amount of video games do not treat video games as a valid source of information about reality. In other words, although video game players may enjoy playing video games, this does not necessarily mean that they take the representations portrayed in the games seriously. Instead, as Malliet’s research indicates, it appears as if many video game players maintain a critical perspective on the content they are exposed to while playing.

Research by DeVane and Squire (2008) further illustrates video game players’ propensity to reinterpret the images and content of video games. Employing an ambitious research agenda, DeVane and Squire interview adolescents from what they describe as a poor, urban environment on their experiences with Grand Theft Auto 3: San Andreas. DeVane and Squire divide their respondents into three groups: casuals, athletes, and gamers. From their interviews, DeVane and Squire (2008) find that all three groups
largely play the game differently. Their research indicates that while gamers primarily play the game to progress through the storyline and successfully complete game-designed challenges, casuals enjoy racing and customizing cars, and the athletes play the game socially, competing with friends to see who could accomplish the most spectacular tricks or endure the highest “wanted” score from the police in the game. DeVane and Squire also study the respondents’ interpretations of certain imagery and themes present in the video game, including violence and racism. Their work finds that each of these three groups respond differently to these themes. For example, although the gamers find no problem with the violent imagery themselves, they do express concern with the game’s violence if consumed by the wrong audience, such as extremely young children in settings without parental supervision. The athletes are also not concerned with the game’s violence. However, they justify their position by describing the violence portrayed in the game as unrealistic in the face of the violence they have to deal with in real life. Finally, the “casual” group reportedly does not enjoy playing the violent episodes in the game and finds it to be extremely distasteful.

The contributions of these works should not persuade reception-based works to abandon a concern with the ideological implications of video games. Instead, these findings further reinforce the need to study how audiences interact with video games, rather than making assumptions in regards to the video game community based on one’s own interpretation of the content. Balancing these concerns, Brenick et al. (2007) find that both male and female adolescent video game players equally consider violent male behavior and sexualized female imagery in video games to be problematic. These findings reinforce Malliet’s conclusion that video game players consume games
critically. However, Brenick et al. also ask respondents if gendered stereotypes in games influence real world behavior and if such images should be censored. Since slightly more male respondents compared to female respondents thought that these images do not have real world implications and should not be censored, Brenick et al. conclude that male players’ have a proclivity towards violent and highly sexualized video game content.

Although this strand of reception work provides valuable insight, their specific research agendas often offer a relatively limited cultural understanding of video games. Not to dismiss the merit of their findings, but by forcing respondents to discuss specific issues such as race, violence, or gender, these works push conversations down certain paths that may not have otherwise been present amongst community members. As a result, we cannot be fully confident that the respondents’ answers are reflective of the predominant manner in which they make sense of video games or the primary meanings different social groups attach to video games. Moreover, by placing such a strong emphasis on a particular theme or topic, these works fail to provide a more complete account of all the various ways in which audiences may use video games and the social implications of these uses. Consequently, an alternative research program is required that does not ignore these concerns but is more open to the various and often unpredictable ways in which social groups engage with video games. Fortunately, cultural sociology provides precisely this framework for scholars interested in exploring the various meanings video games may possess and the social significance of these meanings.

**Cultural Sociology’s Approach To Studying Popular Culture**

Although cultural sociologists have thus far devoted very little attention to video games, many of the approach’s key principles provide a perfect framework for exploring
the various roles or meanings of video games in civil society. According to the prominent cultural sociologist Lyn Spillman (2002), cultural sociology’s primary research objective is “to understand processes of meaning-making, to account for different meanings, and to examine their effects in social life” (p. 4). To understand this process of meaning-making, cultural sociologists argue that we must study the social role of culture, which cultural sociologists define as precisely the realm of meaning in society. To be certain, cultural sociology is not the only academic approach interested in examining culture. However, as Alexander and Smith (2002) note, cultural sociology distinguishes itself from other approaches by treating culture as an analytically autonomous social realm. Whereas other approaches commonly treat culture as a “dependent” variable to be explained by other more “hard” or “material” variables such as class or ideology, Alexander and Smith argue that culture also acts as an “independent” variable, possessing what they describe as “a relative autonomy in shaping actions and institutions, providing inputs every bit as vital as more material or instrumental forces” (p.136).

Quite often, this focus on culture as the realm of meaning is reflected in the works of scholars who examine how social groups imbue certain cultural symbols with particular social meanings which then proceed to shape or influence the groups’ experiences or understanding of the social world. To a certain extent, work by the media studies scholar Henry Jenkins’ reflects this insight, particularly Jenkins’ focus on how groups embed popular texts with their own meanings, such as the case with the fan fiction created by Star Trek fan communities (1992) or debates over the meaning of “spoiling” the reality television show Survivor that occurred within a particular fan community (2006). However, cultural sociology distinguishes itself from other meaning-centered
approaches by focusing on how culture structures the types of meanings social groups can instill into particular symbols. In other words, cultural sociologists argue that the meaning of any symbol is not infinitely malleable in any one moment but is instead partially influenced by society’s overarching cultural structure. In general, most cultural sociology research examines how two separate but related cultural structures influence the precise meaning of any symbol: semiotic codes and narratives.

Influenced by the field of semiotics, cultural sociologists argue that all cultural symbols are grouped into binary relationships between those symbols considered to be similar and those considered to be diametrically opposed. As Alexander and Smith (2002) note, the presence of binary relationships is not an effect of meaning-making processes but instead a precondition (p. 143). It is through these associations that the meaning of any symbol is at least in part shaped. For example, drawing from Durkheim’s (1995) notion of sacred and profane, Alexander and Smith (2002) document how the codes of America’s contemporary civil society are grouped along a binary relationship between traits, individuals, and institutions deemed to be civil or “pure” and those elements understood as uncivil or impure.

This binary precondition is not the only structural influence on the process of meaning-making. As Jacobs (1996) writes, the complexity of social phenomenon makes it so that codes alone cannot sufficiently make sense of the social world. Cultural codes must be connected to pre-existing narrative archetypes in order to make these codes comprehensible. In other words, narratives render certain cultural codes meaningful by inserting them into specific types of social stories that come equipped with formal models for plot and character relationships (Alexander and Smith 2002). Drawing influence from
the literary theorist Frye’s (1957) work on the narrative archetypes of Western literature, cultural sociologists often separate all possible social narratives into four genres, including: comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony. One of cultural sociology’s most significant contributions to understanding social movements and social change is that while all narratives help social groups make sense of the world, the specific worldview crafted and thus the social implications of these narratives depends on their genre. For example, Jacobs (1996) documents how the tragic genre can provoke fatalism and social withdrawal, Smith (2005) explores how groups can use the romantic genre to justify war, and Jacobs and Smith (1997) suggest that the combination of the romantic and ironic genres may stimulate social optimism and inclusion.

By identifying the cultural codes and narratives present in society, cultural sociology provides significant insight into the factors that influence the meaning of any cultural object. But how does a cultural object’s meaning become shared or socialized? According to cultural sociology, social meaning is always a collective accomplishment that takes place in civil society and involves the circulation of central codes and narratives. In other words, the social meaning of any cultural object is never simply predetermined nor does it exist as a force outside of society. Instead, it is only through interactions between social actors and social groups employing these cultural codes and narratives to help make sense of the social world that a collective meaning emerges. Consequently, if we are to fully understand this process, we have to do more than simply assume a cultural object’s meaning through our own skillful interpretations. Instead, we must examine how social actors and groups actively embed cultural objects with particular meanings through their interactions with one another in civil society.
One of the key insights of works by cultural sociologists such as Jacobs (2000) and Alexander (2006) is that today the collective process of meaning-making often happens through mediated public spheres. Influenced by Habermas’s definition of a public sphere (1989) as well as Anderson’s definition of an “imagined community” (1983), many cultural sociologists argue that major media outlets promote social solidarity by providing audience members with common experiences and a shared social space in which to explore these experiences. In the conversations that occur within these shared social spaces, social actors repeatedly invoke particular codes and narratives that facilitate collective meanings and a shared worldview amongst its members. Most importantly, relative to other aspects of civil society, media outlets possess the capacity to connect audience members from a wide geographical area into a single interpretive community.

However, while theoretically this social capacity applies to all forms of mass media regardless of where they fall on the traditional distinction between nonfictional and fictional or entertainment media, Jacobs (2007, 2012) documents how in practice civil society scholars most often examine the impact of nonfictional media forms on civil society, failing to recognize the ways in which fictional media forms may also promote social solidarity. Building off earlier works that problematize the traditional distinction between serious news and entertainment (Alexander 2006; Alexander and Jacobs 1998; Delli Carpini and Williams 2001), works by Jacobs (2007, 2012) and Jones (2007) introduce the concept of an “aesthetic public sphere” as a valuable analytical framework for studying entertainment media discussions. In proposing this concept, both scholars seek to remedy the tendency of public sphere research to focus on what is conventionally
understood as political news while ignoring or denigrating entertainment formats. According to both scholars, this omission prevents scholars from fully exploring how entertainment media also possess the capacity to stimulate discussion on matters of common concern. Interestingly, Jacobs (2012) traces the recognition of entertainment media’s important role in civil society to Habermas’ seminal work on the historical origins of the public sphere (1989). According to Habermas’ account, bourgeois novels facilitated the construction of literary public spheres in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Habermas, these literary public spheres provided a forum to talk about matters of common concern and promoted valuable democratic communicative principles such as publicity and critical rationality, both of which were vital in the construction of Europe’s first political public spheres (Habermas 1989:51; Jacobs 2012:320). However, as Jacobs (2012) aptly notes, Habermas (1989) dismisses entertainment public spheres’ importance once explicitly political public spheres emerged and instead identifies the culture industries as key culprits in the public sphere’s refeudalization in the twentieth century.

As an analytical framework, the concept of an aesthetic public sphere reminds scholars to be open to the possibility that entertainment media may still perform the civic role Habermas attributes to the early literary public spheres. In short, scholars must not automatically dismiss entertainment media as superficial or a distraction from serious sociopolitical issues, but must instead examine the ways in which communicative spaces actually use entertainment media. Whether or not a particular entertainment text or genre inhibits or promotes civic discussion of broader sociopolitical issues thus becomes an empirical question rather than a foregone conclusion.
Recent research by Wu (2011) and Jacobs and Wild (2013) provide empirical support for Jacobs’ (2007, 2012) and Jones’ (2007) theoretical claims. Wu (2011) examines coverage of the Chinese television talent show *Super Girl* in major Chinese newspapers and finds that newspaper coverage of the show contains two competing moral narratives. The first narrative celebrates the show as “an enlightening influence on Chinese democracy” while the second narrative dismisses the show as “mere entertainment or sugar-coated democracy” (p. 57). Wu describes how both of these narratives touch upon more serious issues such as the importance of democracy and equality, and the collective power of “ordinary people” (p. 58). Similarly, Jacobs and Wild (2013) find that mainstream media coverage of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* treats both shows as legitimate sources and use the show to condemn the larger political climate and “reinforce the sacred discourse of journalism” (p. 90). In this sense, both examinations highlight how entertainment commentary addresses broader sociopolitical matters and thus serves as an aesthetic public sphere.

The cultural sociology approach provides a valuable framework for exploring the questions sparked by the *RE5* episode. Rather than rely on our own virtuosic interpretations or respondents’ answers to specifically-focused questions, we gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of video games’ multiple social meanings by exploring the cultural codes and narratives present in the discussions on video games occurring within different interpretive communities or entertainment publics. The cultural sociology approach provides this valuable insight by recognizing a cultural object’s potential to possess multiple social meanings, which thus necessitates scholars to carefully examine the various ways different groups make sense of the object in question.
and the social significance of these potentially contrasting interpretations. Moreover, recent cultural sociology work on the aesthetic public sphere provides the civil society literature with a heightened sensitivity to video games’ potential social significance by recognizing how discussions on video games in these social spaces may address broader sociopolitical topics. Although the majority of the topics touched upon in discussions on video games may remain relatively mundane, cultural sociology’s concept of the aesthetic public sphere reminds us that entertainment commentary always possesses the potential to investigate deeper or more serious sociopolitical concerns. Consequently, researchers must recognize this potential, identify instances in which entertainment commentary functions as an aesthetic public sphere, and explore the particular characteristics of the social space in question and broader civil society that may at least partially influence when and where these broader conversations occur in order to provide a rich and nuanced account of video games’ meaning in contemporary civil society.

**What Constitutes “Good” Video game Commentary?**

Scholars and intellectuals from a diverse array of disciplines have long been engaged in projects examining the media’s role in fostering or suppressing democratic deliberation. These researchers generally start by defining an idealized form of mediated discourse they believe to be vital for a truly democratic decision-making process and then evaluate specific media outlets or the larger media landscape according to this standard. Unfortunately, as Jacobs (2007, 2012) aptly observes, researchers interested in this line of inquiry traditionally focus their evaluations on what is conventionally considered to be journalism devoted to covering politics and the “serious” world of public affairs. This research preference is of course itself a reflection of the serious – entertainment binary
that structures public discourse in contemporary civil society. Consequently, cultural sociology’s recent push to recognize how entertainment commentary may facilitate the construction of an aesthetic public sphere opens up a new site of public conversation to empirical assessment from a deliberative democracy perspective. My work takes advantage of this new analytical opportunity by examining video game commentary according to the prevailing theoretical models for evaluating democratic mediated deliberation. In this sense, my work not only documents how aesthetic publics may foster valuable sociopolitical commentary, but also provides an indication of how the discursive attributes of this commentary may vary.

To be certain, scholars do not agree on the essential elements necessary for the media to facilitate true democratic deliberation. For example, Ferree et al. (2004) divide the prominent democratic theories of media deliberation into four different schools, including representative liberal theories, participatory liberal theories, discursive theories, and constructionist theories of democracy. Similarly, Jacobs and Townsley (2011) distinguish between participatory liberal theories of democracy, representative and elitist theories of democracy, Habermasian theories of complex democracy, and poststructural/critical theories of complex democracy. Despite using different labels for two of the schools, both works generally agree on the major characteristics of each democratic theory. Readers unfamiliar with these different democratic theories should explore both works’ excellent summaries. Overall, these two summaries provide a strong sense of the variety of characteristics scholars consider essential to democratic deliberation, including a plurality of voices or positions, critical rationality (Habermas 1989, 1996), and the inclusion of other discursive styles such as personal storytelling.
(Mansbridge 1999; Polletta and Lee 2006; Sanders 1997; Young 1996, 2000),
intertextuality (Jacobs and Townsley 2011), and dramatic cultural narratives (Alexander
2006; Jacobs and Townsley 2011). Rather than propose an ideal media discourse, in this
work I examine how video game commentary is consistent with or diverges from the
range of attributes deliberative democracy scholars consider essential to a quality media
discourse. In this sense, my work not only documents how aesthetic publics may foster
valuable sociopolitical commentary, but also provides an indication of how the discursive
quality of this commentary may vary depending upon the wide array of principles
different scholars consider essential to their own understanding of media’s ideal role in
fostering democratic deliberation.

Democratic theorists generally agree that media systems should include critical
commentary directed towards government and party officials, major businesses or
commercial interests, and other forms of authority (Benson 2010:4; Wessler 2008). Much
of the contemporary emphasis on criticality can be attributed at least in part to Habermas’
(1989) widely influential normative conceptualization of the public sphere. According to
Habermas, the ideal public sphere serves as a communicative space for all interested
parties to express their position on matters of common concern and critically address
their opponents’ claims. Habermas contends that a genuine democratic consensus for
authority can only be achieved through this style of open-ended and critical debate
(Benson 2009a:176). Of course, Habermas was not the first theorist to champion
criticality. Indeed, Habermas’s own understanding of criticality’s social significance was
influenced by the Frankfurt School’s valorization of social criticism as a moral and
emancipatory enterprise (Seidman 2004). According to Frankfurt School scholars such as
Horkheimer and Adorno (2001), social critique plays an instrumental role in promoting social change by revealing and challenging the ideologies that legitimate the dominant group’s authority (Seidman 2004:120-126).

Given the literature’s emphasis on critique, my discursive analysis identifies and explores instances in which video game discussions in these different media spaces include statements that directly oppose, reject, or problematize the position of authority figures. In the context of this research project, I consider authority figures to include government and political representatives, major businesses, and prominent media outlets and figures. Government and political figures occasionally appear in these media spaces’ video game commentary. My analysis documents the frequency in which these spaces include a critical response to the official government or political position stated in the article or post and the form this critique assumes in such instances. Moreover, the literature’s emphasis on the importance of critical statements directed towards business interests takes on an additional layer of significance given that much of coverage in these media spaces focuses on commercially-produced video games. Consequently, my analysis is also sensitive to instances in which these media spaces exhibit some reflexivity in regards to the video game industry’s principle economic interests.

I also consider critical statements directed towards major media outlets and personalities as an additional form of critique in recognition of the fact that prestigious or prominent mainstream media outlets play a powerful role in defining matters of common concern and circulating the collective representations that promote social solidarity (Alexander 2006:70; Jacobs and Townsley 2011:5). In other words, prominent media outlets themselves exert an authoritative position in civil society. Consequently, my work
documents instances where video game commentary in less influential or more peripheral media spaces specifically reject or contradict accounts provided by mainstream media. Of course, aesthetic publics do not all share precisely the same degree of disenfranchisement from the official public sphere. Some entertainment media outlets may receive more social prestige or recognition relative to others. Of the three media spaces I examine in this study, the Arts section of *The New York Times* possesses the most social prestige. Positive coverage in the Arts section may yield cultural producers greater levels of economic and cultural capital. I will more specifically chronicle the media spaces occupied by the video game media outlet *Kotaku* and the internet discussion forum NeoGAF in the next section. For now, it is important to briefly note that NeoGAF occupies the least prominent position due to its non-journalistic format, niche focus on video games, and smaller audience size. *Kotaku* is most likely located somewhere in between. The website is certainly not as widely influential as *The New York Times* but it does play a prominent role within the video game community. As a reflection of the different positions each of these media outlets occupy in civil society, I also consider cases where *Kotaku* articles reprimand prestigious entertainment critics or posters on NeoGAF repudiate claims made by video game media outlets such as *Kotaku* as another form of critique.

Besides being critical, a second major characteristic that many democratic normative theorists consider to be vital for a healthy, functioning democracy is the presence of a plurality of voices in the media’s coverage on matters of common concern. Scholars often refer to this dynamic as “popular inclusion” (Ferree et al. 2002: 212) or “multiperspectivality” (Benson 2009b; Gans 1979, 2003). Democratic scholars from
many different camps insist that a proper functioning media system must foster what Benson (2009b:402) describes as “a wide-ranging debate among diverse kinds of individuals and organizations”. For example, participatory liberal theorists insist that a diverse media landscape plays an integral role in ensuring that democracies facilitate a fully participatory citizenry rather than generate a passive populace that sits idly by as decisions are left entirely in the hands of government officials, politicians, and media insiders (Ferree et al. 2002:212). Similarly, Habermasian and neo-Habermasian scholars (Fraser 1992; Habermas 1996; Jacobs 2000; Jacobs and Townsley 2011) maintain that every social group must have the ability to articulate their own interpretations of the common good in order for a true democratic consensus to even be a possibility.

In defining and studying media plurality, scholars often distinguish between institutional and ideological forms of media pluralism. According to Benson (2009b), institutional pluralism refers to “the degree to which individuals or organizations from diverse institutional fields, each with their own semi-autonomous logic, are quoted or paraphrased in news accounts” (p. 406). In this sense, institutional pluralism takes seriously many democratic scholars’ demand that all concerned social groups have a direct and visible role in discussing matters of common concern (Wessler 2008:3). To evaluate institutional pluralism, scholars generally start by classifying the various actors present in media coverage based on their occupational or institutional field, including politics (politicians, government officials, political consultants), the media (journalists, columnists, correspondents), academia, law, and other civil society organizations (trade organizations, non-profit associations) (Jacobs and Townsley 2011). For democratic
theorists operating from this egalitarian principle, media coverage must involve actors from all these various institutional fields in order to be considered truly democratic.

On the other hand, the concept of ideological pluralism shifts attention away from the specific actors and instead emphasizes the need for a range of arguments, positions, and interpretations in the media’s account on matters of common concern. Proponents for ideological pluralism note that the presence of public actors from a diverse array of institutional fields does not guarantee that media coverage will contain multiple positions or interpretations. Indeed, mainstream media coverage of a particular topic or event may contain actors from a variety of different institutional settings who all espouse similar viewpoints. Moreover, some scholars argue that ideological pluralism is more feasible and possibly even more desirable than institutional pluralism. For example, Wessler (2008) claims that the egalitarian demand for equal media access for all who want their voices to be heard is unrealistic in lieu of mainstream media’s “limited carrying capacity” (p. 3). As a result, Wessler (2008:3-4) instead suggests that the media should strive to construct coverage representing all the major social groups on a particular issue even if every social group can’t directly represent themselves in this coverage. In recognition of the literature’s emphasis on both forms of pluralism, my analysis explores the range of actors and the variety of positions that appear in these media spaces.

Although many democratic deliberation scholars agree that the ideal public sphere should be critical and pluralistic, many scholars espouse different ideas for how precisely these arguments should be made. In other words, scholars vary in what they identify as the rhetorical styles necessary for promoting democratic deliberation. Habermas’s normative model of democratic deliberation largely remains the premiere standard for
evaluating media coverage. According to Habermas (1989, 1996), the ideal speech situation for democratic deliberation involves all interested parties publically entering into a reasoned dialogue on matters of common concern. During this public discussion, each party must support their claims with rational and objective justifications and respond to their oppositions’ claims in the same manner. In other words, this form of dialogue requires speakers to not just make claims but substantiate their positions with objective evidence. For Habermas, this form of critical-rational dialogue is absolutely vital for facilitating democratic deliberation because it is only through such an exchange that participants may be persuaded to change their position in light of what they can clearly recognize as stronger evidence to the contrary (Ferree et al. 2002; Wessler 2008).

Over the last three decades scholars have issued a variety or critiques and revisions to Habermas’s normative framework. For example, post-structural and critical scholars argue that the public sphere’s emphasis on critical-rational dialogue may actually exclude certain groups from participating in public discourse. These scholars claim that the principles of objectivity and universality that structure the most influential public spheres privilege the experience of the powerful and disqualify or silence social groups with different experiences (Minow 1990; Polletta and Lee 2006:702). In other words, the standards used by the most influential members of the dominant political public sphere to evaluate the validity of a particular truth claim are always socially specific. In this sense, claims found to be “objective” are generally statements that support the status-quo while those dismissed as subjective tend to contradict what powerful groups consider to be conventional knowledge or even matters of public significance (Ferree et al. 2002:225) Consequently, as Polletta and Lee (2006) explain,
“privileging reasoned discourse comes at the expense of another deliberative standard, that of equality” (p. 702). To address this major limitation in democratic deliberation, critical scholars assert that the public sphere must be open to a diverse array of rhetorical styles if public deliberation is to be truly open for all (Young 1996, 2000; Mansbridge 1999).

In terms of alternative rhetorical styles, many critical scholars identify personal storytelling as a valuable format for disenfranchised groups to use in order to gain access to more powerful public spheres (Mansbridge 1999; Polletta and Lee 2006; Sanders 1997; Young 1996, 2000). Of course, personal storytelling is by definition particularistic and thus violates Habermas’s emphasis on universality. However, critical scholars maintain that personal storytelling’s particularistic nature is perhaps its most promising feature in terms of marginalized groups gaining entrance into influential public spheres and thus fostering a truly inclusive public dialogue. According to Polletta and Lee (2006), personal storytelling does not issue universalizing claims and therefore does not attempt to attack or repudiate the experiences of other social groups. Instead, this rhetorical style strives to reveal the experience of actors from different and often overlooked social conditions. In this sense, disenfranchised groups who utilize this personal rhetoric may gain an “emphatic hearing” from members of the more dominant social group (Polletta and Lee 2006:702). Proponents of this rhetorical style often optimistically note that public spheres open to personal storytelling will exhibit a stronger awareness and acceptance of the social world’s multidimensionality, a feature which will hopefully result in a more truly inclusive form of public deliberation (Ferree et al. 2002:226; Polletta and Lee 2006:702).
Critical scholars’ call for public dialogue to be receptive to a diverse range of rhetorical styles is in certain respects similar to recent work by cultural sociologists tracing the “empirical contours of public debate” (Jacobs and Townsley 2011:67). Over roughly the last decade and a half, several works from the Strong Program of Cultural Sociology tradition have revealed the powerful cultural and performative dimensions present in public deliberation (Alexander 2006; Jacobs 2000; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Jacobs and Sobieraj 2007; Smith 2005). Drawing from Alexander and Smith’s (1993) groundbreaking exploration of civil society’s cultural structure, these works demonstrate how social actors and groups rely on cultural codes and dramatic narratives to construct public discourses on matters of common concern. The cultural elements present in these public discourses separate the social world into good and evil, pure and impure, sacred and profane. This cultural element is perhaps most visible during episodes of disagreement. During such moments, social actors often do more than simply employ a critical-rational rhetorical style to refute the opposition. They also symbolically pollute opposing social groups by portraying them as irrational, untrustworthy, or undemocratic (Alexander 2006:125). The inclusion of this cultural dynamic in public deliberation is no accident. As Alexander (2006) explains, social groups depend upon civil society’s cultural structure to render their position comprehensible. In short, the cultural and performative elements of public discourse are absolutely necessary to achieve the intersubjectivity needed for public deliberation on any matter of common concern (Jacobs and Townsley 2011:68).

Perhaps for some intellectuals, the fact that public discourses must contain this cultural element in order to be comprehensible signifies the collapse of a truly objective
form of democratic deliberation. However, other scholars suggest that this dramatic component may actually encourage democratic deliberation, especially in instances where it is coupled with elements of Habermas’s critical-rhetorical style and other discursive formats such as personal story-telling. For example, Jacobs and Townsley (2011) suggest that the “clever use of dramatic technique” and “the elaborate identification of public figures with mythic archetypes” may actually promote greater civic involvement (p. 69). These rhetorical devices may encourage more citizens to participate in the public dialogue or at least follow the proceedings more closely by elevating the often mundane or exclusionary field of policy discussion into a dramatic world of epic conflict and crisis. In this high-mimetic discourse, powerful characters with clear moral attributes battle over the fate of society, either propelling us towards greater prosperity or planting the seeds for our demise. In other words, by applying such stark characterizations to the actors involved and placing such an immense emphasis on the outcome, moral discourses may motivate citizens to become involved in policy discussion that they normally wouldn’t consider to be important or relevant to their own lives. Applying this model to the space of media opinion, Jacobs and Townsley (2011) explain, “if an individual “hates” George Will or Paul Krugman or Bill O’Reilly, it is more likely that the person will participate in the public sphere” (p. 69).

Intertextuality is one final rhetorical style that Jacobs and Townsley (2011) identify as capable of promoting greater civic involvement and consequently a potentially stronger form of democratic deliberation. This rhetorical style consists of speakers using references to other media texts as justification for their claims. For example, an opinion columnist may cite a recent article in The New York Times as evidence supporting their
own position. Such claims may prove persuasive because they call upon a popular or widely accessible media text easily recognized by a large constituency as significant or influential. In an insightful observation, Jacobs and Townsley (2011) explain that intertextual references are not limited simply to other news-oriented media outlets, but may also include references to popular culture texts, such as films, music, television programs, or novels. Similar to references to news texts, Jacobs and Townsley (2012) explain that references to popular culture texts may prove persuasive because they connect an argument or specific issue to media content with a broad appeal (p. 164).

Moreover, whether its news or popular culture, intertextual references may actually expand the social groups involved in democratic deliberation by including resources comprehensible to a constituency much larger than simply political and media insiders (Jacobs and Townsley 2011:163).

Keeping in mind the different discursive features that scholars identify as vital to democratic deliberation, my analysis examines the presence (or lack thereof) of critical rationality, intertextuality, personal storytelling, and dramatic portrayals in each media space’s evaluative articles on video games. Overall, my work provides a detailed description of the discourses present in three different media spaces and thus demonstrates how aesthetic public spheres are not isomorphic but vary in their discursive attributes. In the final chapter of this work, I will use insights from cultural sociology and media sociology to help explore potential social factors or dynamics that might account for the discursive differences I have observed between these three media spaces.
CHAPTER 3: SITES OF ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In this work I examine video game discussions in three different types of media spaces, including the mainstream news publication *The New York Times*, the video game media outlet *Kotaku*, and the video game fan forum NeoGAF. By exploring video game discussions occurring in different types of media spaces, my work provides a stronger understanding of the range of video games’ meanings in American civil society. Moreover, this comparative component allows me to examine how characteristics unique to each space may influence the type of meanings they attach to video games, such as the space’s intended function (journalistic enterprise, source of cultural commentary, fan discussions) or its overarching position in the journalistic field and civil society at large.

Based on the striking features of the *RE5* episode, I am particularly interested in exploring when and how often each of these spaces function as aesthetic public spheres. In the following section, I will briefly describe the three media spaces I have chosen to examine in this work.

*The New York Times*

For the purposes of this project, *The New York Times*’ video game coverage serves as an indication of the meaning of video games in America’s mainstream public sphere. At the start of this study (2009), *The New York Times* was the third largest American newspaper, possessing a daily circulation rate of 941,219. Although *The New York Times* may be the third largest print newspaper, it currently is the most popular

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online newspaper website, with over 18 million unique visitors each month.\textsuperscript{9} Beyond its sheer size, a significant proportion of the newspaper’s audience occupies a privileged space in American civil society; a fact the paper itself regularly touts to attract advertisers. According to the 2008-2009 U.S. Opinion Leaders Study, \textit{The New York Times} ranked #1 in terms of media reach, with 61\% of what the study defined as “American opinion leaders” reportedly reading the newspaper.\textsuperscript{10} Moreover, the newspaper’s coverage often serves as major talking points for other prominent media outlets (Jacobs 2000; Smith 2005). Given its size, its audience, and its prestigious position in the journalistic field, this project asserts that \textit{The New York Times} possesses a strong connection to America’s mainstream or formal public sphere.

Overall, my work has three major goals: to identify the meaning of video games in three different media spaces, to document and explore when the video game commentary in these three spaces function as an aesthetic public sphere, and to use contributions from the democratic deliberation literature to analyze the discourses present in these spaces. However, my analysis of \textit{The New York Times} includes an additional goal reflective of the newspaper’s unique position in contemporary civil society. Whereas \textit{Kotaku} and NeoGAF are two relatively new media spaces that occupy more peripheral positions in civil society, \textit{The New York Times} has for several decades served as one of the most influential media outlets in America. Consequently, a longitudinal study of \textit{The New York Times} can provide significant insight into how the meaning of video games may have changed in American civil society. Unfortunately, there is very little scholarly

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{10} From \textit{The New York Times} media kit. Retrieved November 12, 2009 (\url{http://www.nytimes.whsites.net/mediakit/pdfs/newspaper/Erdus_Morgan_Opinion_Leaders_Study.pdf})
\end{itemize}
research exploring this topic. Williams’ (2003) pioneering work on video game coverage in news magazines between 1970 and 2000 remains the only prominent scholarly investigation into video games’ shifting social meaning nearly ten years after its publication. This scholarly gap is especially problematic given the video game industry’s demographic expansion in the 2000s (Donovan 2010; Williams 2006). I remedy this omission by examining *The New York Times*’ video game coverage from 1980 to the end of 2009.

To examine how *The New York Times*’ video game coverage may have changed over the last three decades, I adopt insights from the social construction of technology literature (Arceneaux and Schmitz Weiss 2010; Briggs and Burke 2009; Gitelman 2006; Kelley 2009; Marvin 1988; Rice 1999; Rössler 2001; Winston 1998). Rejecting the conventional understanding of technology as a “progressive chain of events” (Winston; 1998:1) in which society immediately comprehends and appropriately utilizes new technologies, the social construction literature highlights the conflict and contestation that emerges over the meaning of new technology. As Marvin (1988:8) explains: “Media are not fixed natural objects….They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication”. New technological forms do not emerge in society with their meaning prepackaged. Instead, nascent technologies provide opportunities for different discursive outlets to construct or reiterate powerful cultural codes and worldviews.

The social construction literature demonstrates how different discursive outlets attach both utopian and apocalyptic meanings to new technologies. For example, Marvin (1988) finds that many science journals and popular science magazines treated the
telephone’s invention as the dawning of a more democratic society in which every individual will enjoy access to unfettered communication. However, others writing in mainstream newspapers expressed fear that the telephone would eliminate traditional class and gender hierarchies and render private affairs open to public scrutiny. Similarly, Briggs and Burke (2009) demonstrate that while many intellectuals celebrated modern print technology’s emancipative capacities, clergymen and government officials feared print technology would jeopardize their authority and promote mischief.

To be fair, this study is not the first to adopt a social construction framework to examine video games. Williams (2003) utilizes a similar approach to analyze how America’s most popular news magazines (*Time, Newsweek, and US World News & Report*) frame video games from 1970 to 2000. According to Williams, the initial dystopian frame for all three magazines expresses concern that video games are replacing worthwhile children’s activities. Over time, this concern shifts to fears over adverse health effects and ends with anxieties over how video games negatively influence children’s values. Williams also identifies an early utopian frame that describes video games as keeping children out of trouble and providing a cathartic emotional release. In the 1990s, this utopian frame shifts to a depiction of video games as building intelligence and promoting familiarity with computers.

Williams’ (2003) work is valuable, but much has happened to video games in the last decade to warrant further examination. The American video game market expanded greatly during the first decade of the 2000s, due largely to the success of massive multiplayer online games (MMOs), new Nintendo consoles, and the mobile platform. These new platforms broadened the audience beyond the traditional young male
demographic (Donovan 2010:337; Williams 2006:201). It may be the case that this demographic shift promoted a change in the manner mainstream media covered video games from previous decades. For example, this demographic expansion may result in greater acceptance by mainstream media outlets, as evident by a decrease in the frequency of the dystopian narrative or increase in the frequency of a utopian narrative in video game coverage. Another possibility is that the medium’s newly attained popularity does not shift the scales proportionally between the two narrative types, but results in mainstream media outlets generating alternative dystopian and utopian narratives.

Keeping this in mind, my work expands upon Williams’ (2003) research by examining *The New York Times’* video game coverage over the last three decades. By including the first decade of the 2000s in the analysis, my study allows us to determine if the video game industry’s substantial demographic shift ushered in any significant changes in the mainstream media’s coverage.

My work not only expands the scholarly literature on the media’s representation of video games, but also pushes the social construction literature in a new direction by adopting key insights from cultural sociology to demonstrate how civil society’s cultural structure (Alexander and Smith, 1993; Jacobs and Smith 1997; Jacobs 2000; Smith 2005) influences the specific narratives media outlets attach to new technologies. Previous works in the social construction literature has emphasized how power dynamics (Marvin 1988) or broader social issues (Williams 2003) influence new technology’s reception. These social factors certainly play a role in the social construction of technology. However, it is important for scholars to recognize how civil society’s pre-existing cultural codes also play a role in structuring the types of meanings that social actors and
media outlets attach to new technology. As Jacobs and Smith (1997:63) explain, “Engagement in public life can never be denuded of ideal inputs; it is always grounded in cultural forms that are always already situated within particular concrete historical settings”. In other words, every civil society contains specific cultural codes or collective representations (Smith 2005:14) that reflect that society’s core values and worldview. These cultural codes help make sense of the social world by supplying public actors with ready-made templates to render new objects and events meaningful. Although these cultural codes provide civil society with an easy way to assimilate new experiences, they also limit the types of meanings that public figures can attach to these experiences by forcing the meaning of these new events to fit with civil society’s particular “discursive history” (Jacobs 1996a:1242).

I build upon the growing literature on civil society’s cultural structure to document how two different cultural codes – children and entertainment – influence The New York Times’ social construction of video games. Beginning with the former, this study draws insight from Davies (2001) to document how technologies understood as primarily for children invoke specific narrative types. As Davies (2001) explains, contemporary civil society predominantly treats children as intellectually and emotionally immature relative to adults, yet essential to the country’s future prosperity. In other words, civil society’s cultural structure treats children as “infant citizens” or “future citizens” (Ryan 1992:267), an extremely vital yet incredibly vulnerable population. Consequently, discussions in civil society on topics pertaining to children focus on how to best raise children so that they develop into healthy, mature citizens. Correspondingly,
media outlets evaluate new technologies socially perceived as used by or intended for children in terms of the threats or benefits these technologies pose.

The growing literature on the aesthetic public sphere demonstrates how entertainment also carries a particular meaning in civil society. Jacobs (2012) suggests that contemporary political culture distinguishes between the “serious” world of public affairs and entertainment, championing the former as vital to society’s continued prosperity and dismissing the latter as distractive at best and threatening at worse. For example, prominent intellectuals including Postman (1985), Habermas (1989), Bourdieu (1998), and Putnam (2001) all treat entertainment as hazardous to a strong civil society. This distinction between the realm of politics and entertainment influences the manner in which major media outlets cover entertainment forms. Reflecting this sentiment, entertainment coverage in media outlets devoted to “serious” social issues will frequently describe entertainment as distractive if not harmful. Furthermore, entertainment’s subjugated cultural position also influences sympathetic media channels. Proponents attempting to defend the value of entertainment media must construct narratives arguing that entertainment formats exhibit the same principles civil society celebrates to have any chance of receiving mainstream support. For example, Jacobs (2007, 2012) describes how proponents draw connections between entertainment media and current sociopolitical events or demonstrate how a particular entertainment text cultivates critical rationality or reflexivity in an attempt to legitimate the format.

The scholarly work on the position of children and entertainment in civil society reveals how civil society’s cultural structure plays a powerful role in influencing the social meaning of new objects or events. Unfortunately, the social construction of
technology literature has largely ignored these contributions, instead focusing on how power dynamics or major social events of the time inform society’s understanding of new media forms. In this work I demonstrate how civil society’s cultural structure also plays a role in the social construction of new technology by documenting how the unique cultural positions of children and entertainment in civil society help shape *The New York Times*’ video game coverage.

*Kotaku*

An examination of the position of video games in American civil society would clearly be incomplete without including video game coverage from a major media outlet such as *The New York Times*. However, the mainstream media’s video game coverage may not be the most important or influential source for particular segments of the video game community. For decades, video game fans have relied on the enthusiast press for pertinent video game information and cultural commentary. Consequently, any study interested in uncovering video games’ multiple meanings and roles in civil society should certainly also examine the enthusiast press’s video game coverage, which is precisely why I have also chosen to study the video game media outlet *Kotaku*. *Kotaku* is currently one of America’s most popular game journalism websites, attracting an estimated 1.9 million unique visitors each month in America alone.¹¹ *Kotaku* belongs to the Gawker Media network of sites, which include such other popular blogs as Gawker (media news and celebrity gossip), Gizmodo (consumer electronics), and Lifehacker (software). At the time of this study, *Kotaku* consisted of seven full-time editors/reporters, including two contributing editors located in Japan and Australia. *Kotaku*’s design reflects Gawker

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Media’s overall approach to the blogging format, blending blog-style postings with more traditional news coverage and commentary. *Kotaku* publishes an average of 44 new posts each day, the majority of which consist of *Kotaku* editors providing brief remarks on press releases or stories published by other news sources along with the prerequisite link to the original article. The subjects of these posts cover a wide range of topics, including information on new video games and game systems, upcoming video game related events or appearances, and examples of the video game audience’s creative reception of the medium, including video game inspired costumes, songs, food, and video game modifications (mods). However, while the majority of *Kotaku*’s articles may be blog posts connected to outside media sources, the site’s daily offerings also contain at least a few lengthier pieces of original video game coverage or cultural commentary, which the site refers to as “*Kotaku Originals*”. These “Originals” include in-depth video game previews and reviews, detailed analyses of video game themes or design, and the exploration of other cultural and social phenomenon considered to be of interest to the video game community.¹²

*Kotaku*’s large audience size grants the website a prominent position within the video game journalism space. Other popular video game websites often consider *Kotaku* articles news-worthy by themselves and publish their own pieces covering the content of *Kotaku* articles. *Kotaku*’s powerful position also transfers to the site’s staff. For example, in 2009 the popular video game publication *GamePro* named Brian Crecente, *Kotaku*’s Editor-in-Chief, one of the 20 most influential people in the video game industry over the past 20 years. Moreover, the prestigious British video game magazine *Edge* named

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¹² *Kotaku* stopped using the label “originals” in early 2011.
Crecente one of “Gaming's Top 50 journalists” in 2006. Additionally, Stephen Totilo, who at the time was the first full-time video game reporter for *MTV News* also received “Top 50” journalist status by *Edge* magazine. Totilo eventually left *MTV* to become *Kotaku*’s Deputy Editor in 2009, further illustrating *Kotaku*’s prominent position amongst the video game enthusiast press.

Although *Kotaku* enjoys a relatively high degree of economic capital based on its large audience, the website also possesses a significant amount of cultural capital. *Kotaku* utilizes a variety of strategies to acquire and maintain this cultural capital. For example, many of *Kotaku*’s staff members also publish work in alternative media outlets that possess more cultural prestige. Brian Crecente has contributed pieces for *Wired Magazine, Variety*, and *National Public Radio*. Stephen Totilo participated in *Slate Magazine*’s “Game Club” in 2007 and 2008, a weeklong roundtable discussion on video game criticism modeled off the online magazine’s popular Film Club series. Furthermore, *Kotaku* contributing columnist Leigh Alexander also serves as the news director of industry trade site *Gamasutra* and has written features and commentary for *Variety, Wired*, and *Slate*.

Appearing in more widely known or prestigious media outlets is not the only manner in which *Kotaku* garners a significant amount of cultural capital. *Kotaku* also distinguishes itself from many other popular video game outlets by attracting individuals

from esteemed backgrounds to write for the website. For example, during this study’s data period, Ian Bogost served as a guest-editor for a week. Bogost is a Professor of digital media at The Georgia Institute of Technology, and has written multiple books and research articles exploring games and culture. Moreover, Bogost is also the co-founder of Persuasive Games, a small independent game studio that focuses on developing games that explore social and political issues, such as terrorism, national security, and healthy lifestyles. Bogost is not Kotaku’s only connection to academia. Maggie Greene, a doctoral student in History at UC San Diego, serves as a Weekend Reporter at Kotaku during this study’s period of analysis. During their tenure at Kotaku, both Bogost and Greene’s articles frequently connect video game topics to broader academic discussions.

Besides Kotaku’s popularity and its association with other prestigious media venues and individuals, Kotaku’s connection to traditional journalism institutions also distinguishes it from many other video game outlets. Of the website’s full time staff as of the end of 2009, three out of the seven possess degrees in journalism (Brian Crecente, Stephen Totilo, Owen Good). Moreover, two staff members hold Masters from Columbia University’s renowned Graduate School of Journalism (Stephen Totilo, Owen Good). Extending journalistic experience beyond degrees, four of Kotaku’s staff came to the website with a background primarily in journalism. For example, Brian Crecente worked as a police-reporter for Rocky Mountain News and other daily newspapers around America. Owen Good also worked at Rocky Mountain News. Additionally, Brian Ashcraft still serves as a Contributing Editor for Wired Magazine and has written two well-received books on Japanese culture, Arcade Mania and Japanese Schoolgirl

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Confidential. The staff’s journalistic credentials distinguish the website from many of the other popular video game media outlets, whose staff members generally possess backgrounds in cultural commentary. As this study will demonstrate, Kotaku’s journalism affiliation not only provides the site with a high amount of cultural capital and recognition within the broader journalistic field, but also influences certain aspects of the site’s coverage and commentary.

NeoGAF

Although Kotaku is a prominent member of the video game enthusiast press and not part of what is conventionally considered to be the mainstream media, the publication is still a media outlet. For a more thorough understanding of the range of video games’ meanings in civil society, we should also be interested in video game commentary occurring outside of the journalistic field. It may be possible that fan communities attach alternative meanings to video games or explore different topics in their video game discussions relative to major media outlets, whether these outlets are members of the mainstream media or the enthusiast press. Consequently, in this work I also examine the video game discussions occurring on NeoGAF, one of the most popular internet video game discussion forums in America (Oxford 2010). NeoGAF currently receives an estimated 243,000 unique visitors each month.19 Besides NeoGAF’s popularity, the forum also occupies an influential position within the video game community, a point I will explore in more detail later in this section.

Similar to other internet discussion forums, the content on NeoGAF is almost entirely user-generated. In other words, users on NeoGAF provide the majority of the

site’s substance, creating posts on particular topics they find to be interesting, which can be read and commented on by other users. According to internet discussion forum rhetoric, collections of posts relating to the same topic are known as threads. Since NeoGAF’s inception, users have created 462,279 threads and generated a total of 36,089,054 posts.\(^{20}\) However, roughly 600 threads are “open” or available for commenting at any one moment. It is important to note that although NeoGAF allows all visitors to read the discussion threads posted on the site, only approved members can comment on threads and create new threads. Currently, NeoGAF has 74,942 registered members.\(^ {21}\) Registration involves the submission of an online application and approval from the site’s administrative staff.\(^ {22}\) Registration is never permanent and users can lose their membership if they are found to be in violation of the site’s terms of service.\(^ {23}\)

The forum known today as NeoGAF originated as a message board for the video game journalism website *Gaming Age* in the mid-1990s. Launched in 1996, *Gaming Age* was a part of the first group of popular internet-only video game media outlets. According to Sam Kennedy, *Gaming Age*’s founder, the website originally had two goals: to bring print publications’ “high-quality games writing” to an internet audience and to assist his friends in their efforts to start successful careers in game journalism (Oxford 2010). Besides publishing original content, *Gaming Age* also hosted its own forum with the straightforward title “Gaming Age Forums” for fans to comment on the site’s articles or discuss game-related topics in general. However, hosting the forum eventually proved

\(^{20}\) Data taken from NeoGAF, Retrieved March 23, 2012 (http://www.neogaf.com/forum/).
\(^ {21}\) Data taken from NeoGAF, Retrieved March 23, 2012 (http://www.neogaf.com/forum/).
\(^ {22}\) Besides asking for email addresses that are not free to use, the application process largely consists of simple demographic questions such as name and date of birth.
\(^ {23}\) NeoGAF’s terms of service, Retrieved November 16, 2009 (http://www.neogaf.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=15&Itemid=37)
to be too expensive for *Gaming Age* and the popular entertainment website *IGN* took over the forum’s hosting responsibilities in 2001 (Oxford 2010).

*IGN* did not prove to be *Gaming Age Forums*’ long-term home. Over the next three years, the forum’s server responsibilities switched two more times, first to *EZBoards* and then to *Game Squad Network*. During these transitions, the forum’s connection to *Gaming Age* grew increasingly distant, with the website’s staff eventually handing over moderating responsibilities to Tyler Malka, an enthusiastic poster on the forum who previously had no formal relationship with *Gaming Age*’s staff (Oxford 2010). In 2004, after a variety of issues led to the corruption of the entire forum base, Malka rallied the community together to fund the creation of a truly independent *Gaming Age Forums*. Renamed NeoGAF in 2006, the forum is now entirely owned and operated by Malka (Ashley 2008; Oxford 2010).

Through all these transitions, NeoGAF’s forum structure remains largely the same and the site continues to be one of America’s most popular online gaming forums. To this day, hundreds of unpaid members continue to scour the web for information on the latest games, making the forum the preferred news aggregator for thousands of game enthusiasts. Similarly, the forum structure provides members with a space to express their own opinions on particular video games, video game developers, and even video game media outlets. Fan’s reactions to a particular piece of information or their comments on what they like or dislike about a specific game inevitably spark other GAF members to respond, often turning the thread into a several hundred post debate amongst dozens of members that can easily last for hours.
Due to the intensity of the conversations and the sheer number of video game fans frequenting these sites, many game journalists and game developers closely monitor discussions occurring in NeoGAF’s forum threads. Several game journalists have openly admitted to using conversations on NeoGAF to help determine the topics gamers find interesting and to gain insight into how gamers are reacting to particular news stories. Testifying to the importance of NeoGAF for journalists, Newsweek’s N’Gai Croal explains:

A good message board serves as a news aggregator, a gauge of what a portion of hardcore gamers deem important or interesting, and a sampling of how they're reacting to the news in question. So scanning NeoGAF a few times a day is like killing three birds with one stone: I can find out about a story that I wasn't aware of and/or determine how compelling GAFers think a story is and/or measure their take on it. I might know more about games than one gamer, two gamers, or even 10 gamers. But there's no way I know more about games than 100 gamers. Or 1,000. Nor can I keep track of as many stories as the collective forum. So as long as I keep things in perspective -- trust but verify -- it's one very useful tool among many. (Ashley 2008)

Journalists are not the only ones closely surveying NeoGAF. Game developers and game publishers also closely monitor the site, often treating forum discussions as a form of constructive feedback during the development process or as a type of audience research that will hopefully reveal promising insights for future projects. Many developers make no secret of their surveillance. In a 2008 1up.com article chronicling NeoGAF’s influence on the making and marketing of video games, numerous developers provide detailed accounts on how NeoGAF influenced some of their creative choices. In the article, Brad Wardell, the CEO of the development studio Stardock describes NeoGAF as a “24/7 Game Developers Conference panel”. Wardell explains that his studio takes forum comments very seriously and has integrated “significant features” into the studio’s last two games based on forum feedback (Ashley 2008). The article goes on
to add that certain developers have even invited some of the more active or constructive forum posters to private test sessions and incorporated their responses into the development process.

Most of the journalists and industry figures observe NeoGAF from a distance, safely following the discussions without actively participating. When they do engage in discussions, they usually do so anonymously (Ashley 2008). However, a few journalists and game developers shirk the forum’s potential anonymity and actively participate in thread discussions, often defending their creative choices against a vocally critical portion of the NeoGAF community. Although such direct interactions may prove inspirational for game developers and educational for game enthusiasts, discarding anonymity on NeoGAF is always a risky enterprise. In openly defending their games or the companies they work for, industry figures can quickly find themselves turned into the forum’s latest subject of ridicule, with NeoGAF members devoting countless posts and all sorts of less than flattering digitally-edited images to mocking the industry figure, an event games journalist Robert Ashley (2008) refers to as a “feeding frenzy”.

Dennis Dyack’s experience with NeoGAF in the spring and summer of 2008 is perhaps the starkest illustration of the dangers industry figures face when formally participating in NeoGAF discussions. The founder and president of the popular video game development studio Silicon Knights, Dennis Dyack had gained a certain level of fame and prestige within the gaming community by the early 2000s. While his games varied in their levels of commercial success, they were generally well-received by the press and garnered an enthusiastic fan base. After the release of his critically-acclaimed game *Eternal Darkness* in 2002, the gaming press and fans eagerly awaited Dyack’s
follow-up, a video game named *Too Human*. Dyack’s energetic promotional appearances only further heightened the public’s excitement. In multiple public venues, Dyack touted *Too Human* as the first installment in an epic high-concept trilogy set in a science fiction world inspired by the works of Nietzsche where cybernetically-enhanced Norse gods battle each other for the fate of humanity. Unfortunately, the game was not well-received by the press during its first public preview at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in 2006 (Carless 2007).

Perhaps as a reaction to Dyack’s ambitious promises, *Too Human* quickly became a popular source of ridicule on many different game forums after its public debut. Posters not only criticized the game but also mocked Dyack for issuing such extremely lofty claims for a game that based on much of the press’s account appeared to be utterly mediocre. In responding to the negative public response, Dyack went on the offensive, criticizing media outlets publishing negative accounts of *Too Human* as well as disparaging posters on NeoGAF and other forums. In June 2008, Dyack (posting under his own name), created a new thread on NeoGAF entitled “Too Human – Stand and be counted”.

Reacting to the fervor of many posters’ criticism, Dyack opened the thread by claiming that it was time for GAF members to “stand and be counted” as either “for” or “against” *Too Human*. Dyack proceeded to explain that he is so confident that the press and gamers will consider *Too Human* to be a great game upon its release that he is willing to have the tag “Owned by the GAF” added to his NeoGAF profile if he is proven wrong. However, if his faith in *Too Human* is ultimately vindicated, Dyack requested that those who identified themselves as “against” should receive an “Owned by Too Human”

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tag. Dyack ends the post by extending an “honorary invitation” to Tyler Malka (under his GAF username EviLore) and fellow moderator “Duckroll” to stand and be counted, claiming that they both regularly “help fuel the fire” against Too Human on NeoGAF.

Dyack continued his public criticism against NeoGAF in a July 2008 interview with 1up.com. In the interview, Dyack claims that NeoGAF and other similar forums are “hurting society and hurting the video game industry” (Kollar 2008). Similarly, a vg247 article published in August 2008 quotes Dyack describing NeoGAF as “the worst forum” (Garratt 2008). For Malka, the vg247 comment was seemingly the last straw. Malka responds to Dyack’s actions in a single post NeoGAF thread entitled “Dyack: ‘NeoGAF...I would say is probably the worst forum.’ Response”. In his statement, Talka contemptuously likens Dyack to Baldur, the protagonist in Too Human. As Talka explains

You are Baldur, Denis. You’re the poorly animated bald Norse technogod, the Übermensch with a thousand pointless book references misunderstood by the dirty proles who aren’t worthy enough to judge you. Your favorite Nietzsche quote, "he who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster," is one you’ve fallen victim to yourself, if your opinion of this site is to be taken to heart. In these pitiable confrontations with us you’ve proven to be the monster of gaming development, a sore on the industry and a squanderer of your subordinates' time and effort. Through all this, through this self-inflicted PR nightmare, you’ve conquered vast new frontiers of unwarranted hyperbole and desperate pseudo-intellectual grasping. 25

Talka proceeds to explain that he will not tolerate any further insults and ends the post by formally banning Dyack from NeoGAF.

Major game media outlets followed these events quite closely, meticulously documenting every critical comment Dyack made against NeoGAF as well as Talka’s statement publicly banning Dyack. While these events transpired approximately five

years ago, media outlets continue to question Dyack about this experience to this day. As this example demonstrates, NeoGAF’s popularity amongst game enthusiasts is not the only reason media sociologists should study this space. The site also occupies a unique and influential position within the overall video game community. Consequently, we should be interested in the manner in which forum users treat video games and the type of topics their conversations on video games address.

Although these media spaces are clearly interconnected in certain respects, it seems highly likely that my analysis will reveal some significant differences in terms of how they treat video games, the type of topics they address, and the manner in which they do so given such factors as their varying proximity to the official public sphere and each space’s identification or lack thereof with the journalistic enterprise. Consequently, my work will reveal the wide range of video games’ social meanings and subsequently the role of video game commentary in American civil society.

**Sampling**

The three media spaces that I have chosen to analyze produce and organize their video game commentary in their own unique ways. Consequently, each space requires its own sampling framework. To explore video game coverage in *The New York Times* from 1980 until the end of 2009, I utilized the *Lexis Nexis* database to collect article transcripts for all the instances in which the term “video game” or “computer game” appears in the newspaper from December 31, 2009 to as far back as the database allows: June 1, 1980. For the entire decade of the 1980s, *The New York Times* publishes 1,735 articles containing the words “video game” or “computer game.” This number grows to 3,288 articles in the 1990s, and 6,994 articles contain these phrases in the 2000s. To make the
sample size manageable, I analyze 2,000 articles randomly selected from the total, including 500 from the 1980s, 500 from the 1990s, and 1,000 from the 2000s. The larger number of articles for the 2000s reflects the decade’s greater overall size relative to the previous decades.

Kotaku’s blog format requires a somewhat different sampling framework relative to my data collection method for The New York Times. Although examining online media outlets certainly has its advantages to analyzing print publications, it also comes with its own potential problems. Currently, there is very little in the way of an industry standard for storing past articles or an electronic database for online media outlets in the vein of Lexis Nexis. Without these features, this project must rely on Kotaku’s own unique archiving system to examine past articles. Fortunately, in the case of Kotaku, this is not a problem; as the site maintains an easy to use archive that includes every article offered on the website since its inception in October of 2004 organized by the month in which the article was published.

However, examining Kotaku’s video game coverage poses an additional dilemma. Although a simple keyword search quickly filters through the thousands of unrelated articles to find most if not all of the video game related articles from The New York Times, technically one could argue that all or the overwhelming majority of the articles posted on video game websites pertain to video games and video game culture. For example, all 44 articles posted on Kotaku for November, 13, 2009 focus specifically on video games or video game-related items such as industry sales figures and video game licensing spinoffs. Moreover, in order to gain a strong sense of the variety of ways in which Kotaku covers video games, my work does not filter out any posts during the data
collection stage. Of course, not privileging certain sections or types of articles during the data collection stage comes with the risk of gathering an initially large sample. This proves to be the case with Kotaku, which publishes an average of 1,360 new posts a month. Given the sheer size of content generated by this website, for this study I randomly selected two months each from 2007, 2008, and 2009 and gathered all the articles published from each of those months. The randomly selected months include July and November of 2007, April and October of 2008, and January and May of 2009. This random selection led to a dataset of 7,811 articles.

Similar to Kotaku, NeoGAF’s forum structure necessitates its own unique sampling framework. Threads on NeoGAF come in a variety of sizes. Of the 594 threads available for commenting on November 8, 2009, thread sizes ranged from a minimum of 1 post to a maximum of 82,371 posts, with a mean of 1,465 and a median of 144. In response to this drastic variation in thread size and the overall massive amount of content available for members to comment on at any one time, I utilize a multi-tiered sampling framework to analyze the discourses present in the site’s video game discussions. For the first part of my sampling framework, I’ve selected the three most popular threads (based on the highest number of posts) on February 1, 2010. The three most popular threads on this particular date include “The Official Street Fighter IV Thread of FADCing a Stranger in the Alps”, “KILLZONE 2 - The [OT]”, and “Uncharted 2: Among Thieves | The Official Thread”. NeoGAF classifies all three threads as “Official Threads” or “OT” for

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26 Figure based on the average number of posts published monthly from January to October of 2009.
27 While the sample size still appears large, the overwhelming majority of Kotaku’s content consists of brief posts on new trailers or screenshots for upcoming games. These articles usually contain less than a paragraph of text and can quickly be analyzed.
short. Members create “official threads” in an attempt to provide a single destination for all the information available about a particular game and also to funnel the entire forum’s discussions about that game into one thread. Consequently, given official threads’ intended purposes, it is not surprising that the three most popular threads on that particular date are all official threads.

Moreover, these three official threads are devoted to three of the most popular games of 2009, which further helps explain their prominence on NeoGAF. Each of these threads contains tens of thousands of posts spanning several months. For example, the official thread for *Street Fighter IV* includes 58,207 posts from February 2009 until August 2010. Similarly, the official threads for *Uncharted 2* and *Killzone 2* contain 33,548 posts and 28,908 posts respectively. The sheer size of these threads presents a significant methodological challenge. To make this dataset more manageable, I examine all the posts published in the first 48 hours after the thread’s initial release, leading to a total of 3,929 posts. As I will discuss in a later chapter, NeoGAF’s debut of official threads for popular video games often generate intense levels of excitement. During the first few days, a large number of members flock to official threads to share information or express their opinion about the video game, making this period a particularly rich and interesting time for analysis.

To ensure that this project obtains a diverse portrayal of the interactions occurring on NeoGAF, I combine this random sample from the most popular threads with a more targeted analysis of the forum’s participation in the debate over the meaning of *RE5*’s imagery. Although my introduction focused on the coverage of this episode in certain

media outlets, it is important to recognize that game enthusiasts actively engaged in this conversation as well, congregating in the comments section of video game media outlets and major forums such as NeoGAF to voice their own thoughts on whether or not \textit{RE5} contains racist imagery. NeoGAF devotes two specific threads to discussing \textit{RE5}’s potentially racist imagery. The first thread, entitled “N’Gai Croal - \textit{RE5} Trailer Imagery is Racist” debuts on April 13, 2008, three days after \textit{MTV Multiplayer}’s article containing N’Gai Croal’s initial comments. Although the NeoGAF thread only stays open for approximately 12 hours, it contains 1,375 posts.\footnote{NeoGAF. 2008. “N’Gai Croal - \textit{RE5} Trailer Imagery is Racist.” April 13, Retrieved March 30, 2012 (http://www.neogaf.com/forum/showthread.php?t=277325&highlight=Racist).} Such a high post count over a relatively short period of time illustrates just how significant this issue was for many NeoGAF users. The second thread, entitled “\textit{RE5} Not Redesigned After Race Criticism, Says Producer”, appears on June 3, 2008. This thread initially focuses on comments made by \textit{RE5}’s producer in a recent \textit{Kotaku} article. In the article, the producer claims that the public’s concern with \textit{RE5}’s imagery did not change the game’s development in any significant manner. This thread did not attract as much attention as the first thread and it currently contains only 164 posts.\footnote{NeoGAF. 2008. “\textit{Resident Evil 5} Not Redesigned After Race Criticism, Says Producer.” June 4, Retrieved March 30, 2012 (http://www.neogaf.com/forum/showthread.php?t=306233&highlight=Racist).}

This multi-tiered sampling framework involving a random sample of posts from the most popular threads combined with a full analysis of threads covering one highly contested topic provides a much more nuanced view of the types of interactions occurring on prominent video game internet forums such as NeoGAF. By utilizing such a framework, we are able to compare the codes and narratives present in NeoGAF during seemingly mundane moments relative to those that appear during episodes where video
games occupy a more pronounced position in discussions occurring in the greater civil society.

Methods

My research predominantly relies on principles from narrative analysis to analyze this large amount of data. Certain techniques cultural sociologists’ commonly associate with narrative analysis possess the ability to provide valuable insight into the meanings of video games within all three of these media spaces. However, before using this method to delve into video games’ deeper social meanings, I first explore the data in a broader and less guided manner. My main goal during this initial stage of analysis is to gain a sense of the variety of ways in which The New York Times, Kotaku, and posters on NeoGAF cover or engage with video games, including the type of topics these spaces address in their video game discussions (e.g., purely aesthetic matters, focus on the video game industry as a business, or exploration of broader social/political issues), the presence of alternative cultural texts or alternative social spaces in their discussions, and in the case of The New York Times, the location of the discussion (e.g., arts section, business section, politics).

During this stage of analysis, I also identify articles and posts that include moral evaluations of video games, the video game community, public actors, or other social groups, and instances in which video game commentary addresses broader sociopolitical concerns. These more hermeneutically rich articles provide strong insight into the moral underpinnings of each space and subsequently occupy the predominant focus of my analysis. However, it is important to start the analysis at a more broad or superficial level in order to gain insight into the variety of ways in which these spaces discuss video games and a sense of how often these deeper episodes occurs.
After using this initial approach to the data in order to gain an overarching sense of the types of discussions occurring in these media spaces, I use techniques from narrative analysis to examine the deeper meanings *The New York Times, Kotaku,* and NeoGAF posters attach to video games and the underlying cultural structures that guide their discussions. Over the last two decades, cultural sociologists have used narrative analysis to document culture’s powerful role in influencing civil society’s interpretation and subsequent response to significant episodes or events (Jacobs 1996a, 1996b, 2000; Jacobs & Smith 1997; Ku 2001; Smith 2005). Building from semiotics, literary theory, and hermeneutical philosophy, these works reveal how social actors render events or objects comprehensible by transforming them into stories. To achieve this understanding, Smith (2005:18) explains that social narratives “allocate causal responsibility for action, define actors and give them motivation, indicate the trajectory of past episodes and predict consequences of future choices…and provide social approval by aligning events with normative cultural codes”. To summarize, narratives render new events comprehensible by connecting them to past episodes, identifying the major actors involved, and providing a moral evaluation of both the actors and the proceedings. Consequently, we can ascertain the social meaning of a particular object, figure, or episode by exploring the stories different social groups attach to these items or emerge from conversations involving these items.

Keeping in mind these core insights, I conduct a narrative analysis of all the evaluative articles I identified during my initial survey of the data. During this narrative analysis, I am predominantly interested in exploring the narrative elements of *plot* and *character* that appear in these articles. Building from Jacobs’ (2000) description of the
insight we gain from studying these two elements, my work examines *characters* by identifying the individuals and items that feature prominently in these stories and exploring the manner in which these articles portray them. Of course, these stories embed characters with a certain degree of moral significance simply by featuring such figures in their stories. However, a character’s presence in a particular narrative does not necessarily mean that the narrative portrays said character heroically or amicably or that the social actors constructing the narrative support that figure’s position. It is certainly possible that that many individuals or institutions present in these accounts will either be mocked or deflated by these social spaces or serve an antagonistic role in these narratives. Consequently, the objects or figures that consistently appear in these media spaces’ video game commentary and the manner in which these spaces morally portray them provides us with a sense of the meaning of video games and the different symbolic relationships these spaces attach to video games.

The narrative element *plot* shifts our attention away from how particular social spaces evaluate certain objects or events and focuses more on the overarching story being told through these evaluations. In other words, *plot* refers to the key events described in an article and the manner in which the article assesses and thus make sense of these events. Consequently, an analysis of the plot elements present in video game commentary provides us with greater insight into these spaces’ overarching worldview. In terms of my application of these techniques to examine video game commentary, it is important to note that I did not set out with any particular narratives in mind, but instead identified all of these narrative types inductively, first identifying the major narrative elements in each article and synthesizing the results afterward.
Besides exploring the narrative components of these articles, I also examine the discursive attributes and cultural styles present in these media spaces. As I previously mentioned, rather than try to develop my own criteria for the ideal media discourse I instead examine how the manner in which these spaces engage in sociopolitical commentary is consistent with or diverges from the wide array of principles different scholars identify as vital for promoting a truly democratic public sphere. I rely on an interpretive analysis to reveal the more intricate discursive different that may exist between these spaces. This interpretive approach allows me to sensitively explore the different ways in which these spaces engage in criticism as well as the different targets of their critique. Similarly, I rely on a more interpretive approach to explore the different ways in which these spaces justify (or fail to justify) their positions. Moreover, during this interpretive analysis, I pay particular attention to how these spaces may use dramatic techniques to substantiate their claim, pollute their opponents or their opponents’ positions, or embed the entire debate with a deeper moral significance. Besides this more qualitative analysis, I also rely on a simple quantitative coding methodology that records the organizational affiliation of the author and the public figures that appear in each article or post in order to gauge each space’s level of institutional pluralism. The combination of these two methods creates an analytical strategy that is capable of revealing a wide range of these media spaces’ discursive attributes.
CHAPTER 4: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF VIDEO GAMES IN THE NEW YORK TIMES

The New York Times’ video game coverage offers a great starting point for any exploration into the meaning of video games in American civil society. The publication possesses an influential connection to America’s mainstream public sphere and thus occupies a prominent position in American civil society. Consequently, The New York Times’ video game coverage provides strong insight into mainstream civil society’s current understanding of video games. Although my overarching goal is to compare relatively current video game coverage in three different media spaces in order to reveal and examine video games’ multiple meanings in contemporary civil society and thus the different ways in which video game commentary may function as an aesthetic public sphere, in this chapter I analyze The New York Times’ video game coverage over a much longer time period. Whereas Kotaku and NeoGAF are two relatively new media spaces that occupy more peripheral positions in civil society, The New York Times has for several decades served as one of the most influential media outlets. Consequently, a longitudinal study of The New York Times’ video game coverage from 1980 until 2010 would provide significant insight into how the meaning of video games may have changed in American civil society over the last thirty years. In this chapter, I engage in precisely this enterprise.

Overall, my analysis indicates a certain degree of consistency in The New York Times’ coverage as well as some change in how the newspaper covers video games. Analogous to Williams’ (2003) previous work on video game coverage in general readership magazines, The New York Times’ evaluative articles predominantly
characterize video games as a social threat in the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, this social threat narrative is not isolated to one particular news section but instead serves as the most popular portrayal of video games across the newspaper’s various sections during these two decades. Despite the medium’s growing popularity, the social threat narrative remains the predominant manner in which evaluative articles in *The New York Times* portray video games during the first decade of the 2000s. Although this social threat narrative remains the most popular portrayal of video games in *The New York Times* across these three decades, there are some notable changes in the particular threat video games pose during this time period. Furthermore, the newspaper’s portrayal shifts from describing video games as a singular threat in the 1980s to grouping video games with other forms of harmful entertainment in the 1990s and 2000s. This is an important shift that Williams (2003) either does not find or does not analyze in his previous work on mainstream media coverage. In this chapter, I explore these changes in *The New York Times*’ video game coverage and their significance in greater detail.

Although the social threat narrative endures as the most popular narrative throughout this time period, *The New York Times* does contain a numerically small but socially important counter-narrative during all three decades. During the 1980s and 1990s, this counter-narrative largely focuses on video games’ instrumental value. However, the counter-narrative shifts both in terms of its location in the newspaper and the manner in which it portrays video games during the first decade of the 2000s. During the last decade of my analysis, articles appear in *The New York Times*’ Arts section that treat video games as a valuable form of artistic expression. The emergence of this new narrative is not only in stark contrast to how *The New York Times* previously
characterized video games during the 1980s and 1990s, it also does not appear in Williams’ analysis of video game coverage in general readership magazines from the 1970 to 2000. I trace what lead to this new type of video game coverage and explore its significance towards the end of this chapter.

Throughout this chapter, I rely on insights from cultural sociology to explore how elements from civil society’s cultural structure help shape the particular meanings *The New York Times* attaches to video games during this thirty year period. As I noted in the introductory chapter, prominent works on the social construction of new technology generally focus on how power contestation or social concerns of the time help shape society’s understanding of new technology. In particular, I focus on how civil society’s predominant understanding of children and entertainment informs the manner in which *The New York Times* covers video games during this time period. In the conclusion to this chapter, I use these same insights to explore how the cultural codes of children and entertainment also influence the type of aesthetic public sphere that emerges from the newspaper’s video game coverage. Given the longitudinal component of my analysis of *The New York Times*, I save my examination of the discursive attributes of *The New York Times*’ coverage for the next chapter, where I compare it to *Kotaku*’s coverage.

**Evaluative Coverage of Video Games in The New York Times**

The vast majority of articles involving video games in *The New York Times* contain very little moral evaluation. Overall, only 10% of the articles in my sample morally evaluate video games. This proportion remains stable across time, accounting for 9% of the articles in the 1980s, 11% in the 1990s, and 10% in the 2000s. One of the most common non-evaluative article types simply reports on a video game publisher’s
financial forecast. The fact that the newspaper includes financial reports on the video game industry indicates that the commercial potential of the medium possesses a certain degree of legitimacy. For instance, *The New York Times* is most likely not going to devote a similar style of coverage to illegal enterprises such as drugs or prostitution. However, similar in tone to much of the newspaper’s business coverage in general, the newspaper almost always characterizes such its business reporting on the video game industry through the mundane, everydayness of the low-mimetic narrative genre. Certain video game companies (or the entire video game industry) are performing well and others are enduring tough financial times. Smith (2005:24) writes that in low-mimetic narratives, “Characters are not strongly polarized in terms of their moral worth and nothing much is at stake. In this genre there is no clear trajectory to events”. Consequently, *The New York Times*’s low-mimetic business reporting is most likely not going to excite readers about the new medium’s possibilities or frighten readers over video games’ potential hazards. It is not the type of coverage that is going to motivate readers to take action or to devote special attention to video games. In short, *The New York Times*’ business reporting is most likely not the type of coverage that rouses civil society’s imagination. Consequently, for this analysis I am mainly interested in examining the video game articles that contain high-mimetic narrative attributes. Such accounts involve morally polarizing characters and events. Depending on the specific type of characterization, high-mimetic narratives evoke powerful sentiments of optimism, heroism, and success or fear, failure, and pity (Smith 2005:25-27). These are the type of narratives that stir public sentiment and play a more powerful role in influencing a new technology’s social reception.
The majority of the evaluative articles covering video games though a high-mimemetic narrative lens appear in every major section of The New York Times. Although the greatest proportion of the evaluative articles for each decade appear in the metropolitan, national, and international news sections, a substantial proportion of evaluative articles are also published in the op-ed pages, arts and entertainment section, and the science/technology/health sections (see Table 1). Although coverage is somewhat disperse in the early 1980s, my sample does indicate here a partial shift in coverage from the beginning of the 1980s to the end of the first decade in the 2000s. During this period, the proportions of evaluative articles in the metropolitan, national, and international news sections and the op-ed pages decrease while the proportions of evaluative articles found in many of the other sections increase. Perhaps the most significant shift occurs in the arts and entertainment section. The arts and entertainment section not only expands its proportion of evaluative articles on video games in the 2000s, there is also a qualitative difference in the manner in which articles in the arts and entertainment section cover video games in the 2000s compared to the previous two decades. I describe this shift and explore its social significance in a later section in this chapter.

The majority of the evaluative articles in The New York Times predominantly portray video games as a social threat. However, a small but not insignificant proportion of the evaluative articles during each decade contain a counter-narrative that documents video games’ social benefits. As Table 2 illustrates, the proportion of the evaluative articles that characterize video games in these two ways remain relatively stable across the three decades despite video games’ growing popularity over this time period. Perhaps even more striking, the social threat narrative serves as the predominant manner in which
every major section of *The New York Times* characterizes video games during this time period (see Table 3). The majority of the evaluative articles in the metropolitan/national/international sections, the op-ed pages, the arts and entertainment section, the science/technology/health section, the education section, and the business section all primarily portray video games as a social threat throughout the three decades under analysis. This remains the case even if we collapse the sections into their major institutional orientations. Although conventional news coverage, the op-ed pages, and the arts and entertainment sections each possess their own logic in terms of how to report on or examine the topic under discussion, all three types of video game coverage in *The New York Times* primarily portray video games as a social threat and do so in a similar manner (see Table 4). On the other hand, the presence of the social threat narrative in the arts and entertainment section and the science/technology/health section declines greatly over time relative to video game coverage in the other sections. I examine the social benefit narratives that occupy a growing proportion of the coverage in these two sections in later sections in this chapter.

Although *The New York Times* predominantly portrays video games as a social threat during these three decades, the particular form this narrative assumes varies. As Table 5 illustrates, during the 1980s the *New York Times* predominantly expresses concern over how video games’ replacement of worthwhile activities will result in an intellectually inept generation of Americans. The newspaper’s predominant narrative shifts in the 1990s to focusing on how video games promote violent behavior. Although violent behavior remains the newspaper’s primary focus through the first decade of the
2000s, during this period a second narrative addressing video games’ adverse health implications rises in prominence, particularly from the mid 2000s onward.

In the following sections I describe the most popular social threat narrative during each decade and end with an analysis of the predominant counter-narrative present in *The New York Times* during these same periods. Before analyzing these narratives, I provide a brief synopsis of the video game industry’s history during the particular decade under examination.

**1980s: The Rise of Video games and the Decline of American Society**

Although the first commercial video games appeared in the early 1970s, many consider the American release of the arcade game *Space Invaders* in 1979 as initiating video games’ expansion in the 1980s (Donovan 2010; Kent 2001; Poole 2004). To be certain, Atari published *Pong*, the first widely released commercial video game, in 1972. Dozens of manufacturers quickly flooded the market with *Pong*-esque games and the video game industry collapsed by the mid to late 1970s (Herz 1997:34-35). However, the U.S. release of the Japanese arcade game *Space Invaders* reignited the video game industry, ushering in what Kent (2001:123-177) refers to as the first “golden age of video games” between 1979 and 1983. Nevertheless, an overabundance of derivative, poor quality games led to a second collapse in 1983 (Donovan 2010:96-99; Herz 1997:39; Kent 2001:234-239).

Similar to the first collapse, another Japanese company reignited America’s video game industry. Nintendo launched its home console in Japan, the Famicom in 1983. After years of resistance from American retailers hesitant to enter the video game market, Nintendo released its console nationally in 1986 (Kent 2001:278-279). The console,
renamed the Nintendo Entertainment System, included the video game *Super Mario Bros*. The game and Nintendo’s console proved to be immensely popular. Recognizing Nintendo’s massive audience, software developers quickly started producing an abundant supply of new games to keep players’ interest (Donovan 2010:168). By the end of the 1980s, video games had become a staple in homes across America.

*The New York Times* coverage during this period primarily portrays video games’ expansion in the 1980s as a serious social threat. During this decade, *The New York Times*’ predominant narrative documents video games’ capacity to impede players’ intellectual development. This portrayal is consistent with the media’s characterization of video games as displacing valuable children’s activities found by Williams (2003:540-541). Accounting for 41% of all the evaluative articles in *The New York Times*, this description characterizes video games as a shallow form of cultural expression. The newspaper elevates the social significance of video games’ superficiality by interpreting video game’s popularity as a severe threat to the country’s prosperity. For example, the author of a 1989 editorial details his son’s longing for a Nintendo Entertainment System and the author’s reluctance to purchase the console. In justifying his refusal, the author explains how much more is at stake than spoiling his son, writing:

> From my observation, Nintendo is a mindless way for children to spend their time…. it is another step toward a society of mindless automatons, interacting with machines rather than with other human beings, and exercising only their fingers and wrists, rather than their minds and bodies.  

As this example illustrates, during the 1980s *The New York Times* often treats video games as a dire threat. By replacing more valuable endeavors such as pursuing scientific

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knowledge or reading challenging literature, video games jeopardize America’s future generations.

Two character types repeatedly appear in this “dumbing of America” narrative: video game players and parents. Beginning with the former, this narrative portrays video game players as lazy and unintelligent. For example, one article claims video games are “cultivating a generation of mindless, ill-tempered adolescents”\(^{32}\). An alternative article includes a quote from a family therapist who explains that “games put children on a narrowly defined developmental path, and contribute little to social skills”\(^{33}\). Reflecting the narrative’s emphasis on video games’ dangers, these articles describe video game players as mindless and suffering from developmental deficiencies. Moreover, as both examples highlight, this narrative characterizes video game players as predominantly children.

Parents constitute this narrative’s other major character. Articles repeatedly encourage parents to monitor their children’s leisure activities. In one article, Marie Winn, author of *The Plug-In Drug*, offers parents the following advice:

The general feeling among the parents I’ve been talking to is one of succumbing… Parents don't realize that they do have options. You really can say no, you just won't have it in your home. It would be terribly farfetched to imagine that a child would be harmed if he did not have it. Or you can limit the playing time.\(^{34}\)

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As this example illustrates, this narrative depicts parents as having the vital task of constantly surveying and controlling their children’s activities, ensuring that their children avoid such harmful activities as playing video games.

**1990s: Fear of Violent Youth**

Video games’ popularity in America continued during the 1990s. New technological innovations such as the CD drive, graphics and sound cards allowed developers to create games possessing 3D visuals and audiovisual recordings (Donovan 2010). These technological breakthroughs combined with the consumer-friendly pricing of multimedia personal computers (PCs) transformed the PC into a popular video game platform in the early 1990s. Even more Americans gained access to this technology when Sony, Sega, and Nintendo incorporated these features into their consoles during the mid 1990s (Donovan 2010; Kent 2001). Many developers utilized this new technology to produce games combining mature themes with cinematic aesthetics, including *Final Fantasy VII, Resident Evil* and *Metal Gear Solid*, further expanding video games’ audience (Donovan 2010).

In 1993, a Congressional hearing investigated the marketing of violent video games to children. This hearing included testimony from child experts documenting video games’ harmful effects. The video game industry responded by forming the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB), an independent organization in charge of rating games (Kent 2001:461-480). Sadly, America endured five major school shootings from October 1997 to May 1999. Following these tragic events, politicians, advocates, and media figures blamed violent media content, including video games (Kent 2001:544-555).
Consistent with Williams’ (2003) findings, The New York Times primarily characterizes video games as violent during the 1990s. For example, one article describes video games as “presenting constant images of senseless harm toward others”. According to this portrayal, video games insert players into situations where violence serves as the only solution. The newspaper elevates this violent portrayal’s significance by explaining that children playing video games become desensitized to violence and learn to view violence as a legitimate behavior. According to this logic, if left untouched, video games will socialize an entire generation into sadistic individuals. This fear is prevalent in the articles published in the wake of the Columbine High School shootings. All the articles covering this event identify violent video games as one of the tragedy’s major causes. One article notes that one of the killers enjoyed the “violent simulated shooting game” Doom. An alternative article reports that First Lady Hillary Clinton placed the blame on “a media culture that glorifies violence on TV, in the movies, on the Internet, in songs and in video games”. By explicitly connecting video games to the atrocities at Columbine High School, this narrative portrays video games as a clear danger.

The quote from Hillary Clinton illustrates a unique element of the newspaper’s violent video game narrative relative to coverage from the previous decade. Whereas the publication’s predominant narrative in the 1980s focuses exclusively on video games’ hazards, the most prominent narrative in the 1990s connects video games with other

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entertainment formats. This feature is clearly visible in articles covering school shootings, which frequently reprimand violent films, television, video games, and music. This focus on violent media is also present during less intense periods, including discussions of the perils of adolescence and proper parenting. In contrast to the 1980s, the newspaper rarely publishes articles whose sole focus is documenting video games’ danger. Instead, the most prominent social threat narrative during this decade situates video games alongside other entertainment formats the paper considers to be harmful.

Despite such changes, this violent narrative continues the previous decade’s insistence that adults are responsible for protecting children from the dangers of entertainment. For many articles, government regulation is necessary. For example, one article writes:

[O]ur First Amendment right to freedom of expression must be balanced with the commonwealth, and it may be wise to censor television and video violence in the hope of promoting more social behavior among our youth.\(^\text{38}\)

As this article explains, the threat of television and video game violence is so severe that government censorship is necessary in order to protect children, even if it means surrendering some of America’s civil rights.

Alternatively, many other articles focus on the role parents must play in preventing children’s harmful exposure to violent video games. One article even questions the possibility of substantive political action, leading the author to endorse serious action on the part of parents. As the article explains:

But to get real results in a society with free speech and a free market, we have to vote not for pious politicians but with our pocketbooks for the culture we say we want. No one is forcing American families to subscribe to the pay-cable services

that program violent movies... no one has mandated that every household purchase a bloody video or computer game.\textsuperscript{39}

According to this article, it is the responsibility of parents to control and monitor the popular culture their children consume. Although these articles may not agree on the appropriate measures, they all construct a narrative in which adults must remain vigilant in protecting their children from violent media content.

\textit{2000s: Video Games and the Obesity Epidemic}

Politicians, advocates, and media figures continued to blame video games for tragic events in the 2000s. These critiques often focused on the popular franchise \textit{Grand Theft Auto}, whose open-world nature allows players to depart from the game’s formal objectives and interact with the virtual world in a variety of ways, including hitting pedestrians with their cars and soliciting prostitutes. Despite such controversies, video games’ popularity continued to grow as MMOs, new Nintendo products, and mobile platforms exposed video games to a broader audience (Donovan 2010:337; Williams 2006:201). For example, Nintendo released the Wii in 2006, a console utilizing a simplified game controller with intuitive, motion-tracking capabilities. Millions of Americans flocked to stores to purchase the new console. By the end of 2009, Nintendo had sold close to 68 million Wiis (Donovan 2010:340-341).

Although the violent media narrative remains the most popular during the 2000s, a second narrative expressing concern over video games’ health ramifications rises in prominence during the mid to late 2000s. Whereas Williams (2003:541) finds that mainstream magazines during the 1980s express concern that video games promote “skeletomuscular ailments” and epileptic seizures, \textit{The New York Times} predominantly

documents how video games contribute to America’s obesity epidemic during the 2000s. The newspaper establishes this connection by portraying video games as a sedentary activity that demands nothing more from players besides the ability to press buttons and sit for great lengths of time. Articles repeatedly contrast video games from other more physically-demanding activities such as playing tag or running, operating under the assumption that time spent playing the former translates into lost opportunities to engage in the latter.40

Consistent with the violent media narrative’s portrayal from the previous decade, this health narrative rarely treats video games as the sole factor contributing to obesity rates. Instead, the majority of articles covering this health issue identify several entertainment formats as partially responsible for the rise in adolescent obesity, including video games, television, and the Internet. For example, a 2004 article entitled “The widening of America” states:

The push to raise academic scores has squeezed out many physical education programs and athletic activities….After school outdoor activities have yielded to computers, video games and television, the modern-day baby sitters. A result is increasing numbers of youngsters who are eating more and moving less -- and putting on fat cells that will be with them for life.41

As this example illustrates, the newspaper’s obesity discussion does not single out video games. Instead, the paper claims that video games along with other entertainment formats have reduced the amount of time children spend exercising. Moreover, these articles also identify contributing factors outside entertainment, including the availability of fatty foods and families with both parents working full-time.

Similar to the predominant narratives in the 1980s and 1990s, *The New York Times* describes how parents must protect their children from video games’ harmful health effects. For example, an article on childhood obesity summarizes research by Dr. Epstein, explaining:

Dr. Epstein said he taught parents how to set food limits, how to make good food choices and keep fattening foods out of the house and how to keep their children away from the television set. “We taught parents how to get control of their sedentary lives, to change the environment so there is less access to TV and computer games,” he said. “The biggest part of our program isn't what sort of diet you should be on or what sort of exercise program you should be on. It's parenting.\(^\text{42}\)

As this example illustrates, parents are responsible for limiting children’s access to entertainment media.

Over this thirty year period, *The New York Times* criticizes video games for a variety of concerns. Despite their differences, these criticisms all share two major elements. First, they evaluate video games utilizing a social threat narrative. Whether the specific concern centers on how video games replace more desirable activities, promote violent tendencies, or encourage sedentary lifestyles, *The New York Times* predominantly describes video games as a social hazard. The commonality these depictions share reflects entertainment media’s semi-polluted position in civil society. Indeed, in the later two decades *The New York Times* connects video games to other forms of entertainment the newspaper finds threatening, including television, film, popular music, and the Internet. Consequently, in understanding video games, the newspaper utilizes an enduring narrative that views entertainment as socially dangerous.

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Secondly, the most popular narratives throughout this period rarely explore video games’ impact on adults. Instead, these articles almost entirely focus on video games’ effect on children. By portraying video games as a threat to children, The New York Times’ coverage reinforces children’s unique position in contemporary civil society as a special population whose vulnerability necessitates strong adult supervision Articles regularly feature statements made by parents, politicians, and child experts reflecting adults’ responsibility to closely monitor children’s activities. On the other hand, these articles seldom include statements made by children and almost never examine what children themselves think about these issues, a finding which supports Davies’ (2001:148) argument that children possess “no electoral or public sphere role” in contemporary civil society.

Despite these commonalities, we should not overlook the significant change in The New York Times’ portrayal of video games. In contrast to the paper’s coverage during the 1980s, for the last two decades the newspaper rarely characterizes video games as a uniquely harmful medium. Instead, the paper predominantly treats video games as one of several entertainment formats popular amongst children. According to this more recent depiction, video games are no longer a nascent or singular threat. They are now firmly entrenched in the lives of America’s youth. Of course, as the most popular narratives in the 1990s and 2000s illustrates, this does not mean that the paper considers video games or children’s entertainment in general to be safe. Instead, the newspaper identifies video games along with other forms of entertainment as playing key roles in many of the issues facing children today.
The Instrumental Value of Video games

Although the overwhelming majority of evaluative articles portray video games as a social threat, a small subset of articles during these three decades emphasizes video games’ social benefits. Overall, such depictions account for 20% of the articles from the 1980s, 12% from the 1990s, and 15% from the 2000s. However, the specific location of these articles and consequently the particular social benefits video games offer vary over these three decades. During the 1980s and 1990s, the evaluative articles espousing video games’ benefits primarily appear in the national news section, the science/technology section, and the education section. During the 2000s, the largest proportion of articles praising video games’ social benefits appears in the arts and entertainment section. In this section I describe the manner in which video game coverage in The New York Times portrays video games as a social benefit in the 1980s and 1990s. In the following section I explore video game coverage in the arts and entertainment section during the first decade of the 2000s, as this particular narrative and its location in the newspaper warrants a close examination.

Similar to Williams’ (2003) findings, articles in The New York Times documenting video games’ social benefits during the 1980s predominantly focus on how playing video games cultivates practical skills. For example, multiple articles focus on how video games improve hand-eye coordination.43 Other articles describe how the popularity of video games may benefit computer science. One such article attributes the rise in computer science majors to the “romance in computers” implanted in many of

today’s youth by their experience with video games.\textsuperscript{44} Similarly, an editorial written by a college instructor applauds video games for introducing children to computer software at a young age, which the author argues may motivate children to become gifted programmers.\textsuperscript{45} Finally, an article in the newspaper’s science section expresses excitement over the possibility that the continued popularity of video games will push computer technology forward, resulting with more powerful computers and more sophisticated software to be used for such valuable applications as advanced speech-recognition and artificial intelligence.\textsuperscript{46}

Several articles during the 1980s express excitement over how educators may be able to utilize video games as a powerful learning device. One such article praises the popular video game \textit{Sim City} for its accurate depiction of city planning. The article includes quotes from urban planners and architecture professors offering praise for the game for what they describe as its realistic approach to urban design. For example, Chris Harlow, a geographic information systems consultant, notes that \textit{Sim City} “is a game that is actually fairly serious. It struck me as a great tool for people to get used to the idea of using a computer to manage the city.”\textsuperscript{47}

Whether its video games’ ability to strengthen hand-eye coordination, promote computer science, or serve as a powerful educational tool, these articles all portray video games in a similar manner. For such articles, the importance of video games isn’t related to video games’ unique aesthetic possibilities or the experience of playing a video game

in and of itself. Instead, video games possess instrumental value. Under this account, video games primarily serve as training for other more important enterprises.

This emphasis on video games’ instrumental value remains the predominant form in which *The New York Times* praises video games during the 1990s. These articles primarily focus on how video games may serve as a powerful educational tool. For example, one article expresses excitement over the possibility of new computer technology capable of providing players with the ability to “explore the harmonies of a Beethoven symphony, study a detail of Michelangelo’s Pieta or plunge into the structure of a Tennyson poem”.48 Similarly, a different article describes the educational model developer Will Wright uses in such video games as *Sim City*.49

Although this portrayal’s emphasis on videogames’ instrumental value contrasts with *The New York Times’* predominant portrayal of video games as a social threat, this counter narrative still characterizes video games as primarily a children’s activity. During the 1980s and 1990s, the newspaper considers video games to be a children’s form of entertainment and thus evaluates video games accordingly, praising video games for their capacity to promote such positive attributes as physical dexterity and familiarity with computers. In this sense, both the social threat narrative and the counter-narrative located in the *The New York Times* during the 1980s and 1990s reflects the predominant understanding of children and thus the purpose of childhood activities in civil society. As Davies (2001:58) illustrates, contemporary society considers children’s cultural products to serve one purpose: to assist in children’s development into healthy, functional adults.

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Whereas the social threat narrative focuses on video games’ adverse impact on adolescent development, the instrumental value counter-narrative present during the 1980s and 1990s highlights the benefits of children playing video games.

**Video Games as a Unique Form of Artistic Expression**

During the first decade of the 2000s, the proportion of articles describing video games’ social benefits does not differ much from earlier periods. However, the location of this narrative in *The New York Times* and the particular form this portrayal assumes diverges drastically from the counter-narrative present in the newspaper’s video game coverage during the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas the counter-narrative present during the previous two decades highlights video game’s instrumental value, the counter-narrative in the first decade of the 2000s instead treats video games as a legitimate and uniquely valuable form of artistic expression. The majority of the articles that treat video games in this manner appear in the Arts section of *The New York Times*. This is a major change considering the vast majority of the video game coverage in the Arts section during the 1980s and 1990s characterizes video games as a social threat. Moreover, many of these articles primarily serve as video game reviews. The emergence of video game reviews in the Arts section of *The New York Times* is itself a major landmark in the history of the medium’s social reception. Consequently, before I explore the meaning and social significance of this new counter-narrative, I will first provide a brief description of the changes in *The New York Times’* video game coverage that contributed to the emergence of video game reviews in the Arts section in the mid2000s.
On February 26, 1998, *The New York Times* publishes its first article with the subheading “Game Theory”.\(^5^0\) This new subheading is part of the newspaper’s “Circuits” section, which is itself affiliated with *The New York Times*’ Technology desk. Articles falling under the “Game Theory” banner generally provide brief reviews of upcoming games, describe innovations in video game technology, or explore recent trends in video game design. For example, the first three articles under the “Game Theory” subheading include a description of the social engineering strategies implemented by the developers of the upcoming online game *Asheron’s Call*,\(^5^1\) a discussion of software emulation for classic arcade games,\(^5^2\) and an examination of how the developers of *Parappa the Rapper* drew inspiration from U.S. hip-hop and Japanese popular culture.\(^5^3\) J.C. Herz serves as the sole “Game Theory” author during the first two years of this section’s run in *The New York Times*. Before covering video games for *The New York Times*, Herz authored *Joystick Nation* in 1997, one of the first popular works on the history of video games.

The tone of the “Game Theory” articles is relatively subdued compared to the newspaper’s predominant portrayal of video games as a social threat or the artistic celebration of video games present in the Arts section’s video game coverage in the 2000s. In contrast to these more high mimetic portrayals, “Game Theory” articles generally portray video games as a curious and entertaining pastime. For example, the video game reviews that fall under the “Game Theory” subheading primarily evaluate video games according to such criteria as graphical display, difficulty, story, and

entertainment value. These reviews do not attach a strong moral or artistic significance to video games but instead focus on whether or not particular games are fun to play. Despite this somewhat mundane portrayal of video games, the significance of *The New York Times*’ “Game Theory” heading should not be overlooked. For the first time in the newspaper’s history, *The New York Times* devotes an entire subsection to a type of video game coverage that treats video games as a legitimate form of entertainment and evaluates video games accordingly. The emergence of this type of coverage in one of America’s most prominent publications indicates the beginning of a shift in the meaning of video games in mainstream civil society.

“Game Theory” articles appear in the paper’s technology section for seven years. On April 8, 2005, *The New York Times* briefly moves its “Game Theory” articles to the Arts and Entertainment section of the newspaper. However, this move does not last long. “Game Theory” articles move to the newspaper’s Sports section in July of 2005, followed by the Business section in 2006. “Game Theory” articles remain affiliated with the Business section for two years. The feature moves back to the Technology section for one last article on June 5, 2008. Despite the frequent moves to different sections of the newspaper, the coverage remains similar in theme and tone throughout this ten-year period.

Although the “Game Theory” feature only has a brief tenure in the Arts and Entertainment section, its time there overlaps with the start of regular video game

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coverage in the Arts and Entertainment section in general. The first non-“Game Theory” piece to appear in the Arts and Entertainment section is published on June 7, 2005 and examines how advanced artificial intelligence may allow video games to explore and implement more innovative storytelling techniques.\(^{58}\) By the end of the year, video game coverage of this nature is appearing in the Arts and Entertainment section several times a month.

The video game coverage published in the Arts and Entertainment section shares many similarities with the “Game Theory” pieces I previously discussed. Both types of articles provide video game reviews and cover innovations in game design and technological breakthroughs. However, whereas the “Game Theory” pieces predominantly focus on video games’ entertainment value, video game coverage that appears in the Arts section from 2005 onward frequently incorporates a high-mimetic narrative lens to describe video games as an immensely valuable form of artistic expression. For example, in a lengthy feature on the upcoming game *Spore*, the author writes:

> Spore…promises to be more than just a blockbuster diversion….the game perhaps deserves to be seen as a work of art first and foremost, a way of seeing and making sense of the world. If it succeeds, it may be in part because of the way its long-zoom perspective resonates with this particular moment in time.\(^{59}\)

As this quote highlights, the author attributes the game’s evocative nature to its utilization of “the long zoom”, a technique artists use to reveal the universe’s inherent complexity. The article connects Will Wright’s work (the developer) in *Spore* to the artist Brian Eno, and even includes quotes from Eno describing their works’ commonalities. According to


the author, the value of the long zoom rests in its ability to allow humans to partially grasp the universe’s great complexity, which consequently serves as a testament to humanity’s potential.

Although the long zoom may be an empowering experience, the author of this article describes it as something not easily conveyed through conventional forms of cultural expression. According to this author, this is precisely why video games are so valuable. Expressing excitement over video games’ unique potential, the author writes:

[A]rguably the best way to come to terms with that feeling [the Long Zoom] is to explore those different scales of experience directly, to move from the near-invisible realm of microbes to the vast distances of galaxies. Of all the forms of culture available to us today, games may well be the most effective at conveying that elusive perspective, precisely because they are so immersive and participatory and because their design can be so open-ended.60

According to this article, video games provide audiences with a level of interactivity unlike any other form of cultural expression. If placed in the right hands, a skilled artist can utilize video games’ interactivity to create a long zoom experience, carefully revealing the layers of complexity that result from the actions a player takes within the virtual universe. Consequently, he article portrays Spore as art of the highest order for being one of the first video games to successfully invoke the long zoom experience.

This article on Spore’s ability to invoke a long zoom experience is far from the only piece to characterize video games in this manner. The powerful aesthetic experience offered by video game’s unique level of interactivity is a theme that frequently appears in video game coverage in the Arts section during this time period. A single author, Seth Schiesel, writes the majority of articles describing video games in this manner. In multiple articles, Schiesel insists that this interactivity provides video games with the

capacity to illicit powerful emotional reactions. For example, in one article Schiesel chronicles his intense experience playing the video game *Mass Effect*. According to Schiesel, *Mass Effect’s* combination of cutting-edge character models with sophisticated interactive story elements demonstrates video games’ powerful artistic merits. In praising the game, Schiesel writes:

> It is the best rebuttal yet to the notion that games are inherently inferior to linear media like television and film in their ability to envelop an audience in a world that is both fantastic and a lens on the complexities of real human emotion -- in short, to be an art.\(^\text{61}\)

Schiesel equates the intensity of his emotional experience to the player’s ability to directly interact in the fictional world and make meaningful choices that shape the story. In a different article Schiesel constructs a list of video games worthy of similar praise, including: *Planescape: Torment; BioShock; Fable II, Fallout 3* and *Grand Theft Auto IV*. Schiesel praises them all for their “emotional depth” and their ability to provoke “an intellectual engagement with one's own place in the world”\(^\text{62}\).

This description of video game’s aesthetic merits marks a significant departure from the counter-narrative that appears in the newspaper’s video game coverage during the previous two decades. Whereas the counter-narrative present during the 1980s and 1990s focuses on video games’ instrumental value, this new counter-narrative instead emphasizes the intense aesthetic experience video games are capable of providing and thus highlights the medium’s transcendental value. In this sense, this type of video game coverage in the Arts section elevates video games to a higher moral level. For the first time *The New York Times* moves away from its depiction of video games as a children’s


activity or a simple yet fun form of entertainment and instead depicts video games as a uniquely powerful art form.

This portrayal is not only a significant departure from the ways in which The New York Times characterizes video games during the previous two decades, it may also be indicative of a broader change in the manner in which mainstream media treats video games. The articles in the Arts section of The New York Times that characterize video games as a uniquely valuable art form differ from what Williams (2003:543) describes as the medium’s “partial redemption” in the late 1990s. Williams identifies a subset of articles in the magazines he examines from the late 1990s that identify video games as possessing some artistic merits. However, according to Williams, these magazines still consider video games to be an inferior artistic format relative to film (Williams 2003:531). In contrast to video games’ “partial redemption” in the magazines Williams examines from the late 1990s, I find that The New York Times includes numerous articles during the first decade of the 2000s that describe video games as offering a uniquely valuable aesthetic experience not possible by other artistic formats. Overall, the introduction of video game features in The New York Times and the subsequent emergence of articles in the newspaper’s Arts section that consider video games to be a uniquely valuable art form indicate that the medium’s position in one of America’s most prestigious publications has somewhat changed by the late 2000s relative to its position in the 1980s and early 1990s. Although the majority of the evaluative articles in The New York Times continue to portray video games as a social harm, it is clear that the medium’s position in civil society has begun to shift towards the “semi-polluted” status occupied by other entertainment formats such as film, popular music, and television.
It is possible that this dramatic shift reflects a generational change. By the 2000s, many of the children who grew up playing video games reached adulthood, a small proportion of who possibly became journalists or columnists. Consequently, this artistic account may represent their cultural preferences. Related to that, as a weakly autonomous field not entirely immune to market demands (Bourdieu 2005), the newspaper’s shift in portrayal may serve as an attempt at appealing to as large an audience as possible by including positive coverage of what by the early 2000s had become one of America’s most popular pastimes.

Although these factors help explain why a subset of articles praise video games, more insight is needed to determine why this particular account specifically portrays video games as possessing transcendental value rather than continuing to describe video games’ instrumental value. It is possible that this change reflects the emergence of video game coverage in the newspaper’s Arts section during the 2000s. As Table 3 illustrates, it is not until the 2000s that the majority of the articles describing video games’ social benefits appear in the Arts section. During the 1980s, none of the newspaper’s social benefits articles appear in the Arts section. Similarly, only 14% of such portrayals appear in the Arts section during the 1990s. In contrast, 60% of the newspaper’s social benefits articles appear in the Arts section during the 2000s, the same decade in which the newspaper’s counter-narrative shifts from emphasizing video games’ instrumental value to describing video games’ transcendental value. Consequently, the emergence of video game coverage portraying video games as an art form may simply reflect how the newspaper’s Art section covers entertainment formats in general.
To be fair, an alternative explanation is that the emergence of the transcendental narrative reflects the particular critical style of the journalists covering video games for the Arts section in the 2000s. In other words, it may be possible that the journalists emphasizing video games’ transcendental value drastically differ from the other journalists covering video games. However, examining the biographies for all the *New York Times* journalists covering video games in this sample indicates that the journalists pushing for video games’ transcendental value share similar career paths with the journalists documenting video games’ social harms or instrumental value. The majority of the social harm and instrumental value authors begin their careers covering science or education for smaller media outlets. Similarly, the majority of the transcendental value authors begin their careers covering technology before moving to covering video games in *The New York Times*’ Arts section during the 2000s. For example, Seth Schiesel starts at *The New York Times* in 1995 as a business reporter covering the telecommunication industry. Schiesel switches to a technology reporter in 2003 and finally moves to covering video games for the Arts section in 2005 (IGN.com 2011). Similar to many of the other transcendental advocates, Schiesel’s argument for recognizing video games as a powerful art form first appears in his articles for the Arts section. These findings provide greater insight into the newspaper’s shift in depicting video games’ benefits. Responding to video games’ mainstream success, *The New York Times* begins providing coverage for video games in the Arts section during the 2000s. In presenting this coverage, the video game journalists working in the Arts section utilize an enduring aesthetic narrative cultural commentators commonly use to legitimate their preferred form of entertainment. Responding to entertainment’s semi-polluted position in
civil society, these journalists construct a narrative that asserts video game’s social significance while reiterating civil society’s emphasis on serious subject matter over entertainment.

**Conclusion**

In certain respects, my findings support previous work on the social construction of video games in mainstream media outlets. Similar to Williams’ (2003) analysis of general readership magazines from the 1970s until the end of the 1990s, I find that evaluative articles in *The New York Times* predominantly characterize video games as a social threat from 1980 until 2010. The social threat narrative’s prevalence in a mainstream media outlet beyond the 1990s and into the first decade of the 2000s may be somewhat surprising considering video games’ growing demographic expansion during this time period. As my analysis in this chapter indicates, the social threat narrative’s enduring popularity demonstrates how society’s predominant understanding of the role and position of entertainment and children exerts powerful influence on the social meaning of any cultural object conventionally associated with either of these two social classifications.

However, it is important to note that *The New York Times*’ video game coverage does not solely portray video games as a social threat. The newspaper’s video game coverage does include a proportionally small but socially significant counter-narrative in all three decades. Concurrent with Williams’ findings, during the 1980s and 1990s this alternative narrative in *The New York Times* primarily describes how video games foster athletic prowess, promote technological literacy and offer an educational supplement. This portrayal clearly differs from the newspaper’s predominant exploration of video
games’ dangers. However, this counter-narrative shares a trait in common with the social threat narrative. Whereas the social threat narrative focuses on how video games harm children, the counter-narrative present in the 1980s and 1990s emphasizes the medium’s positive applications for children. Although these two narratives may disagree on whether this new medium hurts or benefits society, they both primarily portray video games as a children’s activity.

Although my findings complement Williams’ previous work on the social construction of video games in these two key areas, my research also uncovers two significant changes in *The New York Times*’ video game coverage that Williams does not find in his analysis. Despite the social threat narrative remaining the most popular evaluation of video games in *The New York Times* from 1980 until 2010, this narrative changes from treating video games as a central and distinct threat in the 1980s to grouping video games with other forms of entertainment the newspaper considers dangerous in the 1990s and 2000s. To a certain extent, this shift in coverage indicates that the meaning of video games in mainstream civil society has begun to change. Video games are clearly still a polluted object in the most popular form of evaluative coverage present in *The New York Times*. However, video games are no longer a singular threat but simply one among many forms of children’s entertainment that parents must closely monitor.

In retrospect, this shift in *The New York Times*’ video game coverage serves as a precursor to an even more profound change that occurs during the 2000s: the emergence of video game coverage and commentary in the Arts section of *The New York Times*. The appearance of Arts section coverage devoted to video games is a significant change
compared to the section’s overwhelmingly critical portrayal of the medium during the previous two decades. However, the particular form this coverage assumes renders this change even more striking relative to past coverage. The authors devoted to covering video games for *The New York Times’* Arts section do more than just evaluate games according to their entertainment value; they often treat video games as a uniquely powerful art form. In contrast to Williams’ (2003) finding that mainstream media outlets consider video games to be an inferior form of art relative to film in the late 1990s, it is clear that by the end of the 2000s authors writing for the Arts section of *The New York Times* consider video games to be just as legitimate an art form as film if not even more valuable. Although *The New York Times*’ evaluative articles still predominantly treat video games as a social threat in the 2000s, the fact that coverage in the Arts section for one of the most prominent media outlets in the U.S. characterizes video games as a valuable form of artistic expression indicates that a significant shift in video games’ position in civil society has taken place by the end of the 2000s. We can also find evidence for this shift outside of *The New York Times*. The first decade of the 2000s witnesses the emergence of high-status museum exhibits on video games such as the Smithsonian’s “The Art of Video games” and lectures by video game figures at prominent symposiums, as evident by Will Wright’s TED speech in 2007. Taken together, these observations serve as a clear indication that video games have begun to occupy a similar position to other semi-polluted forms of entertainment in civil society. Similar to film, television, and popular music, prominent social actors and institutions portray video games as a dangerous form of cultural expression and also a legitimate
form of artistic expression. Today in the United States, video games are both open to moral pollution and moral consecration.

These findings support previous work on the social construction of technology literature, demonstrating how the social meaning of video games is not static or universal even within a single media outlet. However, my work adds new insight to the literature by revealing how civil society’s cultural structure influences the social meaning of new technologies. *The New York Times*’ understanding of video games as a children’s activity ultimately influences the manner in which the newspaper treats video games, resulting in coverage primarily focused on determining if video games are a threat or a functional benefit to children. In this sense, *The New York Times*’ video game coverage is consistent with civil society’s predominant understanding of children as a special population in need of protection and adult guidance. It is only in the 2000s when video game coverage begins to appear in the Arts section that *The New York Times* includes a narrative that is not focused on evaluating video games solely based on their potential impact on children.

Moreover, consistent with the aesthetic public sphere literature, my work illustrates how *The New York Times*’ video game coverage reflects entertainment media’s subjugated position in civil society. The newspaper’s understanding of video games as an entertainment form influences both the paper’s predominant video game narrative and the newspaper’s most popular counter-narrative. This depiction of video games as entertainment combined with the newspaper’s understanding of the medium as predominantly a children’s activity results in the newspaper’s primary portrayal of video games as a social threat in all three decades. Indeed, even the newspaper’s first counter-narrative to treat video games as providing a powerful aesthetic experience preserves
entertainment’s principal meaning in civil society by describing video games as art and not entertainment, thus reproducing the overarching symbolic binary of serious activities versus entertainment.

These same cultural codes influence the type of topics that The New York Times’ video game coverage explores. To be certain, the social harm narrative’s predominance across these three decades serves as a clear demonstration of the newspaper’s capacity to function as an aesthetic public sphere. However, the topics this social harm narrative specifically addresses are influenced by civil society’s predominant understanding of video games as a children’s activity. There is no question that children’s education, exposure to violence, and obesity are all legitimate concerns. However, their consistent presence in The New York Times’ video game coverage consequently limits the aesthetic public sphere present in the newspaper to discussions of proper child-rearing.

Consequently, the particular focus of the social harm narrative found in The New York Times highlights how the type of sociopolitical commentary that develops and thus the type of aesthetic public sphere that forms is at least partially influenced by that particular social space’s understanding of video games. My analysis in the proceeding chapters will further illustrate this insight by revealing how the aesthetic public spheres that emerge from the other media spaces I examine address different topics in their video game coverage relative to The New York Times. Of course, the media spaces’ particular understanding of video games is not the only factor that influences the type of aesthetic public sphere that emerges from their video game coverage. In the final chapter I explore how the media space’s particular location in civil society also influences the type of topics they address in their video game commentary.
CHAPTER 5: KOTAKU AND THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF VIDEO GAMES

My analysis in the previous chapter documents how one of the most prestigious publications in American civil society has predominantly portrayed video games as a social threat for the past three decades. To be certain, my work also identifies the presence of an alternative narrative in *The New York Times* that treats video games as a valuable artistic medium. However, this alternative narrative is significantly smaller in frequency and only appears in the Arts section of the newspaper. The segregation between these two portrayals may hinder the video game as art narrative’s steering influence given entertainment coverage’s weak connection to the official political public sphere (Jacobs and McKernan forthcoming). Of course, as prestigious as *The New York Times* may be, the publication’s coverage does not hold complete sway over all of civil society. Despite the newspaper’s predominant portrayal of video games as a social threat, the popularity of video games has only grown over the last three decades. During this time period, a large proportion of video game players have relied on the video game enthusiast press for video game news and commentary. We should be interested in how these alternative media outlets cover video games in order to gain a stronger understanding of the various types of aesthetic public spheres that may emerge around different forms of video game commentary. It certainly seems likely that the video game enthusiast press’s portrayal of video games and the medium’s social significance will at least somewhat contrast with mainstream media’s portrayal.

In this chapter, I examine video game coverage in *Kotaku*, one of the most popular video game media outlets in the U.S. My analysis demonstrates how *Kotaku’s*
coverage predominantly treats video games as a valuable artistic format. In this sense, Kotaku’s primary narrative is analogous to the counter-narrative present in The New York Times. Moreover, I find that Kotaku’s video game coverage often functions as an aesthetic public sphere. However, the website discusses a much larger array of topics relative to the instances in which The New York Times’ video game coverage engages in sociopolitical commentary, including politics, journalism ethics, corporate interests, and issues related to race, gender and sexuality. Moreover, the manner in which Kotaku articles engage with these issues also differs from The New York Times. Additionally, the critical discourse present in Kotaku’s evaluative articles is much more closely aligned with the style of critique endorsed by much of the media and deliberation literature relative to The New York Times. Moreover, Kotaku also exhibits a higher level of ideological pluralism, and contains a larger amount and broader array of intertextual references compared to The New York Times.

Kotaku’s emphasis on video games’ social value and the website’s strident and sardonic critiques of prominent public figures and other media outlets serve as an attempt to construct a semi-autonomous aesthetic field for video games and a unique space for video game media outlets in the journalistic field. I will discuss the significance of this in the concluding section of this chapter.

Kotaku’s Approach to Covering Video games

Kotaku’s approach to covering video games differs greatly from the manner in which The New York Times covers video games. The website carves out its own distinct voice within the video game journalism space by combining more traditional cultural commentary and video game-related news coverage with the inclusion of
autobiographical elements commonly associated with the blogging format. Kotaku’s video game previews and reviews often incorporate a personal element that ranges from a brief anecdote to serving as the main subject of the story. For example, in the article entitled “Falling in With Fallout 3”, the author transforms a traditional video game preview into a travel piece documenting the author’s journey to the developer’s studio in Maryland. To be certain, the article provides readers with all the details commonly included in video game previews, such as a description of the game’s mechanics, story, and graphical features. However, the article attaches this information to more personal details about the trip, including the author’s anxieties over flying, the unplanned historical tour around Washington, DC his cab driver provided, and his uneasy first night in the hotel.63

Similarly, Kotaku’s preview for the video game Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction assumes the form of a running email debate between two different staff members over who more fully appreciates the game’s greatness. Although a significant portion of the article involves the discussants taking personal jabs at each other, with one staff member attempting to prove that the other is a robot and thus incapable of truly appreciating anything, the article still manages to provide readers with all the pertinent information provided by more conventional preview pieces.64 As both these examples illustrate, Kotaku’s video game coverage often possesses a degree of personality and playfulness that provides just as much insight into the authors writing these articles as it does video game information. To be certain, Kotaku is not the only video game

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publication to frame their coverage in this manner. Other prominent video game media outlets such as 1up.com; GiantBomb, and IGN incorporate humor and personal touches into their video game coverage. When successful, such efforts transform many of the journalists and critics working for these publications into distinct individuals with unique personalities and tastes.

Much of Kotaku’s coverage focuses on providing as much information as possible on upcoming video games, new consoles, or even the financial well-being of video game developers, publishers, and retailers. Kotaku utilizes a variety of strategies to supply readers with this information, including interviews with industry representatives, posting information provided by coverage from other media outlets (along with the corresponding link), analyzing company financial reports, summarizing the proceedings of shareholder meetings, and even examining new copyright filings by video game developers and publishers.

One final aspect of Kotaku’s coverage worth mentioning is the site’s propensity to criticize or disagree with public statements made by industry individuals or other media sources. Indeed, as I will discuss shortly, Kotaku is much more likely to directly criticize specific authority figures than The New York Times. For example, in one article Kotaku strongly rebukes comments made by Peter Moore, the Corporate Vice President of Microsoft’s Interactive Entertainment Business Division. In a Game Daily article, Moore dismisses critics of the Xbox 360 console’s high hardware failure rate as “in need of a history lesson”, implying that the 360’s failure rates are consistent with the industry’s standard. Michael McWhertor, the author of the Kotaku post covering the original Game Daily article, strongly rejects Moore’s statements. In the piece, McWhertor writes:
What history has taught us is that the NES, Sega CD, PlayStation, Dreamcast and PlayStation 2 all had their share of well-reported issues. That said, in my 25 years of following video games, I've personally never seen a hardware fiasco of such epic proportions. I believe future history—when we ultimately know the real story behind the Xbox 360's manufacturing reliability woes—will tell a memorable story of poor design, shoddy manufacturing, lame excuses and tardy resolutions. It'll be a real page turner.65

In covering this statement, the Kotaku author rejects the Microsoft executive’s depiction and criticizes Microsoft for constructing a console based on faulty hardware and subsequently misleading customers and the public at large in regards to the severity of the problem.

One the whole, these examples illustrate Kotaku’s general approach to video game journalism: providing readers with intensive coverage of the video game industry and video game culture, including previews and reviews, news, and rumors as well as more detailed explorations of the interpretive communities that form among avid fans of certain games. Kotaku constructs its own distinct voice within the video game journalistic space by inserting personality and a propensity to criticize industry representatives or other public figures,

Kotaku’s Insistence on the Significance of Play

Kotaku articles do more than simply supply readers with interesting or useful information about video games and video game culture. In discussing video games, Kotaku articles construct symbolic codes, and attach moral significance to video games, video game players, video game commentary, specific public figures, and social institutions. In short, in covering video games, Kotaku articles construct moral narratives that make sense of or provide structure to the social world. Of course, for the

overwhelming majority of articles published on the site, this social function largely remains implicit. Similar to The New York Times’ business-reporting on video games, the vast majority of Kotaku’s articles portray video games through a low-mimetic narrative lens. Kotaku’s daily coverage predominantly involves brief posts on new details about upcoming games, including release dates, pricing, screenshots, videos, and newly announced features. To be fair, the authors of these pieces often express excitement about the games they are covering, but their coverage in such articles rarely attaches broader social significance to the new information. In short, Kotaku’s predominant form of video game coverage doesn’t rouse the collective imagination or demand its audience to take the topic being discussed seriously. However, during specific moments, such as in articles defending the video game medium or defining video game journalism ethics, the symbolic codes that usually remain relatively latent in Kotaku’s coverage become much more readily apparent to the observer.

Of the 7,811 posts analyzed for this study, only 3% match this description. In these 227 articles, Kotaku moves beyond simply covering video games to construct hermeneutically-rich articles addressing a wide variety of topics or moral themes, including the aesthetic and social value of video games, moral assessments of other media outlets and public figures, the need for “quality” journalism, as well as debates on such sociopolitical issues as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Again, this is of course a small proportion. From a strictly quantitative perspective in which all articles receive equal weight; this finding indicates that Kotaku’s coverage rarely involves hermeneutically-rich explorations of video games’ meaning or the medium’s social significance. By extension, this finding demonstrates that the majority of Kotaku’s
coverage during this time period does not explicitly address broader sociopolitical concerns. However, ending the analysis here would yield a severely limited understanding of Kotaku’s treatment of video games and would thus fail to provide a full exploration of the range of roles video game commentary serves for certain segments of civil society. From a public sphere orientation, examining when Kotaku moves beyond conventional aesthetic matters to engage in a discussion of the meaning of video games and/or broader sociopolitical concerns takes on even greater interest given the infrequency in which such instances occur. Consequently, we should be interested in documenting the types of subject matter that provoke Kotaku to move beyond its predominant low-mimetic aesthetic or entertainment orientation.

Furthermore, an analysis that concludes with the finding that Kotaku’s coverage rarely examines the meaning of video games or uses video game commentary to explore broader sociopolitical concerns is also analytically deficient in the sense that such a conclusion problematically treats the various types of articles Kotaku publishes as all yielding the exact same impact and influence in the video game community. Despite occupying a small proportion of the website’s coverage, Kotaku’s articles that explicitly examine the significance of video games or address broader sociopolitical concerns are among the most likely to foster intense discussion in the article’s comments section lasting for more than a few hours after the article’s publication. Moreover, these articles are among the most likely to be picked up and debated by other segments of the gaming community, including alternative video game media outlets and internet discussion forums, thus exposing the issues the original Kotaku article addresses to a much larger segment of the video game community beyond simply the publication’s most dedicated
readers. In short, although the instances in which Kotaku’s coverage contains a deeper moral underpinning are small in number, they play a major role in the video game community’s continual process of making sense of both video games’ social significance and the community’s own position in civil society. In the next section, I will analyze the predominant themes that emerge during these instances in order to reveal the moral structure underpinning Kotaku’s video game coverage.

**Video Games’ Aesthetic and Social Value**

Kotaku’s coverage treats video games as much more than simply an amusing leisure activity. In approximately 36% of the hermeneutically-rich articles I analyzed (see Table 7), Kotaku specifically characterizes video games as a legitimate form of artistic expression and insists that mainstream society acknowledge the medium accordingly. Kotaku articles utilize a variety of different measures to argue for society’s recognition of video games as a significant art form. Perhaps the most explicit example of this push appears in the website’s coverage of critical comments made against video games by noted film critic Roger Ebert. Ebert’s original comments predate this study’s time frame, but his initial statements and the public debate that ensued persevere as a topic of discussion on Kotaku throughout the period I sampled.

Ebert first came to Kotaku’s attention in 2005 after publishing a column for the Chicago Sun-Times where he describes video games as “inherently inferior to film and literature”. In the article, Ebert explains:

I am prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful. But I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art. To my knowledge, no one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers. That a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience, I
accept. But for most gamers, video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic.\textsuperscript{66}

Ebert’s depiction of the entire video game medium as craftsmanship rather than art and description of playing video games as a “loss of precious hours” sent a shockwave throughout the entire video game community, with video game media outlets quickly publishing responses in defense of video games.\textsuperscript{67}

Although Ebert’s original comments appeared in 2005, the video game media’s intense rebuke transformed Ebert into an enduring figure in the community’s own discussion of the aesthetic merits of video games and the medium’s similarities and differences to other artistic forms. Ebert often fans the flames by reiterating his original statements in various public venues and media outlets. For example, during this study’s sample, \textit{Kotaku} devotes extensive coverage to Ebert’s response to comments made by Clive Barker at the Hollywood & Games Summit. During his keynote address at the conference, Barker, a famous film director, screenwriter, author, and video game designer, took time to criticize Ebert. Describing Ebert’s original comments as “bullshit”, Barker explains:

\begin{quote}
We can debate what art is, we can debate it forever. But if the experience moves you, some way or another, even if it just moves your bowels, I think it’s worthy of some serious study... Games mean something to a lot of people... Games aren’t about reviewers, they’re about players.\textsuperscript{68}
\end{quote}

Ebert responds to Barker’s criticisms three weeks later in a \textit{Chicago Sun-Times} article entitled “Games vs. Art: Ebert vs. Barker.” Ebert opens by revising his original

comments, explaining that he was wrong to claim that games could not be art. Instead, what he should have said is that video games are incapable of being “high art”. In defense of his original comments, Ebert points to the main reason publications such as *The New York Times*’ Art Section and *Kotaku* consider video games to be art: their ability to provide audience members with an unprecedented level of interactivity. According to Ebert, video games’ “malleability” is one of the medium’s major artistic limitations. As Ebert explains, “Art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices”.

Consequently, according to Ebert, video games’ interactivity disqualifies the medium from becoming “high art”.

Similar to his original comments, Ebert’s response to Barker generates a lot of coverage from video game media outlets. In the week following Ebert’s reply, *Kotaku* publishes three different commentaries on the topic. In one of *Kotaku*’s articles on this subject, the author systematically rejects the majority of Ebert’s criticisms. In regards to Ebert’s dismissal of video games as “high art” due to their interactivity, the author responds by noting that every object that a player can interact with in a video game must be programmed to act in a specific manner. Consequently, interacting with the object is really just one way of exploring the world created by the video game developer, just as studying a painting from a different angle provides the viewer with a different perspective on the work. Furthermore, the author notes that no matter how one plays a video game, the video game will ultimately lead the player to an inevitable conclusion, whether it be “of failure or victory, from narrative or sheer experience”.

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In rejecting Ebert’s claims, the Kotaku article draws a connection between video games and the plays of Shakespeare. Ebert originally brought up Shakespeare as an example of why video games cannot be art, arguing that similar to how rewritten versions of Romeo and Juliet or King Lear often result in inferior artistic objects, video game interactions dictated by players’ choices result in an inferior experience. Interestingly, the author’s response notes that similar to Shakespeare’s ability to “bring a class-varied audience to both laughter and tears”, video games allow players to have a variety of experiences by virtue of the medium’s inherent interactivity. In this sense, the author of this Kotaku article insists on video game’s artistic status by drawing a connection between video games and one of the most recognizable and consecrated pieces of art in the United States.

Moreover, this particular article is not satisfied with simply highlighting video games’ similarities to other artistic mediums. The author proceeds to suggest that the medium’s unique features grant video games the capacity to provide players with significant experiences not possible in other artistic mediums. To demonstrate this claim, the author asserts that whereas films struggle to promote a sense of empathy among viewers, video game’s interactivity allows players to easily empathize with characters. As the article explains:

I would argue that most movies evoke sympathy, or the act of feeling something for another. Empathy, or to feel something with another, is at the very basis of actually becoming a character as players often do in videogames. Empathy certainly exists in film, but it takes a better, more engaging film to evoke empathy due to the hands-off nature of the medium. When a hero is hurt in a movie, you wince at their pain. When a hero is hurt in a game, you wince at your pain.71

According to the author, by providing players with control over the action as opposed to relegating them to passive observers, video games provide a level of empathy between the audience and the characters that only the most gifted films can hope to match.

The manner in which Kotaku responds to Ebert’s commentary contains three of the defining features present in the site’s overall approach to defining video games’ aesthetic qualities: connecting video games to other consecrated forms of cultural expression (e.g., film, literature), identifying what makes video games a uniquely valuable experience, and dismissing or vilifying the medium’s major critics. Although Kotaku’s vehement rejection of Ebert may be one of the starkest illustrations of this outlet’s passionate push for video games’ merits, all three of these features routinely appear Kotaku’s high-mimetic video game coverage. In the remainder of this section, I explore non-Ebert related Kotaku coverage that connects video games to other consecrated art forms and/or identifies what the site considers to be the medium’s unique artistic potential. I devote an entire section later in this chapter to more closely exploring how Kotaku responds to what the website’s authors consider to be coverage or comments critiquing video games by prominent public figures or media outlets.

Kotaku articles frequently establish connections between video games and other prominent pieces of popular culture that are widely considered to be legitimate objects of artistic expression. Several Kotaku articles in my sample draw parallels between video game’s current social position and the history of other entertainment forms that mainstream society now recognizes as art. For example, in an interview with Kotaku, Hollywood film director and screenwriter Paul W.S. Anderson describes games as an art form still in their infancy. In the article, Anderson explains:
When I was playing Pong or Asteroids, that was the equivalent of the very first short silent movies like The Great Train Robbery….They were primitive, but boy they were captivating. Games are now at the stage that movies were when Talkies were introduced. They have much more sophisticated stories because in that hour and a half you had a lot more dialogue. When you look at some of my favorite games from a while ago, the acting was bad and the dialogue was terrible. Games now are more sophisticated and quite often they use well-known actors to voice character. The dialogue is better the actual narrative is better, as well.\(^72\)

An alternative article includes a similar statement from Guillermo del Toro, an award-winning film director and screenwriter, who likens the current state of video games to the periods right before major artistic breakthroughs occurred in film and comic books, such as the release of *Citizen Kane* or *A Contract with God*.\(^73\) In both examples, *Kotaku* attempts to legitimate the website’s depiction of video games by positioning the medium within the historical trajectory of other consecrated forms of popular culture.

Although many *Kotaku* articles draw connections between video games and critically-acclaimed works from consecrated artistic forms, articles on the website also frequently tout the medium’s unique aesthetic contributions. This assertion of the medium’s aesthetic uniqueness even occasionally occurs in the same articles that establish connections between video games and other art forms. For example, in *Kotaku’s* interview with Paul W.S. Anderson, the author is quick to point out that Anderson considers film and video games to be two separate forms of artistic expression, each of which possesses their own distinctive attributes. To highlight this, the author includes the following quote from Anderson where he emphasizes a key difference between video games and film. In the quote, Anderson explains:

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There are animated sequences in games that look like movies, so there's a tendency for people who really aren't into games to think they are the same kind of thing....But I think just the process of playing and interacting with a game make it necessarily different from the movies. I wouldn't know why you would want to combine the two.\textsuperscript{74}

Similar to certain features present in Kotaku’s response to Ebert’s criticism, Anderson’s quote in the article argues that video games’ unparalleled level of interactivity distinguishes the medium from film. However, the article and Kotaku’s commentary on this topic in general carefully note that this interactivity does not disqualify video games from being considered art; it simply means that the medium is its own unique artistic format.

Multiple Kotaku articles in my sample that push for society’s recognition of video games as a legitimate art form do so in part by insisting that the fact that video games are often a collaborative project does not disqualify such video games from being considered art. For example, in an article entitled “What for Art Thou?”, the author specifically critiques the idea that art in general must be the creation of a single individual. According to the article, many of world’s great films would not be considered art if we upheld such a strict definition of what constitutes art. According to author:

[T]hose who exalt the virtues of movies over video games often fail to take into account some of the strange variations in the way movies are made, relevant factors when it comes to deciding whether films deserve to be placed on an art pedestal.\textsuperscript{75}

To illustrate these “strange variations”, the author notes that the creative impetus for a film can come from a variety of sources. While society often considers the director to be


the creative force behind a movie, it can just as easily come from a screenwriter or a producer attempting to reach a lucrative audience demographic. Moreover, during the long, complex process of making a film, all of these individuals and more will help influence the film’s final form. Reflecting this sentiment, the author writes:

In the history of movies, few directors have been able totally to call their own shots and even those have often faced limits. The most sympathetic producer can't always raise sufficient money to bring a project to perfection. The ideal actor isn't always available to play a part.76

In highlighting the diverse array of individuals involved in the process of filmmaking, this article problematizes the widely-held notion of art only being the result of a single individual. Similar to other Kotaku articles, this article’s intention is not to reject film as an artistic form, but instead to argue for the recognition of collaborative works as also art, whether it be film, video games, or some other format.

Kotaku’s treatment of video games as a legitimate art form does not only appear in articles specifically focused on identifying the elements that make video games an art form or rebuking the medium’s prominent critics. Many Kotaku articles in my sample simply take video games’ artistic status for granted. These articles do not present a detailed defense for why video games deserve to be recognized as art, but instead simply assume video games’ artistic status is widely recognized and engage in deep textual or aesthetic analyses of specific video games or popular video game mechanics. For example, one article in my sample provides an intense analysis of how two popular video games, Persona 3 and Persona 4, provide powerful insight into the true nature of our “self” or “selves.” As the author points out, both games start the player off as a nameless, faceless protagonist who must use a variety of different “Personas” or selves to progress.

through the game. According to the article’s author, the anonymous protagonists’ ability
to assume a variety of Personas offers players an opportunity to reflect on their own
selves. In describing this idea, the author writes:

P4 [Persona 4] presents the idea that an individual may have many different
“selves,” some public, some private, and yet the individual’s encouraged to
embrace and accept them all, even when it’s difficult. In fact, in P4, denying one’s
alternate self creates a mortal danger. A facet of the self that’s repressed can
become a dangerous dark side – and that’s true for real-life humans, too. P4’s
social relationships are more complex and more genuine, too, and while this
lightens things up a bit in contrast with P3’s [Persona 3] darkness, it often
encourages the player to do a truthful self-evaluation and to make an emotional
investment – thereby building immersion, and making it more possible to adopt
the protagonist’s journey as one’s own.77

This article’s thematic analysis closely resembles the style of literary and film criticism
found in intellectual general readership publications and scholarly journals. The author of
this piece never evaluates these two video games according to their entertainment value,
but instead focuses on exploring the deep truths about life that these games reveal.
Moreover, at no point in the article does the author include a defense for why we should
examine video games in this manner. In a manner similar to many other articles in my
sample, this article simply assumes that Kotaku’s audience already recognizes video
games’ status as a serious art form.

Kotaku’s portrayal of video games as a valuable form of artistic expression
manifests itself in other types of coverage. Numerous articles in my sample urge game
designers to utilize video games’ unique capabilities to push the medium forward in new
and more provocative directions. The most popular form this plea assumes asks designers
to create more serious games. These articles urge designers to create games that explore
serious issues and provide players with new insights about themselves and the world. For

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example, one Kotaku article strongly praises a Gamasutra article for making precisely this argument. In the post, Kotaku includes statements in the original Gamasutra article from the academic and game developer Ian Bogost. In the original article, Bogost explains: “For 30 years now we’ve focused on making games produce fun .... Isn’t it about time we started working toward other kinds of emotional responses?” In issuing this claim, Bogost draws a comparison to the American film industry, noting that most of the films nominated for Academy Awards are about “the more complex subtleties of human experience” and not about “big explosions and other forms of immediate gratification.”

According to Bogost, sadly too many video games provide only the latter and too few successfully deliver the former.

Although many Kotaku articles encourage video games to address more “serious” issues, the website often accompanies this plea with a disclaimer that designers still need to make these games fun to play. For example, the author of an article entitled “Going Off the Deep End: Has Gaming Grown Up” urges designers to make “mature” games that are still enjoyable to play. The author defines mature entertainment as works that “play with preconceived notions of the way things are or should be; the ones that deconstruct the traditional, reconstitute it as something new; most importantly, the ones that can be read on a number of levels.” In short, the article wants designers to make sophisticated video games that promote critical thinking. At the same time, however, the author insists that video games must still be fun to play. Indeed, the article’s title, “Going Off the Deep End”, refers to the author’s concern that developers often go “overboard” in their

attempts to create “mature” games. According to the article, not only do most of these games lack the subtly and nuance of truly “mature” works, but they also rarely are fun to play. Using the video game series Xenosaga as an example, the author writes:

I love Xenosaga….by the third game I was left going 'Oh, come on' when yet another heavy-handed Biblical reference popped up. Sure, I was left wondering if Nietzsche's introduction and reception in late 19th century Japan was similar to the one in China, but was that really the point? Yes, there were some good strands of classic themes — questioning belief systems, organized religion, technology — but it got lost amongst Issachar this and Wagner that. Someone on the team clearly knew their Israelites and classic Germanic operas, at least superficially (shame they weren't a Strauss fan, we could've had a ship called 'the Fledermaus'), but to what end?80

As the author explains, Xenosaga’s attempt at exploring more complex themes is too heavy handed, creating a disjointed game experience that bombards players with philosophical references and fails to provide an enjoyable play experience.

For all the discussion on the need for “serious” video games, Kotaku rarely specifies the type of themes or discussions video games should address. Although a few articles push for designers to construct games that intelligently explore such subjects as terrorism and sexuality81, one of the topics Kotaku most often pushes for video games to address in a more nuanced manner is military conflict. Multiple articles point out that although many of the most popular video games involve military conflict, almost none of these games cast a critical lens or provide players with a new perspective on this subject.

This demand appears in Kotaku’s coverage of the video game publisher Konami’s announcement and subsequent cancellation of Six Days in Fallujah, a video game documenting the events of the relatively recent military conflict. Konami immediately

received criticism after making the announcement, with many mainstream media outlets and veterans expressing disgust over the publisher’s claim to be creating a game that presents the horrors of war while also providing an entertaining experience. *Kotaku*’s coverage of this event includes an article that urges the public to broaden its understanding of what constitutes entertainment. In issuing this claim, the article includes a quote from Ian Bogost, who explains that a video game or any media object does not have to be fun to be entertaining. Citing the film *Blackhawk Down* as an example, Bogost explains in the article that the film, based on events that occurred during the Battle of Mogadishu, is by no stretch of the imagination fun. However, Bogost notes that the film was still a “positively engaging experience for many film-goers. It wasn't fun, but it was fulfilling and by extension, entertaining.”

Bogost ultimately concludes that the broader public must accept the fact that video games, like other mediums, are capable of handling serious subjects with the appropriate level of respect.

All of these examples demonstrate how *Kotaku*’s portrayal of video games drastically differs from the predominant manner in which *The New York Times*’ evaluative articles characterize video games in the 2000s. Whereas the majority of the video game coverage in both the news-oriented sections and op-ed pages of *The New York Times* treats video games as a dangerous social threat, my analysis clearly indicates how much of *Kotaku*’s coverage portrays video games as a legitimate form of artistic expression. Articles adopting this portrayal rigorously define and examine video games’ artistic features, strongly rebuke prominent public figures who disagree with this characterization, and engage in forms of textual analyses and cultural commentary that

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share much in common with popular approaches to literary and film criticism. In this sense, Kotaku’s video game coverage resembles the manner in which cultural critics describe video games in the Arts section of The New York Times during the 2000s. Both outlets not only insist on the medium’s artistic legitimacy, but portray video games as a uniquely valuable art form. Moreover, both spaces identify what they describe as video games’ unprecedented level of interactivity as the distinguishing feature between the medium and other artistic forms of expression. According to articles in both media outlets, video games’ unrivaled level of interactivity allows artists provide players with more emotionally powerful or insightful experiences relative to other art forms.

The fact that both spaces characterize video games in such a similar manner in order to defend the medium’s legitimacy serves as a testament to the steering influence civil society’s predominant understanding of both art and entertainment have on shaping public discourse in mainstream media spaces. As I noted during the conclusion to the previous chapter, the portrayal of what is commonly understood to be a form of entertainment as a socially valuable art form is an enduring strategy used by advocates of a particular form of cultural expression to defend their preferred form from criticism. Similar to actions undertaken by film studios, directors, and critics in the 1960s (Baumann 2007), authors writing in both the Arts section of The New York Times and Kotaku attempt to counter mainstream media’s predominant understanding of video games as a serious social threat by portraying the medium as a valuable art form. In this sense, these authors symbolically distance video games from entertainment’s semi-polluted position in civil society. Whereas entertainment’s semi-polluted status renders those cultural objects classified as such susceptible to critique and censorship,
mainstream civil society considers art to be special, valuable, and thus something to be celebrated and protected. Consequently, forms of cultural expression recognized by mainstream civil society as art are much less likely to be susceptible to moral pollution relative to objects understood as purely forms of entertainment.83

These two spaces’ portrayal of video games as a valuable art form not only serves as an attempt to counter or silence critics’ moral pollution of the medium, it also potentially opens the medium to new and more prestigious social spaces beyond just the core enthusiast community. Forms of cultural expression widely recognized as art are often the recipients of public support in the form of donations (both by the government and philanthropic organizations), exhibitions, and academic consecration. In this sense, these two spaces’ portrayal of video games as a valuable art form enhances the prestige of not just video games, but also video game developers and video game patrons. Of course, this portrayal also functions as an attempt to legitimate the work of the authors writing about video games in these two media spaces. According to this narrative, these authors are not participating in the superficial enterprise of covering entertainment, they are exploring a valuable art form that possesses the capability of providing powerful insight into the problems and features of the contemporary world.

However, the resources available to fields of art are often scarce (Bourdieu 1993), which may influence both spaces’ insistence that video games possess the potential to provide uniquely powerful experiences far beyond what other art forms are capable of

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83 Individual pieces of what is conventionally recognized as an art form may be symbolically polluted by certain segments of the community. However, critics generally focus their concerns on the individual piece and not the overall form of expression or medium. For example, the protests that emerged over the play Angels in America in several U.S. cities in the mid to late 1990s focused on what the protestors’ considered to be the play’s dangerous content rather than questioning the value or artistic merit of theatrical works in general (Tepper 2011).
producing. Indeed, early game scholars made precisely this argument in the late 1990s and early 2000s in response to what they considered to be film and literary scholars’ attempts at colonizing the academic study of video games (Frasca 2003; Gonzalo 2003). By portraying video games in the same manner as these early video game scholars, authors writing for the Arts section of *The New York Times* and *Kotaku* attempt to carve out a semi-autonomous field of art for video games which suggests that video games’ unique aesthetic capabilities should place it in top running for social prestige and thus social support.

The fact that both these media spaces portray video games in a similar manner reveals *Kotaku*’s connection to mainstream media outlets and thus the predominant cultural codes and structures of mainstream civil society. Despite its peripheral position in the journalistic field as an enthusiast press outlet devoted to covering video games, the manner in which *Kotaku* covers video games demonstrates a strong familiarity with conventional understandings of art. *Kotaku*’s coverage relies heavily on figures and discourses of legitimation associated with other artistic forms of expression. Moreover, similar to entertainment coverage in mainstream newspapers (Jacobs 2007; Jacobs 2012; Jacobs and McKernan forthcoming), *Kotaku* articles often thematically evaluate video games based on their ability (or lack thereof) to examine more mature or broader sociopolitical issues in a nuanced or illuminating manner. Consequently, we cannot assume that outlets occupying more peripheral positions ignore, reject, or are immune to the overarching cultural logic that structures the journalistic field. However, despite this connection to mainstream media outlets, in the next section I examine how *Kotaku*’s
video game coverage often frequently pollutes the mainstream media and in this manner tries to distinguish itself from more popular or more prominent media outlets.

_The Intellectual and Professional Shortcomings of Public Figures and Mainstream Media_

*Kotaku*’s portrayal of video games as a unique artistic form and its insistence for mainstream society to recognize the medium’s valuable contributions influence the type of topics the website covers and the manner in which it does so. *Kotaku* devotes considerable attention to documenting and evaluating the depiction of video games by prominent public figures or mainstream media outlets, especially in instances where the website determines that these alternative media outlets or public figures are portraying the medium in a manner that contradicts *Kotaku*’s attempts at identifying and exploring video games’ social merits. Indeed, this topic proves to be one of the website’s most popular subjects to cover, and is present in 58% of the hermeneutically-rich articles in the sample (see Table 7). This concern with the portrayal of video games in other public venues assumes two different forms. In instances when *Kotaku* considers the media outlet or public figure to be negatively depicting video games, the website dismisses such portrayals by symbolically polluting the actors in question. Less frequently, *Kotaku* bestows praise on media outlets or public individuals it considers to positively portray video games.

One of the most popular manners in which *Kotaku* symbolically pollutes media outlets and public figures is by charactering such figures and institutions as idiotic and/or hypocritical. As the previous section illustrated, *Kotaku* articles often utilize this strategy to rebuke Ebert’s comments on video games. For example, one article reacts to Ebert’s
remarks by writing: “Oh, Rog! We’ve already ruled your opinion on the matter as archaic and out of touch, no need to trot that old horse out again”. As this example illustrates, Kotaku responds to negative portrayals of video games in other media outlets by not only crafting a counter-narrative espousing video game’s positive contributions but also by negatively characterizing opponents and thus disqualifying them as credible authorities on the subject.

One of the individuals to most often receive such treatment by Kotaku is anti-violent video game advocate and former Florida attorney Jack Thompson. Since the late 1990s, Thompson has embarked on a public campaign against violent video games, arguing that violent video games desensitize children from violence and promote if not outright train them to engage in such behavior. Over this time period Thompson served as the attorney for several families of school shooting victims who brought law suits against video game publishers. Besides his actions in the courtroom, Thompson was a regular on many cable news programs during the late 1990s and 2000s, often appearing during coverage of school shootings and other violent tragedies to argue that the killer’s actions stemmed from a fascination or addiction with violent video games. For example, only a few hours after the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007, Jack Thompson appeared on Fox News and declared definitively that the video game Counter Strike was to blame for this horrible event, despite the fact that authorities had not released any information about the shooter to the public. Thompson would repeat these claims on MSNBC the following night. A week after the shooting, authorities ultimately determined that the shooter was

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not a video game player, but instead devoted much of his leisure time to writing poetry and plays.\textsuperscript{86}

Perhaps due to his ability to garner mainstream media attention, \textit{Kotaku} regularly publishes articles covering Thompson’s public statements and media appearances. Rather than systematically dissect Thompson’s arguments, these articles usually briefly summarize his remarks before negatively portraying Thompson as irrational and inept. For example, one \textit{Kotaku} article mocks the titles \textit{Fox News} ascribes to Thompson when he appears on the network’s programs. The author writes:

\begin{quote}
Last seen on Fox News as a "School Shooting Expert", Jack Thompson is now, according to a Fox News broadcast last Thursday, a "First Amendment Attorney." This is not an April Fool's Joke. Neither is Fox News. Yet both strangely seem like one. Everyday of the year.\textsuperscript{87}
\end{quote}

\textit{Kotaku} delegitimizes Thompson’s comments on video games by portraying Thompson as idiotic and helplessly inept. In this manner, \textit{Kotaku} transforms Thompson into a comical character, someone who the website occasionally brings out to ridicule but certainly not someone whose ideas should be taken seriously.

Similar to \textit{Kotaku}’s reaction to public statements by Jack Thompson, \textit{Kotaku} articles often go beyond disputing such statements to specifically criticize the media outlet disseminating the comment as well. \textit{Kotaku}’s response to a local television news report claiming a children’s video game contains a pro-Islamic message demonstrates this tendency. According to the news program, a character in the video game \textit{Baby Pals} says “Islam is the light” when the player gives the baby a bath. In two different articles over


the span of three days, *Kotaku* describes the report as a complete fabrication of the video
game’s content and criticizes the media outlet for reporting such falsehoods. For
example, the first *Kotaku* article covering the story opens with the following statement:

> Does the Crave DS game "Baby Pals" *really* say "Islam is the light" when you
give your tot a bath? Of course not. That's ridiculous. Doesn't stop WTNH [the
local news station covering the story] from reporting it, though!\(^88\)

The article proceeds to note that the video game character’s audio consists entirely of
gibberish and contains no real words or phrases before ending by noting:

> Ah well. "BABY GAME SPEAKS GIBBERISH" wouldn't be as interesting an
angle as "BABY GAME IS ISLAMIC CHUCKY", would it?\(^89\)

As these quotes illustrate, in covering the story, *Kotaku* both documents the
misrepresentation and criticizes the news outlet. *Kotaku* not only dismisses the station’s
claims but also disqualifies the station from participating in any meaningful conversation
on video games by ridiculing the station’s credentials and accusing the station of being
more interested in ratings than truthful reporting. *Kotaku* responds in a similar manner to
video game coverage in major media outlets, including cable news channels and
mainstream print publications.

The final way in which *Kotaku* reacts to what it considers to be negative video
game coverage is to dismiss such claims as a waste of time or distraction from genuine
social issues. This type of response is most common in articles covering statements made
by politicians and government officials. For example, a *Kotaku* article responds in this
manner to a political ad for Mitt Romney from the 2008 Presidential Campaign. The ad

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\(^88\) Plunkett, Luke. 2009. “Well, Of *Course* There Are Secret Islamic Messages Hidden In This DS
Game.” *Kotaku*, January 28, Retrieved September 10, 2011 (http://kotaku.com/5140704/well-of-course-
there-are-secret-islamic-messages-hidden-in-this-ds-game).

\(^89\) Plunkett, Luke. 2009. “Well, Of *Course* There Are Secret Islamic Messages Hidden In This DS
Game.” *Kotaku*, January 28, Retrieved September 10, 2011 (http://kotaku.com/5140704/well-of-course-
there-are-secret-islamic-messages-hidden-in-this-ds-game).
portrays American youth as besieged by violent and sexually graphic television, movies, and video games and ends with Romney promising that he will “clean up this town”. In response, the Kotaku article sarcastically comments: “Good to see someone tackling the hard issues our nation's youngest generation should be most concerned about with the help of shitty analogies”. As this example illustrates, the website often ridicules politicians who treat video games as a legitimate concern for wasting the public’s time and tax-payers’ money. Other articles identify a more insidious tactic and describe such statements as a deliberate attempt by politicians to distract the American public from political corruption and the country’s growing inequality.

Although the majority of Kotaku’s articles covering video game commentary in other media outlets and social spaces focus on dismissing what the site considers to be negative portrayals of video games, occasionally the website also identifies instances in which these outside publications cover video games in a more positive manner. In these cases, Kotaku praises the particular commentator or media outlet for recognizing video games’ social and aesthetic merits and not perpetuating the mainstream media’s usual misrepresentations and falsehoods about video games. For example, one Kotaku article applauds an opinion piece in The Guardian by noted author Naomi Alderman. In the original article, Alderman describes playing video games as “a rich and magical experience” and argues that violent video games like Grand Theft Auto may promote critical reflexivity amongst players. Elaborating on this point, Alderman writes:

It is true that in Grand Theft Auto 3, to take an example that is the subject of repeated concern, the main character, Carl Johnson, shoots other characters, steals cars, and sets up a series of racketeering operations staffed by hoodlums. GTA3 also contains ambulance missions in which the characters ferry people to hospital; these tend not to get so much attention. The world of Grand Theft Auto does contain violence and misogyny; but then, so does The Godfather, or Goodfellas. So, for that matter, does The Iliad. GTA3 is set in a tough, dangerous world. Johnson is trying to clean up his neighbourhood. But as a dispossessed, orphaned young black man, he has no option but to re-form his neighbourhood gang to do so. The makers of this game, like the makers of any movie about gangland, can stand squarely behind the art they have created and say: this represents reality. If it offends you, don't criticise the art, but take action to improve the world around you.\footnote{Alderman, Naomi. 2008. “If we deny children access to all computer games, we deprive them of a rich and magical experience.” \textit{The Guardian} G2, April 9, p. 2.}


In the previous section, my analysis demonstrates how \textit{Kotaku’s} video game coverage (and video game coverage in the Arts section of \textit{The New York Times}) attempts to create a semi-autonomous aesthetic field for video games. My work in this section reveals how \textit{Kotaku} also constructs a symbolic distinction between \textit{Kotaku} and what it describes as mainstream public figures and media outlets. The website predominantly depicts public figures and media outlets as ignorant, inept, and untrustworthy. In this sense, \textit{Kotaku} creates a moral boundary between itself and the broader media environment. According to this discourse, whereas \textit{Kotaku} clearly understands video games and never manipulates its coverage to attract ratings, mainstream public figures and media outlets are ignorant and not to be trusted.
In addition to Kotaku’s attempts to carve out a semi-autonomous space for both video games and its brand of journalism, the type of social critique present in Kotaku’s video game coverage differs greatly from the type of criticism present in The New York Times’ video game coverage. Of course, The New York Times’ predominant portrayal of video games as a social threat serves as a critique against video games and/or the video game industry. However, The New York Times’ video game coverage rarely contains critical statements that oppose or reject the position of authority figures on a given topic. The small proportion of articles that do contain disparaging remarks towards authority figures mainly focus on video game companies. In such instances, the newspaper condemns video game publishers for marketing dangerous products towards children. Yet these articles almost never contain actual statements by video game publishers or even directly chastise specific video game companies. Instead, the newspaper primarily focuses its criticisms at video games writ large.

In contrast to The New York Times’ video game coverage, Kotaku’s video game coverage frequently criticizes authority figures from several different institutional affiliations. As the examples included in this chapter indicate, Kotaku articles routinely reject and criticize politicians and media outlets. This discursive feature is in direct contrast with the vast majority of The New York Times’ video game coverage, where statements by political figures (if present) are predominantly used to support the article’s main position and statements from alternative media outlets are almost nonexistent. Furthermore, Kotaku’s critiques frequently extend beyond politics and other media outlets. The website often reprimands video game companies for what it considers to be corrupt business practices and even rebukes academic research that the publication finds

Kotaku’s video game coverage also differs from The New York Times’ video game coverage in the sense that the website is much more likely to include contrasting viewpoints. The New York Times’ predominant form of video game coverage hardly ever contains contrasting opinions or simply brief disclaimers noting that not everyone may agree with the article’s position. The New York Times rarely includes statements by video game publishers or developers defending the medium. Moreover, The New York Times almost never reference research whose findings fail to substantiate or contradict the article’s depiction of video games as a serious social threat. Within the extremely small subset of articles that do include contrasting positions, the most common form this assumes involves a brief quote by a video game publisher or industry representative who defends the industry’s rating system in response to allegations that video games promote violent behavior.\footnote{Hernandez, Raymond. 2005. “Clinton Urges Inquiry Into Hidden Sex in Grand Theft Auto Game.” The New York Times, Thursday, July 14, Metropolitan Desk, p. 3; Mifflin, Lawrence. 1999. “To Clinton’s Call, an Ambivalent Response.” The New York Times, Tuesday, May 4, National Desk, p. 28.} But again, even this counter-position is quite rare. The New York Times’ overall lack of multiple viewpoints or positions makes it appear as if the newspaper’s portrayal of video games as a serious threat is universally agreed upon and
thus not controversial. Indeed, for the overwhelming majority of evaluative articles in
*The New York Times*, there appears to be nothing at all to debate.

Contrary to *The New York Times*, *Kotaku*’s coverage frequently includes statements
that differ from the article’s own position. Many of the examples I’ve included in this
analysis illustrate this tendency. *Kotaku* articles regularly include critical statements
about video games made in other media outlets, such as Ebert’s unwillingness to
consider video games as art or cable news segments on the dangers of video games.
Moreover, *Kotaku* articles frequently include quotes from politicians pushing for
regulation against violent video games and even summarize research that finds a
correlation between video games and antisocial behavior. Of course, the author’s focus
in all of these articles is to discredit these contrasting opinions. However, *Kotaku*’s
coverage at least exposes readers to different positions by including summaries and quotes from viewpoints in opposition to the website’s own depiction of video games.

*Aesthetic Evaluations With a Journalistic Ethos*

*Kotaku*’s critiques of alternative media outlets often include a definition of
characteristics the site considers essential to “quality” video game coverage. These
pieces, which constitute 10% of *Kotaku*’s hermeneutically-rich articles, identify the proper
methods necessary for video game websites to provide “unbiased” video game coverage (See Table 7). As this section demonstrates, *Kotaku* does not treat this topic lightly. Numerous articles explicitly describe biasness as a serious concern. These articles often highlight the biased work of other websites as examples of what *Kotaku* will not do and what the industry in general must avoid. Moreover, this conversation often extends into a broader discussion on journalism’s vital role in civil society.

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Numerous Kotaku articles express concern over what the website describes as an alarming practice amongst some video game media outlets: publishing reviews for popular games based on nonretail versions of the games. According to Kotaku, many media outlets compete to be amongst the first to publish a review for a massively popular game in order to attract the large amount of video game fans that are anxiously waiting to hear how the game came together. However, in order to do so, websites often base their reviews on unfinished versions of the video game. For Kotaku, the problem with this practice is that it may not be reflective of the experience audiences will have with the video game actually released to the public and thus such reviews may be providing readers with distorted impressions. For example, one Kotaku article criticizes many of the most popular video game websites for publishing reviews of the popular video game Little Big Planet based on impressions from a “beta” (unfinished) version of the game. According to the Kotaku article, the problem is that the retail version of the game suffered from many problems, including a nonfunctioning online component. As the article notes, reviews on many of the other major video game websites (GameSpot, IGN, 1Up) not only reviewed Little Big Planet positively but also commented on the game’s online features. From this discovery the article concludes that these other major websites must not be playing the retail version of the game. The article strongly revokes this practice and explains:

I suspect many of the reviews relied on that beta of the game for their online impressions, which doesn't seem like a very good decision to me. Perhaps a better option would be to forestall a review until the reviewer has the retail, boxed code in their hands. Then they know they’re writing about the same game. But even that has issues. If the game has major online elements those often won’t be up and running until the game is released. Sometimes, like the case of an MMO, even writing a review the week of release is problematic. Sometimes writing it the month of release is a problem. For now the best solution seems to be that
reviewers should be very specific about what they could and couldn’t play in the game they reviewed. And when playing online they should mention if they used the public servers or one set up specifically for reviews.\textsuperscript{97}

As this quote illustrates, Kotaku’s major concern is not so much reviewing nonretail versions of games as it is other media outlets failing to inform readers what precisely they played for their reviews. In other words, in criticizing other prominent video game media outlets, Kotaku issues a call for greater transparency amongst video game reviewers.

Kotaku articles react aggressively to what the website identifies as potential encroachments on journalistic autonomy. More specifically, several Kotaku articles in my sample treat efforts by video game publishers to manipulate or censor media coverage as attempts to bend journalistic independence to commercial interests. For example, Kotaku devotes several articles to covering Jeff Gerstmann’s firing as editorial director for the popular video game website Gamespot. Kotaku’s initial article on this subject claims that Gerstmann’s termination may have been the result of his unflattering review for Kane and Lynch, a video game whose publisher was a major advertiser on the site at the time. According to an “anonymous tipster” who works at Gamespot, the publisher took issue with the critical review and threatened to pull its ad campaign from the site. The first Kotaku article on this topic describes Gerstmann’s termination as starting a “distressing precedent”.\textsuperscript{98} Kotaku follows this story closely over the next few days. One article provides a detailed summary of an anonymous article posted on Kotaku’s sister site Valleywag. The author, who claims to be a current Gamespot employee, explains that the Gamespot staff has been under increasing pressure to create positive content for their

advertisers ever since Josh Larson became executive editor the previous year. The author also provides a detailed account of the current environment at Gamespot, explaining:

I was in the meeting where Josh Larson was trying to explain this firing and the guy had absolutely no response to any of the criticisms we were sending his way. He kept dodging the question, saying that there were "multiple instances of tone" in the reviews that he hadn't been happy about, but that wasn't Jeff's problem since we all vet every review. He also implied that "AAA" titles deserved more attention when they were being reviewed, which sounded to all of us that he was implying that they should get higher scores, especially since those titles are usually more highly advertised on our site….Unfortunately after Kasavin [previous executive editor] left the church-and-state separation between the sales teams and the editorial team has cracked, and with Jeff's firing I think it's clear that the management now has no interest at all in integrity and are instead looking for an editorial team that will be nicer to the advertisers. When companies make games as downright contemptible as Kane and Lynch, they deserve to be called on it. I guess you'll have to go to Onion or a smaller site for objective reviews now, because everyone at GS [Gamespot] now thinks that if they give a low score to a high-profile game, they'll be shitcanned. Everyone's fucking scared and we're all hoping to get Josh Larson removed from his position because no one trusts him anymore. If that doesn't happen then look for every game to be Game of the Year material at GameSpot.99

As these examples demonstrate, Kotaku describes the website’s emphasis on honesty and transparency as vital in providing readers with an accurate understanding of video games from which the readers can make their own judgments. In certain respects, perhaps as a reflection of the staff’s strong journalistic ties, this emphasis mirrors the journalistic field’s own discourse on independence and objectivity (Hallin and Manchini 2004; Schudson 1978; Shoemaker and Reese 1996; Weaver et al. 2007). Indeed, many Kotaku articles characterize the website as a journalistic endeavor. For example, in his first

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article for the website, Stephen Totilo notes that Kotaku’s “strong journalistic core” is what motivated him to make the move from MTV’s Multiplayer blog to Kotaku.100

Given that Kotaku uses aspects of the journalistic ethos to evaluate “quality” video game coverage, it should not be surprising that the website holds the ideal of “traditional journalism” in such high regards. Multiple articles consider traditional journalism to be absolutely integral to a healthy democracy. For example, in one brief article, Brian Crecente expresses sadness over Rocky Mountain News’ probable closure.101 Crecente elaborates on this topic a few weeks later, criticizing the public’s apathy towards the newspaper industry’s likely demise. In the article, Crecente writes:

What I think people don't get is that newspapers and magazines are where news is born. Sure websites, like Kotaku, do their fair share of reporting, but very few sites are 100 percent original. And even the ones that do only run original articles, those articles are often inspired by or backed up with newspaper or magazine stories. To me newspapers are like a utility. They're like electricity or telephone service….Many local television and radio news programs lean heavily on news reported in newspapers. The Associated Press gets a bulk of its stories from member papers. Without a paper all of that is going to dry up. And the people who step into that vacuum, I fear, won't be as interested in covering the mundane but necessary, like school board and city council meetings. They won't call the police station every single day to see what's going on or double check police-involved shootings. They won’t question government. And that, that is a pretty scary thought.102

As this statement illustrates, Crecente’s portrayal of traditional journalism’s social significance is similar to the American journalistic field’s own conceptualization of journalism as a vital public service.

Sociopolitical Commentary

Although my analysis so far has focused on Kotaku’s emphasis on video games’ artistic attributes, the publication’s highly critical style of coverage, and its endorsement of the professional journalistic ethos, my summaries of these themes clearly illustrate how Kotaku’s video game coverage often moves into subjects beyond traditional aesthetic concerns. For example, Kotaku’s passionate assertion for society’s recognition of video games’ social merits often permeates into a conversation on the medium’s ability to critically explore such “serious” topics as sexuality and military conflict. Similarly, Kotaku often counters other public spaces’ critical portrayals of video games by dismissing such claims as distractions from what the site identifies as real issues threatening society, including unemployment and social inequality. Additionally, Kotaku’s articles on “quality” games journalism often extend into discussions on the social significance of journalism in general. Although these articles clearly touch upon broader sociopolitical issues while exploring some other video game-related topic or theme, Kotaku’s video game coverage also includes many articles that more directly and more substantively engage with sociopolitical issues. In these articles, Kotaku utilizes recent events in the video game community to explicitly explore such broader social issues as race, sexuality, and gender. Overall, roughly 29% of Kotaku’s hermeneutically rich articles engage in these broader discussions (See Table 7).

In general, Kotaku’s sociopolitical articles focus on identifying and rejecting what the site considers to be dangerous and hurtful stereotypes. The website predominantly focuses on stereotypes relating to race, gender, and sexuality. For example, the author of one Kotaku article voices support to a statement made by a video game producer during
an interview with \textit{MTV Multiplayer} blog.\textsuperscript{103} In the interview, the producer criticizes the character Cole Train from the very popular video game \textit{Gears of War}. Many video game critics expressed concern that Cole Train perpetuates racial stereotypes by speaking predominantly in an urban vernacular and constantly referring to himself in the third person. The \textit{Kotaku} article includes the following quote from the original \textit{MTV Multiplayer} piece in which the producer expresses this precise concern:

Cole Train is basically like every other effin' black character in a video game. Like here comes the urban stereotype. Where is this 1990's — not even 2000 — black slang, where does this fit in this futuristic world that doesn't even take place on Earth? They go really far to do a lot of fictional justifications for this culture that they've built, and they go right back to this urban stereotype for the black character. I'm not knocking Epic [the game’s developer]; the game was fun and gorgeous. But it's just a lack of thought, right? All it does is reinforce dumb stereotypes and it sort of reinforces casual racism.\textsuperscript{104}

The \textit{Kotaku} article summarizing this interview ultimately agrees with the producer’s statement, ending the piece by noting: “The man has a point. A very, very valid one.”

Similarly, a different \textit{Kotaku} article examines what the author identifies as “racist, hateful speech” amongst user-created content for the video game \textit{Forza Motorsport 2}. The author describes the video game players who created the content as “brainless” and expresses hope that the game’s publisher (Microsoft) will respond with an appropriately “swift and harsh” punishment.\textsuperscript{105}

To be certain, not all of \textit{Kotaku}’s articles exploring race focus specifically on identifying racist stereotypes. For example, one \textit{Kotaku} article praises Rockstar’s


announcement that the next *Grand Theft Auto* 4 expansion would feature a Latino
protagonist. The author of the article treats this announcement as a promising sign for the
entire video game industry, explaining:

> The newly-announced Ballad of Gay Tony, coming this fall, will star Luis Lopez. His presence as the episode’s lead will further the diversification of the series’ string of white and black protagonists that most recently saw the inclusion of its first Asian lead, *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars'* Huang Lee. Lopez is believed to be of Dominican descent.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, the article draws a connection between Rockstar’s announcement and
President Obama’s nomination of Judge Sonia Sotomayor for Supreme Court Justice. The
article considers the nomination of Sotomayor to be a momentous event in American
history, noting that Sotomayor would be America’s third female Supreme Court Justice
and the first of Hispanic descent. According to the article, the fact that both these
announcements occurred on the same day should not go unnoticed. As the article
explains:

> We're not saying whether anybody should or shouldn't play their games or think about their Supreme Court Justices with regard to what ethnicity those people are. But the parallel milestone announcements, coming in the same day, can't be ignored.¹⁰⁷

According to the author of this piece, both the protagonist of the next installment in the
immensely popular *Grand Theft Auto* series and President Obama’s Supreme Court
nomination are promising signs that American society is growing more accepting of
racial and ethnic diversity.

As these examples illustrate, many articles in *Kotaku* explore race, treating what
the site considers to be racist portrayals as dangerous while viewing what the site regards

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as progressive portrayals in video games as a powerful step forward not just for the medium but also for society in general. Perhaps the most striking illustration of Kotaku’s frequent focus on race and correspondingly the website’s capacity to function as an aesthetic public sphere appears in the website’s coverage of and participation in the debate over Resident Evil 5’s (RE5) potentially racist imagery. The fact that my random sample includes two separate Kotaku articles covering this debate is not surprising. Kotaku and other major video game media outlets intensely covered the debate over RE5’s imagery over the three years of my analysis. For the purpose of this analysis, I only discuss Kotaku articles on the RE5 debate that appear in the months I randomly selected to study.

The first Kotaku article covering this debate focuses on comments made by the video game journalist N’Gai Croal. Although Croal was not the first game journalist to express concern with the game, Croal’s prominent position within the community as a video game journalist for the popular general readership magazine Newsweek caused much of the ensuing debate to center around his initial comments, which appeared in an article on MTV’s Multiplayer blog. The MTV Multiplayer article includes the following quote by Croal:

I looked at the "RE5" trailer and I was like, "Wow, clearly no one black worked on this game."...There was a lot of imagery in that trailer that dovetailed with classic racist imagery...There was stuff like even before the point in the trailer where the crowd turned into zombies. There sort of being, in sort of post-modern parlance, they're sort of "othered." They're hidden in shadows, you can barely see their eyes, and the perspective of the trailer is not even someone who's coming to help the people. It's like they're all dangerous; they all need to be killed. It's not even like one cute African -- or Haitian or Caribbean -- child could be saved. They're all dangerous men, women and children. They all have to be killed. And
given the history, given the not so distant post-colonial history, you would say to yourself, why would you uncritically put up those images?108

Upon the article’s publication, many of the biggest gaming journalism websites reported on Croal’s comments, including Kotaku, which quickly posted an article entitled “Clearly No One Black Worked on This Game.”109 The article, written by Brian Ashcraft, summarizes Croal’s comments and includes statements from the original Multiplayer article such as the example above. Ashcraft ends the article by writing: “Knowing Japan and the Japanese, I’m willing to bet this wasn’t even on their radar. Hence, the problem.” In this brief statement Ashcraft suggests that the fact that Capcom is a Japanese developer and thus most likely unfamiliar with America’s racial history is not a legitimate justification for the imagery. Indeed, Japan’s ignorance of this issue may make the imagery even more problematic. Consequently, Kotaku’s first article on this topic ultimately comes out in support of Croal’s original comments.

Croal’s comments and the media coverage that accompanied them provoke an intense debate within many of the major gaming media outlets and fan websites that endured from the trailer to the release of the game two years later. Throughout this period, Kotaku eagerly participated in the debate and published several articles covering the subject. For example, Kotaku quickly followed up its first article on Croal’s comments with a second one the next day discussing comments made by RE5’s producer in an interview with the Japanese video game magazine Famitsu. Although the Famitsu interview provides new information about RE5 in general, the Kotaku article focuses

entirely on the producer’s explanation for the game’s African setting. The Kotaku article notes that the producer claims in the Famitsu interview that the Resident Evil series has always been about examining the concept of light and darkness and that RE5 explores this theme more fully than any previous installment in the series by setting it in Africa, humanity’s “birthplace”. The author of the Kotaku article uses the producer’s explanation as further evidence of the game’s troubling imagery. As a conclusion to the piece, the author writes:

To me it’s sounding more and more to be influenced by the famous Joseph Conrad novel The Heart of Darkness, a blending of both the metaphorical and literal "white" vs. "black" effects of European ivory-fueled colonialism. But Conrad's text has more than once been accused of its own racism, most famously by Chinua Achebe.110

The author’s suggestion that the developers of RE5 may have been influenced by Joseph Conrad’s novel Heart of Darkness is certainly a serious accusation. As the author notes, numerous scholars and cultural commentators have strongly criticized Conrad’s famous work for perpetuating racial stereotypes that dehumanize Africans and legitimate European colonialism. In this sense, the Kotaku article symbolically pollutes RE5 as perpetuating a long enduring and incredibly dangerous legacy of Western racism.

Kotaku’s participation in the debate over the meaning of RE5’s imagery serves as a clear demonstration of entertainment commentary’s ability to function as an aesthetic public sphere. As this episode illustrates, Kotaku does not solely cover video games in term of their entertainment value or aesthetic credentials. Instead, the authors of these two articles actively participate in this debate over the meaning of RE5’s imagery and even share statements made in other video game media outlets’ coverage of this issue.

Both of Kotaku’s articles on this debate that appear in my sample discuss in rather sophisticated detail the enduring history of racism, colonialism, and the role popular culture may have played in promoting both. It is important for civil society scholars to recognize that these conversations do not appear in explicitly political or socially-oriented venues, but instead in social spaces devoted to discussing what is conventionally understood as an entertainment format.

In addition, this episode marks perhaps one of the first times a debate originating within the video game community permeated into broader or more mainstream media outlets, including two of the most widely read and praised newspapers in America today. We should not be quick to dismiss the significance of this event. As my earlier analysis of video game coverage in The New York Times as well as Williams’ (2003) work on video game coverage in major mainstream magazines indicates, mainstream newspapers and magazines have historically treated video games through a social threat or dystopian lens. However, as my exploration in the introductory chapter demonstrates, the coverage of RE5 in both The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal neither treats video games as the root of all evil in America nor evaluates RE5 through the traditional aesthetic review template. Instead, the articles not only report on but also enter into the debate over RE5’s meaning. At least in this instance a degree of communication emerges between mainstream media and the video game enthusiast press. In this example, members of America’s more privileged public spheres participate in conversations that originally appear in video game media outlets. In this sense, through their coverage of this debate, widely read newspapers such as The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal not only recognize the existence of the gaming community’s informal public
sphere, but also provide an opportunity for some of the discourses present in the video game community to be exposed to a much broader audience.

However, it is important to mention that this dialogue is far from egalitarian. Although mainstream media outlets covering a debate that originated in the more peripheral video game journalism community is a significant occurrence in and of itself; the manner in which these outlets participate and frame this debate reflects the unequal position of these different media outlets in America’s overarching public sphere. This power differential manifests itself in the fact that both The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal pieces never reference any of the original critics or video game publications covering this debate. The New York Times’ article notes that “some black journalists” first voiced these concerns, but fails to mention any specific details on who these journalists are or the fact that they work for video game media outlets. Moreover, The Wall Street Journal piece includes a multitude of quotes from academics and industry figures on the topic of racist imagery in video games, but the article provides no comments from any of RE5’s initial critics or the video game press in general. This dynamic is consistent with my findings from the previous chapter. As I will explore in the next section, The New York Times’ video game coverage rarely acknowledges the work of other media outlets in general. This feature of mainstream media’s coverage is in stark contrast to the strong focus and significance Kotaku places on how the mainstream media covers video games. Whereas major media outlets’ prominent position in civil society allows such publications to generally ignore more peripheral media outlets, this prominence forces the video game press to take what these publications say about video games seriously.
Comparing the Discursive Characteristics of Kotaku and The New York Times

Kotaku’s primary portrayal of video games as a serious form of artistic expression results in coverage that often extends beyond traditional aesthetic concerns. As my analysis in this chapter indicates, this insistence often leads the website to publish articles that strongly criticize public figures, media outlets, and even politicians and government officials. In issuing these critiques, Kotaku often offers definitions of what constitutes quality journalism and provides a defense of the professional journalistic ethos. Moreover, Kotaku’s depiction of video games as a serious artistic format often results in the website publishing articles that directly address and debate broader sociopolitical matters. In this manner, Kotaku’s video game coverage clearly facilitates the construction of an aesthetic public sphere.

Beyond Kotaku’s competing portrayal of video games relative to The New York Times’ predominant portrayal of video games as a social threat, the narratives that emerge from both media outlets’ coverage vary in their discursive attributes. As I have already discussed, Kotaku’s critical lens is much broader in scope than The New York Times. Kotaku’s articles do not just reject alternative interpretations of video games; they also directly rebuke prominent public figures and media outlets that disseminate such positions. Whereas The New York Times’ critical coverage almost exclusively focuses on video games in general, Kotaku’s regularly rebukes and questions the credentials of influential public figures from a wide variety of fields.

One possible limitation of this type of coverage is that Kotaku articles predominantly champion one interpretation of video games. It is rare to find an evaluative article on the website whose main argument rejects the depiction of video games as a
serious form of cultural expression. In this sense, Kotaku’s evaluation of video games is strongly isomorphic. However, although Kotaku articles may endorse one specific understanding of video games, the articles are much more likely than The New York Times to include summaries and statements from opposing positions. Even though the article ultimately criticizes such statements, readers are still exposed to contrasting interpretations of video games.

In addition, Kotaku’s evaluative articles exhibit a different type of intertextuality relative to the The New York Times’ predominant form of video game coverage. Although articles in The New York Times often group video games with other “violent” forms of entertainment such as movies and popular music, these references remain general and on the whole articles characterizing video games as a dangerous social threat rarely link video games to any specific cultural text. Of course, both the video game coverage in the Arts section of The New York Times in the 2000s and Kotaku’s coverage draw connections between video games and critically claimed pieces of popular culture in order to defend video games as a legitimate form of art. However, Kotaku incorporates a wider range of references relative to the Arts section of The New York Times. As my analysis in this chapter indicates, Kotaku’s coverage regularly includes comments made in other video game publications. For example, several Kotaku articles lend credence to claims made by other members of the video game press, such as Maggie Greene’s endorsement of a Gamasutra article on the need for more games to tackle serious issues.  

However, not all of Kotaku’s references to other video game media outlets are so affirmative. The website also frequently criticizes other video game publications, as

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demonstrated by the multiple articles in my sample that express concern with the questionable review practices of other popular video game outlets.

*Kotaku* does not limit its coverage of alternative media outlets to only video game publications. The website also devotes considerable attention to video game discussions in mainstream media outlets. In fact, *Kotaku* occasionally covers video game commentary in media outlets from other countries, such as the Japanese video game publication *Famitsu* and the popular British newspaper *The Guardian*. Due to this wide assortment of media references, *Kotaku*’s video game commentary constructs a complex media landscape, exposing readers to a vast array of different media outlets, and connecting the website’s own focus with prominent mainstream media outlets and the journalistic field in general. Although both publications include a certain degree of intertextuality in their video game coverage, overall *The New York Times*’ form of intertextuality is much more one-dimensional relative to *Kotaku*. Whereas *Kotaku*’s coverage frequently draws connections between video games and other cultural texts and references to video game coverage in other media outlets, *The New York Times*’ alternative narrative generally only does the former.

Besides these two forms of intertextuality, *Kotaku* also makes references to other popular culture objects as a means to insert humor into their arguments. For example, in an article covering criticisms levied against the video game *Manhunt 2* by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), the author uses humor to help dispute the alliance’s claims. In response to the group’s claims that *Manhunt 2* perpetuates the dangerous

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stereotype that those suffering from mental illness are violent, the author suggests that the alliance discuss their concern with the comic book superhero Batman. Referencing Arkham Asylum, the fictional insane asylum in the Batman universe, the author writes:

Have you ever been to Arkham Asylum? Those dudes are so crazy they had to order an entire truckload of them crazy buckets, and there were still a bunch of guys going bucketless. Poor Batman. I kid of course, but Arkham Asylum is an excellent example of another fictional mental hospital where the patients would kill you in several creative ways were you to wander in on door-unlocking day (worst idea ever). If a game were made starring Batman fighting his way out of Arkham after being trapped deep inside when say, an earthquake hits, freeing all of the inmates, it would be completely awesome. It would also be fictional, and we'd recognize that, just like we recognize that Manhunt 2 is fictional.\textsuperscript{113}

Ultimately, the author’s reply follows one of the site’s most common responses to critiques against video games: those issuing these critiques do not understand video games. But like many other Kotaku articles, the author includes a comical exploration of Batman’s adventures in Arkham Asylum to insert an element of humor into the article’s takedown of NAMI’s statements.

As these examples help illustrate, Kotaku’s video game coverage includes a wider variety of intertextual references relative to The New York Times video game coverage. Both The New York Times’ video game coverage (the social threat narrative and the art narrative) and Kotaku draw a connection between video games and other forms of popular culture. However, Kotaku’s video game coverage frequently references video game commentary in other media outlets.

Overall, intertextual references serve as the primary manner in which Kotaku authors substantiate their positions. Of course, this reliance on intertextual references is at least partially a reflection of the site’s emphasis on defending video games as an artistic

format, a topic that does not lend itself easily to what is conventionally considered to be objective or factual evidence. Moreover, Kotaku articles broaden their discursive styles when more explicitly engaging in sociopolitical commentary. For example, in the articles covering the RE5 debate that appear in my sample, the authors who consider the game to contain troubling imagery substantiate their claims by connecting the imagery to colonial and post-colonial portrayals of Africans as savage others.

The manner in which Kotaku articles attempt to substantiate their positions is in stark contrast to The New York Times. Articles in The New York Times that portray video games as harmful generally rely on assertion and appeals to common sense. For example, a 2005 article by Susan Sontag attributes the Abu Ghraib torture scandal in part to the “video games of killing that are a principal entertainment of boys”. Sontag offers no evidence to validate her claims. In this sense, Sontag’s statement appeals to the reader’s commonsense. According to this logic, video games contain violent imagery and thus must create violent people. The newspaper occasionally includes quotes from researchers and other authority figures to corroborate their claims. However, even in these instances, the articles rarely cite relevant research. For example, in a 1994 letter to the editor, noted author and popular scholar Myriam Miedzian claims that parents are perpetuating gender inequality by allowing their sons to play video games that “focus on male power and dominance and the use of violent means to achieve those ends.” Miedzian offers no relevant research to support her serious claim. Instead, the validity of this claim rests solely on the author’s credentials. To be fair, many of the social threat articles focusing

on childhood obesity in the 2000s cite recent medical research. However, the social threat narratives focusing on displacement and violence continue to utilize appeals to common sense and corroborative statements from authority figures throughout the first decade of the 2000s.

Despite these differences, *Kotaku* and *The New York Times* exhibit certain discursive similarities. Consistent with *The New York Times*’ predominant portrayal of video games as a social threat and the newspaper’s alternative depiction of video games as a valuable artistic format, *Kotaku* constructs a dramatic portrayal of video games’ moral worth and social potential in order to defend the idea that video games are a legitimate form of artistic expression. In this sense, although the two outlets may differ on video games’ specific implications, *Kotaku* and *The New York Times* characterize video games through the lens of a high-mimetic narrative and thus both call on the broader public to recognize the medium’s social significance.

However, *Kotaku* adds a unique narrative component to this characterization that is absent in the majority of *The New York Times*’ coverage. Whereas *The New York Times*’ video game coverage rarely includes opposing viewpoints, *Kotaku* articles not only include dissenting positions but also utilize a low-mimetic portrayal to refute and dismiss statements from public figures that contradict the publication’s own understanding of video games. As my earlier analysis indicates, *Kotaku* regularly describes such public figures as misguided and ill-informed. Moreover, it attacks politicians critical of video games as foolish and wasting the public’s time by concentrating on non-issues. Similarly, the publication describes mainstream media outlets disseminating critical portrayals of video games as idiotic and operating in
violation of journalistic standards. In this sense, Kotaku uses low-mimetic techniques to deflate or “de-mystify” the privileged position of influential public figures and media outlets (Ku 2001). Kotaku does not describe these figures as diabolical or evil, but instead mocks them in a manner that calls their credibility into question.

Video game coverage in both The New York Times and Kotaku rarely use personal accounts to support authors’ positions. The few social threat articles in The New York Times that include personal accounts usually do so to substantiate the author’s position or a claim by another authority figure. For example, an article on America’s growing childhood obesity combines statements and studies from medical practitioners with the story of Keith Morgan, a thirteen year old junior high school student from Memphis, Tennessee. To help contextualize researchers’ findings that children’s lifestyles are becoming alarmingly sedentary, the author includes direct quotes from both Keith and his mother as testament to many American families’ experience grappling with this serious health issue. The minimal presence of personal accounts in Kotaku’s evaluative coverage may come as a surprise given the site’s blog-style format. Of course, as my earlier description of the website’s overall content demonstrates, personal accounts certainly occupy a prominent position in the site’s offerings. However, these personal accounts rarely appear in order to substantiate an article’s particular position on the meaning of video games or the medium’s social significance. Consistent with The New York Times, the small amount of evaluative Kotaku articles that do include personal accounts do so to support the author’s position. In this sense, the inclusion of personal anecdotes is not only incredibly rare in both outlets, but also does not provide a different

interpretation of video games. The personal experience simply serves as a testament to
the author’s authoritative position.

Moreover, although Kotaku’s coverage exhibits a higher level of ideological pluralism, Kotaku and The New York Times both possess a low level of institutional pluralism in terms of authorship. Journalists and other media professionals author the vast majority of both publications’ video game coverage (see Table 8). In regards to the institutional affiliation of the figures quoted in both publications’ video game coverage, politicians and academics make up the bulk of the figures present in The New York Times’ video game coverage. In contrast, media figures and creative workers (primarily video game designers, film directors, and screenwriters) occupy a larger presence in Kotaku’s coverage relative to The New York Times (see Table 9). Kotaku’s higher frequency of quotes from media professionals serves as a reflection of the publication’s focus on video game coverage in other media outlets. Similarly, the greater presence of statements from creative workers in Kotaku’s coverage relative to The New York Times’ social threat narrative is not surprising given Kotaku’s prominent focus on portraying video games as an artistic medium.

Conclusion

Kotaku’s emphatic insistence that video games are a serious artistic format results in video game coverage that is highly critical of prominent public figures and media outlets. Moreover, this type of coverage often extends into discussions on serious sociopolitical issues. In covering video games in this manner, Kotaku attempts to carve out a semi-autonomous space for video games. As my analysis indicates, Kotaku not only treats video games as a legitimate artistic medium but also insists that video games’
unparalleled level of interactivity allows the medium to provide a uniquely powerful experience. In this sense, *Kotaku* distinguishes video games from other art forms. To be certain, *The New York Times* also portrays video games as a unique form of artistic expression. However, the newspaper’s coverage rarely ever rebukes prominent public figures and mainstream media outlets offering contradictory interpretations. In this sense, *Kotaku*’s video game coverage more actively enforces its portrayal of video games as an intrinsically valuable and distinctive form of art.

The often serious manner in which *Kotaku* covers video games also occasionally results in a bid for its own unique position in the journalistic field. As my analysis in this chapter illustrates, *Kotaku* regularly describes mainstream media outlets as foolish and deceptive. Similarly, *Kotaku* often faults video game publications for violating the professional principles of the journalistic field. The website often combines these critiques with promises to its audience that it will not engage in such unethical practices. In this manner, *Kotaku* actively distinguishes itself from mainstream media outlets and other video game publications. Whereas mainstream media outlets clearly do not understand video games and feel no need to validate the sensational claims they publish, *Kotaku* portrays itself as clearly understanding video games and assures readers that it will not engage in sensationalism in order to garner a larger audience. Similarly, *Kotaku* also promises to stand above what it describes as the shady practices many of the other popular video game websites engage in with major video game publishers. Overall, *Kotaku*’s coverage depicts the publication as separate and professionally superior to many mainstream outlets and the conventional video game press.
Although *Kotaku* may characterize itself as a unique entity within the video game community and the journalistic field in general, it is important to recognize that the website often relies on civil society’s predominant cultural structure and the cultural codes that define the journalistic field in order to make this distinction. For example, *Kotaku* rejects the prominent portrayal of video games as a mindless and possibly dangerous distraction by insisting that video games are a uniquely valuable art form. The website’s response reflects the serious–entertainment binary that shapes civil society. *Kotaku* does not embrace spectacle, but instead describes video games as art and thus repositions video games on the “serious” side of the binary. Moreover, despite its insistence that video games are a unique artistic form, *Kotaku* often draws connections between video games and other formats conventionally considered to be art. Similarly, *Kotaku* uses many of the professional principles of the journalistic field in order to highlight deficiencies in mainstream media outlets and the video game press. Consequently, although *Kotaku* may subvert certain conventional understandings of video games and the mainstream media in order to distinguish itself, the publication is not entirely isolated from civil society’s predominant cultural structure.

My work also illustrates how *Kotaku*’s video game coverage often functions as an aesthetic public sphere. Overall, *Kotaku*’s video game coverage more strongly satisfies many of the key principles scholars identify as fostering a democratic media discourse relative to *The New York Times*’ social threat narrative. Specifically, *Kotaku*’s evaluative articles are more likely to include critical statements directed towards authority figures and institutions, opposing viewpoints (even if the article’s author ultimately disagrees), and intertextual references to other entertainment formats and media outlets. Despite
these strengths, Kotaku’s coverage also includes some significant limitations that it shares with The New York Times’ predominant portrayal of video games, including the minimal presence of personal narratives and low levels of institutional pluralism.
CHAPTER 6: NEOGAF AND THE CREATION OF AN INSULAR INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

My analysis in the last chapter illustrates how Kotaku’s video game coverage differs significantly from The New York Times’ video game coverage. Whereas the portrayal of video game as an art form only appears in a small subset of articles in the Arts section of The New York Times, it is the predominant portrayal present in Kotaku’s hermeneutically-rich coverage. Moreover, whereas The New York Times’ critical coverage focuses entirely on video games writ large, Kotaku extends its critical lens to a broader array of prominent or influential sectors of civil society. However, although Kotaku is devoted to covering video games and other items the publication considers of interest to the video game community, it is still a professional media outlet. Indeed, my analysis demonstrates how authors and editors working for the website often publically characterize themselves as engaged in a journalistic enterprise. In this sense, despite its particular focus on video games, Kotaku remains firmly entrenched in the journalistic field, albeit in a much more peripheral position relative to The New York Times.

In the following two chapters, I shift my attention away from the journalistic field to examine the video game discourses present on NeoGAF, one of the most popular internet fan forums devoted to video games. Discussions on NeoGAF are divided into different topics of conversation or “threads”. To interact with other members, NeoGAF users publish their comments or “posts” within specific threads. NeoGAF threads vary in their subject matter. Threads often focus on discussing specific games or consoles, game genres, or recent video game news. Users often create “Official Threads” (OT) for specific games in an attempt to direct all of the users interested in discussing that
particular game into one place. Posters are able to and often create other threads pertaining to specific games without the “OT” label, but these threads conventionally focus on discussing very specific aspects of the game, such as a game’s story, controls, or release date.

For this specific chapter, I focus solely on three of the forum’s most popular threads on February 1, 2010, including “The Official Street Fighter IV Thread of FADCing a Stranger in the Alps”, “KILLZONE 2 - The [OT]”, and “Uncharted 2: Among Thieves | The Official Thread”. It is important to briefly mention that the Killzone 2 and Uncharted 2 threads are devoted to discussing two video games exclusively released on the Sony Playstation 3 console. The fact that two of the three most popular threads on this date are Playstation 3 exclusives reflects the time of my analysis. Both titles were among the most eagerly anticipated and heavily marketed video games released during the period I gathered my data. The fact that these two threads are devoted to covering console-specific video games does not influence the type of discussions occurring in these particular threads in any significant manner. The examples from the Street Fighter IV thread I include in this chapter and my analysis of NeoGAF’s participation in the RE5 debate in the following chapter demonstrate that the meaning posters attach to video games and the forum’s overarching discursive structure remain consistent across threads regardless of the particular video game console.

My analysis in this chapter reveals how NeoGAF users construct a different portrayal of video games from the two other media spaces. Whereas all three spaces focus on video game’s interactivity (to various degrees), NeoGAF users care much less about the possibility for a transcendental experience and more about whether or not these interactions are fun or entertaining. Moreover, NeoGAF users do not collapse all video game players into one camp. Instead, the forum distinguishes between “hardcore” or true gamers and “casual” or non-gamers. Based on this distinction, users frequently identify the forum as a space for “hardcore” video game players. Furthermore, users often adversely portray video game media journalists and commentators whose statements or positions they disagree with as not true video game fans. In this sense, NeoGAF members attempt to carve out their own entertainment public that is at least partially separate from video game media outlets and the greater journalistic field.

Overall, NeoGAF’s predominant discourse bears a striking resemblance in form (but not necessarily ideology) to the discursive structure of many of the most popular conservative opinion media outlets in the United States (Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Norton 2011). Similar to conservative media outlets, users on NeoGAF frequently promote a strongly polarizing and morally charged worldview that divides civil society into heroic insiders and idiotic or dangerous outsiders. In the case of NeoGAF, this moral polarization takes the form of what users describe as hardcore or true gamers versus casual or non-gamers. According to this portrayal, only true gamers understand video games and the video game community. Casual or non-gamers do not understand the video game community, which renders their opinions on these subject matters flawed, suspicious, and potentially dangerous. Analogous to
conservative media outlets, NeoGAF users apply this polarizing framework to a variety of subject matter and in doing so reduce contentious and potentially complex issues into stark, two-sided confrontations (Norton 2011:330) between heroic or noble hardcore gamers and idiotic or nefarious non-gamers. Moreover, forum posters utilize the same strategies as conservative media outlets to critically portray media coverage that contradicts with their own positions.

In the concluding sections to this chapter, I explore how this intensely polarizing discursive framework may contribute to the forum’s limitations from a democratic deliberation standpoint. Although the forum routinely questions media outlets occupying a more influential or prestigious position in civil society and exhibits the highest amount of reflexivity, posters rarely substantiate their position with evidence and thread conversations are highly insular. Indeed, as my analysis illustrates in this chapter, the three most popular threads on the forum rarely engage in broader sociopolitical topics beyond conventional aesthetic concerns.

**Curating Excitement on NeoGAF**

As I briefly noted in the introductory chapters, it is not surprising that the three most popular NeoGAF threads on the date I chose to collect data are all official threads. The release of NeoGAF’s official thread for a highly anticipated video game is often a momentous occasion. Official threads generally debut a few weeks away from the game’s release. Consequently, for NeoGAF members who have been closely following the game’s development with eager anticipation, the official thread’s unveiling signifies that the wait is almost over. This excitement is clearly evident in forum members’ initial
reaction to the thread’s opening. The first few hundred posts in all three threads largely consist of members sharing their exhilaration for the game’s imminent release.

Besides expressing their enthusiasm, many of the early posts on official threads simply thank the thread’s creator for starting the thread. After examining the first post or “OP” (as in the original post), it becomes clear why so many members feel the need to express their gratitude. Creating and maintaining an official thread appears to be quite a labor-intensive undertaking. Within the NeoGAF community, the OP for an official thread functions as a one-stop destination for all information and material pertaining to the specific game currently available. The original posts for all three of the official threads I selected contain deluges of information and resources, including story and character summaries, detailed descriptions of game modes and features, links to videos and screenshots, control layouts, and lists containing the specific release dates, packaging, and pricing broken down by international region. In all three threads the OP also includes fan art produced by other members of the community.

The OP only expands as the date gets closer to the game’s release. In all three threads, the creator is constantly adding new information, including brief summaries and links to previews and reviews by major video game media outlets as they become available. Fortunately, the creator is not entirely alone in this task. In the thread, members often share new pieces of information they’ve uncovered on the web, which the creator promptly adds to the OP.

Although the enthusiasm among members participating in the thread discussion rarely wanes before the game’s release, discussions in all three threads begin to expand beyond expressions of excitement and gratitude after the initial few hundred posts. Much
of the broader discussion in all three threads begins with one member posing a single question to the community. The majority of these questions serve as requests for additional information. Such inquiries encompass a wide variety of topics. Many questions focus on purchasing details, including the game’s release date for countries currently not on the OP, distinctions between different editions, and stores offering special deals or hosting midnight launches. Other questions focus more on “in-game” specifications, asking the thread for more information on the number of levels and characters in the game or storyline clarification. Additionally, other posts ask the community for advice on how to be successful in the game’s competitive multiplayer modes, including what characters or weapon layouts to use and what specific strategies to employ to ensure victory.

These questions rarely go unanswered, with the majority of inquiries receiving numerous responses. Overall, most forum interactions assume the form of a conversation, with roughly 64% of posts providing comments on previous posts. In many instances, these requests for additional information function as catalysts for conversation. A member poses a specific question on the thread and in only a few minutes the thread lights up with posts providing answers. Such responses can often be quite detailed, particularly when the original poster is asking for help playing the game. For example, one NeoGAF member poses the following question on the Uncharted 2 official thread (UC2):

Question: I'm used to firing in controlled bursts (for the assault rifles), but it seems I'm doing it too slow or it doesn't really make a difference (re: accuracy), since I always get killed first by people going full auto. Do you guys go full auto
with the assault rifles, or do you try controlled bursts? Does it make a difference? (maybe I just suck badly, so that's another option :P) (UC2: Post 1665)

In this post, the user asks other members for advice on how to do better against human opponents in *Uncharted 2*’s competitive multiplayer mode. In only three minutes, a member replies to the poster’s inquiry, briefly suggesting an effective weapon layout. Ten minutes later, a different member also answers the poster’s question, supplying the original poster with detailed suggestions while also asking for more information about their specific character layout. Less than an hour after posing the initial inquiry, the original poster has received five suggestions from four different members. Similar exchanges also occur in the *Killzone 2* official thread (KZ2), where multiple posters ask for multiplayer advice. Correspondingly, many members in the *Street Fighter 4* official thread (SF4) solicit advice on appropriate character selection given their level of fighting-game experience.

Beyond posing and answering game-related questions, a significant amount of discussion in all three NeoGAF threads focuses on how the developer/publisher should market the game to best ensure that it receives strong sales numbers. In certain respects, this focus on marketing reflects the community’s overall excitement for the game. In their conversations on the perfect marketing strategy and possible sales figures, members often admit that they want the game to be commercially successful so that the developers can continue to make more great games. For example, early in the *Uncharted 2* official thread, one poster explains “I hope the unbelievable review scores translate into unbelievable sales for ND [Naughty Dog, the developer]. They really deserve it and dammit, I want Uncharted 3!”(UC2: Post 1067).

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118 All of the direct quotes I’ve taken from NeoGAF in this chapter and the following chapter appear as they were originally posted in the forum. I have not corrected any grammatical errors.
This concern with sales is most prominent in NeoGAF’s official threads for *Killzone 2* and *Uncharted 2*. Discussions in both threads view the game’s success as not only imperative for the developer, but also crucial for the legacy of the Sony Playstation 3 (PS3), the exclusive console for both games. During the period under analysis, many journalists and video game enthusiasts in America viewed the PS3 as a lost cause. While the console had a relatively successful commercial launch, rival home consoles had long since eclipsed the PS3 in terms of commercial sales (Nintendo Wii) and the gaming community’s attention (Xbox 360). In both threads, Playstation 3 enthusiasts treat the release of *Killzone 2* or *Uncharted 2* as a watershed moment for the console. The hope in both threads is that these games’ commercial and critical success will generate renewed public attention and solidify the console’s video game legacy. On the other hand, users worry that either game’s failure may prove to be the console’s death knoll.

Posters on both threads vigorously devise what they consider to be ideal marketing strategies to ensure each game’s commercial success and thus the console’s longevity. For example, in discussing the best marketing strategy for *Uncharted 2*, one poster analyzes the success of Sony’s marketing campaigns for *Killzone 2* and *Resistance 2*, explaining:

*KZ2* [*Killzone 2*] had potential to sell if Sony actually tried giving the game a real marketing push, it’s sad that Resistance 2 got more marketing than their supposed big bad ass FPS [first-person shooter, a game genre] to kill all FPS. Resistance got comic series, novel, action figures, giant billboard advertisements, special commercial sneak peak at premier of new South Park episode, limited edition release, etc. The marketing for KZ2 was a joke and no more than any other standard Sony release.

Uncharted 2 right now is going to be interesting since the first game has been bundled for a while, had good word of mouth, but will it truly be able to compete with the other big games this holiday? They might have the benefit of coming out a bit earlier than the other "blockbusters", but I still think it’s not quite a proven IP
intellectual property]. The first did supposedly do over 2 million ww [worldwide sales] before its greatest hits releases in europe but it was also a bundled title. Hope it does well, the first is still one of my favorite sony exclusives. The game will sell, but I won't get my hopes up for a mega seller. (UC2: Post 1620)

As this example illustrates, these conversations address a variety of possible marketing opportunities, discussing everything from television spots, merchandise, commercial tie-ins, and a perfectly positioned release date.

This marketing discussion often takes the form of criticizing the publisher’s actual promotional campaign. In both the Killzone 2 and Uncharted 2 official threads, members express shock and outrage that Sony has barely broadcast any television spots with only a few weeks to go before the game’s release. Additionally, posters on the Uncharted 2 thread lambast Sony for releasing the game during an already crowded holiday season. As multiple commentators note, the holiday season is not only packed with blockbuster games from Sony’s competitors, but it also already includes two major PS3 exclusive games. By simultaneously releasing three major console-exclusives into an already packed release window, many commentators express concern that Sony’s offerings may be buried under the competition whereas they could have received much more attention if the publisher released them each separately during slower months. Moreover, many commentators argue that not only will Sony’s release schedule fail to grab much mainstream attention; it also forces the small crowd of Playstation devotees to choose between three different games when they may have been able to afford all three games if their releases were appropriately paced. Reflecting this criticism, one poster comments: “I think releasing Ratchet [Ratchet and Clank: A Crack In Time, one of the three exclusives] two weeks after this is a terrible, terrible decision, and that the game’s sales
are going to suffer for it. And that game looks stellar too” (UC2: Post 804). Similarly, a different poster angrily notes “Sony is clearly a bunch of jerks” (UC2: Post 827).

Besides exploring publishers’ possible marketing strategies, one of the most popular topics of conversation involves examining how other media outlets treat video games. Roughly 15% of all the posts in the sample mention other media outlets. Video game media outlets make up the vast majority of these references, with mainstream media outlets or alternative video game forums only rarely appearing in thread discussions. The particular manner in which these threads discuss video game media outlets varies. As I’ve previously mentioned, official threads often rely on video game media outlets to provide new information about the video game the thread is devoted to discussing. Posters will often share links to news articles about their game of choice along with a brief synopsis of what they consider to be important new information.

Beyond simply relying on video game media outlets as important sources for valuable game information, these threads also devote considerable attention to how media outlets treat or portray the particular games under thread discussion. Many NeoGAF posters place great significance on how video game journalists and critics evaluate their favorite games. In all three threads, members anxiously ask other discussants when the first reviews will appear. All three threads’ devotion to video game reviews is not solely information-driven. Members treat what they consider to be positive reviews by popular or prestigious game outlets as a stamp of approval, vindicating their long-held faith in the game’s quality. Essentially, many NeoGAF members view positive reviews as an affirmation of their own taste in games. Additionally, similar to thread discussions on marketing strategies, posters explain that positive reviews may also boost sales, thus
increasing the chances that the game’s developer will have the opportunity to work on a sequel or develop some other exciting new project. On the other hand, critical reviews often have a much deeper significance for the community, opening the thread to heated debates on how to properly review or evaluate video games.

The *Uncharted 2* official thread’s response to *Eurogamer*’s review serves as a clear illustration of the significance NeoGAF members attach to media coverage. On NeoGAF, *Eurogamer* has a reputation as a prestigious but often overly critical video game media outlet. Many members describe a glowing review from *Eurogamer* as a rarity and thus cause for celebration. Consequently, the thread erupts with applause upon the revelation that *Eurogamer* gave *Uncharted 2* a perfect 10/10 score. The initial post broadcasting the news shares the 10/10 score, a link to the full review, and the following glowing quote from the review:

[T]he core of *Uncharted 2* is an action-adventure masterpiece whose minor flaws are washed away on a tide of rhythm and spectacle - one that would still be an essential experience even without the option to pull your friends off cliffs and play capture-the-heirloom. For over a dozen pulsating hours, Nathan Drake [the game’s protagonist] is among thieves, just as Naughty Dog was when it made the first game by ransacking surrounding genres. By the end of *Uncharted 2* though, Drake has found his place in the world, and so has the developer - among giants. (UC2: Post 535)

For a large number of discussants, this is clearly a momentous event. Roughly 15 minutes after the news broke on NeoGAF, the initial post sharing the review received 18 ecstatic responses. Many of these comments simply re-post the 10/10 score accompanied with exclamation points or enthusiastic expletives. One unique post attaches a picture of the actress Kate Winslet seemingly overwhelmed with emotion while giving an award acceptance speech with the caption “tears of joy” below the image (UC2, Post 578). Others note that this review has sent their excitement for the game to an even higher
level, or as one poster explains, “hype through the stratosphere” (UC2, Post 553). The general consensus on the thread is that the *Eurogamer* review confirms the *Uncharted* fan community’s belief that the sequel will go down as one of this generation’s best video games.¹¹⁹

NeoGAF’s eclectic nature makes it challenging to provide an overview that fully encapsulates the variety of topics and types of exchanges that occur in the site’s most popular threads, but the examples I’ve included provide a clear indication of the sheer level of enthusiasm posters on NeoGAF exhibit for their favorite games. Moreover, my analysis uncovers some general patterns or consistencies that appear in all three of these threads. Besides displaying a general excitement for video games, discussions in all three threads focus on gathering information for upcoming games, meticulously analyzing publishers’ marketing strategies, and devoting considerable attention and significance to video game coverage in major media outlets. Occasionally these interests create episodes of crisis or debate in the threads. During such moments, which constitute 6% of all the posts in the sample, conversations become much more heated and users portray video game publishers, media outlets, and even other thread participants in a much more dramatic manner. These episodes allow us to gain a better sense of the moral codes and discursive framework that structure interactions on NeoGAF.

**The Proper Criteria for Evaluating Video games on NeoGAF**

The proper aesthetic evaluation of a particular game is by far one of the topics most likely to lead to heated discussion amongst forum members on NeoAF. Given an

¹¹⁹ While not entirely disagreeing with the thread’s celebration over the *Eurogamer* review, a few posters urge the community to exercise some restraint in their reaction to the review. For example, one post comments “lol at the people going crazy over the Eurogamer review. Relax folks, you'll enjoy the game more if you reign in that hype back to normal levels” (UC2: Post 579)
official thread’s intended focus on examining a specific game, one may assume that participants in thread discussions share a similar level of enthusiasm or reverence for the game under discussion. Yet quite frequently disputes break out amongst thread discussants over the game’s aesthetic credentials. In all three threads, a GAF member occasionally posts a comment criticizing the particular game the official thread is devoted to discussing. Posts of this nature generally assume one of two forms. Many of these critical posts provide detailed aesthetic evaluations of what the commentator considers to be the game’s shortcomings. Alternatively, other critical posts simply provide a short negative remark about the game. These terse comments include posts that identify a different game (often on a rival console) that the poster considers to be better. Other curt statements identify the console’s technical shortcomings. For example, critical posts on NeoGAF threads devoted to a PS3 game often note that the PS3 does not enjoy as vibrant an online community as the Xbox 360. By pointing out the console’s deficiencies, posts of this nature imply that the game is inadequate or inferior to other offerings.

The manner in which other thread participants react to such posts largely depends on the type of critical statement. Thread discussants often ignore terse critical comments identifying the console’s shortcomings or claiming an alternative game’s superiority. Occasionally, other participants respond to such curt statements by claiming the poster is “trolling”, meaning the original poster is deliberately trying to irritate the community or disrupt thread discussion. By identifying the critical poster as a troll, participants attempt to persuade others to ignore the original comment. On the other hand, critical statements containing more substantive aesthetic evaluations often provoke intense debates amongst thread discussants. Interestingly, much of the ensuing debate not only focuses on the
game’s “true” aesthetic worth, but also on how to appropriately evaluate video games from an aesthetic standpoint. Before discussing the content of these aesthetic debates, I will briefly summarize the variety of aesthetic criteria members utilize to evaluate video games in NeoGAF’s most popular threads.

By far the most prominent aesthetic criteria NeoGAF posters raise in their video game conversations pertains to concerns with “gameplay”, or the quality and variety of experiences that the game provides players. Overall, gameplay concerns appear in 60% of the posts containing aesthetic commentary. Even at an individual thread level, gameplay concerns are the most prominent form of aesthetic evaluation (see Table 10). In certain respects, NeoGAF’s focus on gameplay reflects the predominant aesthetic narrative present in The New York Times and Kotaku. Narratives in both media outlets insist that video games offer an unprecedented level of interactivity relative to other entertainment mediums. In this sense, NeoGAF members’ gameplay concerns are consistent with what many contemporary media figures consider to be the medium’s most distinctive attribute.

On the other hand, forum members rarely use the term to aesthetically evaluate a video game according to its ability to promote a profound experience. In other words, NeoGAF users may agree with the two other media outlet’s emphasis on interactivity, but they are much less concerned about how this interactivity may provide players with aesthetically powerful or transcendental experiences. Instead, discussants usually refer to the term gameplay in order to assess whether or not a video game’s features are fun, varied, or engaging for the player. For example, numerous posts praise Uncharted 2 for its platform and combat mechanics, finding the manner in which the player maneuvers in the environment and interacts with obstacles and opponents to be intuitive and appealing.
Similarly, several posts applaud *Killzone 2*’s incorporation of cover mechanics during combat scenarios, claiming it adds a unique feel and layer of strategy to the player’s actions.

NeoGAF members’ gameplay assessments often draw a strong connection between fun and a game’s level of variety. Many posters consider high quality games to provide a range of unique yet equally enjoyable experiences. Discussants often describe themselves as left unsatisfied by games repeatedly offering players the same albeit initially fun gameplay mechanic over and over again. Instead, forum members expect games to provide a variety of enjoyable experiences. Calling a game repetitive is one of the most critical statements a poster can make. For example, one poster shares the following comment in the official thread for *Killzone 2*:

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KZ2 [Killzone 2] is a good fps [first person shooter, a game genre], but that's about it. in my opinion killzone is just to repeative until now...even for a shooter. it's just feels like they ran out of ideas. especially in the 3rd and 4th mission if sometimes feels like playing the horde mode in gears2 [Gears of War 2, a different game with some similar mechanics]. you just wait in a specific place for waves of enemies, until everything is killed. although is looks really great, the gameplay is really old and very repetetive. (KZ2:Post 953)
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According to this commentator, although *Killzone 2*’s core shooting mechanics are competent and enjoyable, the game fails to provide a variety of scenarios that require the player to utilize these core gameplay mechanics in different and creative ways. This poster’s criticisms are consistent with the forum’s overall emphasis on fun and divergent gameplay.

Although gameplay is by far the most prominent aesthetic criteria forum members use to evaluate video games, a smaller portion of posts consider other factors. Interestingly, despite many journalists and commentators’ emphasis on interactivity, 17%
of the aesthetic posts evaluate video game according to the quality of the game’s story. Posts in both the official threads for *Killzone 2* and *Uncharted 2* applaud each game’s nuanced story. Indeed, many of these posts cite each game’s creative or multilayered story as one of their main reasons for playing the game. For example, numerous posts celebrate the morally ambiguous nature of *Killzone 2*’s plot. As one commentator in the *Killzone 2* thread notes:

> Wow, the lore behind the games seems really interesting. I had no idea it was that complex and thought out. I think I'm actually more excited to play the game now that I know why the Helghast [main antagonists] are so mad at life. (KZ2: Post 430)

The “complexity” this poster refers to is the manner in which *Killzone 2* portrays its protagonist and antagonist. *Killzone 2* is set in a science fiction universe, in which the Interplanetary Strategic Alliance (ISA) is at war with one of its former colony planets (Helghan). Although the player assumes the role of an ISA soldier, the game’s detailed back-story notes that for years the ISA forced Helghan colonists into an exploitive trade agreement, which ultimately served as the motivation for the Helghast rebellion. Many posters applaud the game for including characters that are much more morally ambiguous relative to the traditional hero-villain archetype present in other video games.

However, not every thread poster applauds *Killzone 2*’s story. Several posts criticize the game for not fully exploring the complex universe the franchise established in previous games. For example, one poster expresses disappointment upon learning that the game provides very little new insight into the sociopolitical dynamics shaping the universe, noting “Guerilla [the developer] had an opportunity there, imo [in my opinion]. It’s a shame that they ‘wasted’ it” (KZ2: Post 206). Several other posters note that the developer could have at least provided additional story elements on the game’s website to
provide a more in-depth understanding of how the events depicted in the game relate to the overall universe. Analogous to the posts praising *Killzone 2*’s nuanced story, these posts affirm the idea that storyline is an important aesthetic consideration for video games by criticizing *Killzone 2* for its narrative shortcomings.

Story is not the only alternative criteria GAF members use to evaluate video games. 20% of the aesthetic posts assess video games based on the quality of their visuals, or what many members refer to as “graphics”. In general, discussants value visuals that they consider to be realistic, extremely detailed, or unique. For example, several posts express excitement over *Uncharted 2*’s graphics, praising the game for its visually diverse and photorealistic environments. Comparing *Uncharted 2*’s visuals to *Killzone 2*, one poster notes:

"As technically proficient as Killzone 2 might be, I could never really appreciate how good it looks because of how gritty everything was. The varied landscapes of Uncharted 2 combined with unquestionably good graphics make it the clear winner in my book. (UC2: Post 580)"

As these posts indicate, although “gameplay” concerns are the most popular aesthetic criteria present in these NeoGAF thread discussions, commentators regularly make use of other criteria not specifically connected to how a game actually “plays”. Often times, new posts evaluating games based on these alternative aesthetic criteria provoke relatively amicable responses from other thread discussants. Posts responding to the initial comments usually simply agree or disagree with the original discussant’s evaluation. However, in certain moments, other thread discussants react disapprovingly to the original comment and criticize the post not for the actual evaluation but for the aesthetic criteria the initial poster used to evaluate the game. In such instances, thread discussions in NeoGAF assume a broader significance, providing a place for game enthusiasts to
debate the community’s understanding of what constitutes a “good” game. By publically arguing over the proper aesthetic criteria for evaluating games, these discussants reproduce or negotiate key elements of the moral framework underpinning this entertainment public.

Analogous to the majority of conversational exchanges on NeoGAF, these symbolically-loaded interactions include multiple forms. Frequently, a few members quickly post critical responses to commentators using alternative aesthetic criteria to appraise a game. For example, when several members express concern over *Uncharted 2* being too short, numerous discussants use the common adage “quality over quantity” to dismiss game length as a valid criticism. Reflecting this sentiment, one post explains: “The length of a game should not matter if the game was great such in the case of *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, that was a fantastic game” (UC2: Post 249). Abrupt dismissals of this type are generally successful at temporarily inhibiting any further thread discussion on these alternative aesthetic criteria for at least a few hours. More importantly, in arguing for the quality of the experience as opposed to the game’s length, these rejections reaffirm gameplay’s status as the community’s primary aesthetic concern.

However, in other instances, posts rejecting alternative aesthetic criteria assume a more detailed form and often result in spirited thread discussions involving multiple commentators. One of the most striking examples of this forum dynamic starts with a poster in the *Killzone 2* official thread sharing a link to an *MTV Multiplayer* video in which noted game developers Ken Levine and Todd Howard dismiss the emphasis many
video game critics place on “newness”. It is not surprising that this video became a major topic of conversation on the Killzone 2 thread, as Levine and Howard’s discussion was itself a response to the critical reviews Killzone 2 received from many prominent media outlets. In the video, Levine and Howard take exception to reviewers’ complaints that Killzone 2 offers nothing new in terms of game design. Both developers reject the notion that simply providing players with a new game experience is inherently valuable by itself. Instead, they argue that what ultimately matters is whether the game is enjoyable to play. Levine and Howard contend that even if Killzone 2 may not do anything new, the game is ultimately a success because it appears to offer a fun experience.

Levine and Howard’s assertion that what matters most is if a game is fun to play mirrors the predominant sentiment on NeoGAF that gameplay is the most important or only legitimate aesthetic criteria for evaluating video games. Consequently, the majority of posts pertaining to this subject on the Killzone 2 official thread generally agree with Levine’s and Howard’s comments. Numerous thread posters frame their responses to these developers’ remarks as examinations into the proper role and implementation of innovation in video games. Participants in this discussion compare Killzone 2 to other video games they enjoyed that critics ignored or dismissed for failing to innovate the genre or medium. For example, two different posters relate Killzone 2’s negative reception to the critical backlash against Dead Space. The first discussant to do so writes:

I also didn't think it was fair at the time for Dead Space to be criticized for not doing something drastically different. I don't think any game that does exactly what the developers set out to do should be - a big reason many games fail is

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because they are too ambitious and put aside things like basic gameplay mechanics as an expense. You know, making sure the game is actually fun to play. (KZ2: Post 955)

According to this commentator and numerous similar posts, although *Dead Space* may not be truly innovative, the game provides an enjoyable experience, which is what ultimately matters.

To be certain, discussants in the *Killzone 2* official thread rarely reject the value of innovation in its entirety. Instead, many posters note that innovation is a welcome addition only when it is in the service of expanding the gameplay experience. Forum members regularly dismiss certain games that prominent media outlets praise for being innovative because they consider these pioneering games to not actually be fun to play. Multiple posts describe *Spore*, the game the author of an article in *The New York Times*’ Art Section fawned over for its capacity to provoke a “long zoom” experience, as simply not a fun experience. Reflecting this sentiment, one discussant notes that *Spore* is the “single most unfortunate and disappointing example” of developers being too ambitious and forgetting about making a game that is actually fun to play (Post 955). This post’s critique of *Spore* highlights how many NeoGAF users attach a different meaning to video games relative to *The New York Times*’ Art section and *Kotaku*. Although all three spaces take video games seriously, their rationale for doing so varies. Whereas *Kotaku* and the counter-narrative present in *The New York Times*’ Art section portray video games as a valuable form of artistic expression, NeoGAF users primarily treat video games as an immensely fun leisure activity.
NeoGAF’s Portrayal of Video Game Media Outlets

These discussions over the proper evaluation of a particular video game not only shed light on what video games mean to NeoGAF users, they often provide insight into the discursive framework that structures much of the forum’s conversations, especially during moments of conflict. These more hermeneutically-rich posts often appear during discussions over media coverage that users find objectionable. To a certain extent, NeoGAF’s critical media coverage is reminiscent of Kotaku’s critical media coverage. Both spaces place a strong emphasis on identifying and responding to media coverage they consider to portray video games in an unfavorable manner. However, whereas Kotaku predominantly focuses on mainstream media coverage, the majority of NeoGAF posts on this topic examine coverage by video game media outlets. The harsh manner in which many users portray video game media outlets is itself an outgrowth of the forum’s key distinction between hardcore or true gamers and casual and thus false or non-gamers. This moral binary between true gamers and non-gamers influences how many NeoGAF users engage with and address opposing viewpoints.

This critical media narrative frequently surfaces when outlets begin publishing game reviews that thread discussants consider to be overly critical or logically flawed. Often times, posters dismiss a review’s negative assessment by characterizing the critic as not a true gamer. One poster dismisses the criticisms Uncharted 2 received by a few prominent game critics by claiming:

Simply put this game got everything a video game should have and some more. It looks great both technically and artistically, it got great story telling elements, it got actions, it got puzzle and its look very fun to play. And to me a that's is the definition of videogame in the first place. So don't worry about the review scored, because most of them will be high cos if it doesn't that just prove the reviewer
does not like video game and he should quit the gaming industry for his own
good. (UC2: Post 1932)

This particular poster’s rebuttal is a common response by NeoGAF members to what they
consider to be negative evaluations of their favorite games. Such posts begin by taking
the game’s greatness as an objective fact. Consequently, any reviewer who fails to
recognize the game’s obvious merits must not be a true gamer, thus rendering their
review null and void. In short, there must be something wrong with the reviewer, not the
game.

One of the most striking examples of NeoGAF’s critical media discourse and its
moral distinction between true gamers and fake or non-gamers appears in the Street
Fighter IV official thread. Early on in the thread discussion, a poster shares a link to a
Strategy Informer article the poster authored. The article offers a thorough description
of each playable character in the game and includes a tier system ranking each character
based on their strengths, weaknesses, and ease of use. The thread community did not
respond warmly to the author’s tier system. The responses start off by pointing out
specific flaws with the author’s character assessments. For example, one of the first
comments notes that the author’s evaluation of the character Gief is “contrary to
everything” the poster had heard (SF4: Post 368). In a matter of minutes, thread
discussants largely reject the entire article. One intensely hostile poster describes the
article as “full of fail” (SF4: Post 368) and shares the current tier list in Japan as well as a
summary of who the top Japanese players are presently using to highlight just how
flawed the author’s assessment really is.

The author actively defends the article throughout the thread discussion. In response to the thread’s critical reception to the piece, the author notes that the article’s tier list isn’t designed “for the hardcore but for ease of jumping into the game” (Post 380). The author’s use of the term “hardcore” possesses a powerful meaning for many NeoGAF users and is strongly connected to the forum’s overarching distinction between true gamers and non-gamers. Within certain segments of the video game community, the term “hardcore” refers to challenging video games that demand hours of dedication and skill. The community distinguishes “hardcore” games from “casual” games, negatively describing the latter as simple, easy, and unsophisticated. The community also applies the symbolic binary to video game players, labeling players as either “hardcore” or “casual” based on the type of games they tend to play. Analogous to the distinction between hardcore and casual games, proponents of the symbolic code generally dismiss casual gamers as foolish, lazy, or possessing crude cultural sensibilities. As this description illustrates, the community closely connects this hardcore/casual binary to a specific notion of authenticity. Gamers that play what the community considers to be the more complicated or challenging games are “true gamers” while casual players are not really video game players at all.

This symbolic distinction has been present in the video game community since at least the early 2000s, but it became a major topic of discussion after the mainstream popularity of the Nintendo DS and Nintendo Wii in the mid2000s. In the wake of both consoles’ wide appeal, many game enthusiasts expressed concern that the video game industry would predominantly cater to the needs of the mainstream, casual audience. For a few years after the Wii’s release, media figures and forum participants regularly
discussed and debated the future of hardcore games. During this period, the hardcore/casual binary assumed a greater moral significance, as many cynical game enthusiasts feared that the industry’s shift towards the casual audience was irreversible and would soon mean the end of hardcore games. For proponents of this worldview, “casual games” no longer simply meant games of an inferior quality. “Casual games” were now understood as a direct threat against the hardcore audience’s cherished pastime.

Keeping this in mind, it is not surprising that posters on the Street Fighter IV thread do not react kindly to the author’s defense that the article is not intended for hardcore gamers. Numerous posters criticize the author for describing the article as including a tier system. As multiple posts explain, the term “tier system” has a very specific connotation on NeoGAF. For example, one user explains to the author “You have to understand that when posting a ‘tier list’ everyone is assuming you are talking about character potential, not just how easy they are to use the first time you pick them (SF4: Post 386). Similarly, a different poster explains:

Tier lists are usually a concern at higher levels of play; maybe you shouldn't promote what you're talking about as such. I noticed in the Dhalsim section you mentioned you need to master his teleport, but in a normal tier list it’s assumed you're playing each character to their max potential. (SF4: Post 385)

As these posts demonstrate, thread discussants claim that only hardcore players are interested in tier-based character rankings. According to this logic, tier lists are only useful to the most skillful players who are willing to devote countless hours to mastering each character and fully understanding the game. Casual players have no such desire, so an article constructing a tier-list catered towards such players is a waste of time. Explaining this logic, one poster states:
I guess it all boils down to attention span. Do people have it enough to stick with fighters of this type, to get decent at it? Perhaps I'm a cynic when it comes to modern gamers, but I don't believe so anymore. The attention span and time investment, more so than anything else except maybe RTS’ [real time strategy games] to even get decent, is the dividing factor. (SF4: Post 471)

This statement reflects the hardcore/casual binary present in NeoGAF discussions. As the poster explains, focus and dedication separate hardcore from casual gamers. Complex games like Street Fighter IV require an immense level of devotion in order to truly master. Any casual gamers who actually pick up the game will most likely only play it crudely for a few weeks before moving on to the next flashy game that catches their attention. Consequently, a tier list catered towards casual players will simply fall on deaf ears.

The thread’s critical reaction to the author’s Street Fighter IV article does more than reconstruct the hardcore/casual symbolic code; it also defines NeoGAF as the exclusive domain of hardcore gamers. The thread response accomplishes this in two ways. Discussants implicitly delineate NeoGAF as a “hardcore” internet forum simply by berating what they identify as the author’s casual sensibilities. For example, one poster notes that “These types of articles sadden me and will continue to as more people write the same type of BS that are not hardcore/competitive players” (SF4: Post 376).

However, other posts make this hardcore identification in a more explicit manner. As one poster explains, “I'm on GAF. I come here to really not give a shit what casuals think” (SF4: Post 471). Multiple additional posts express the same sentiment. In this sense, thread discussants utilize a media text as an opportunity to reiterate the symbolic boundaries structuring this social space.
NeoGAF’s critical discourse is similar in format to the critical discourses present in popular U.S. conservative media outlets. The discourses present in both spaces contain powerful moral binaries that divide the social world between heroic insiders and idiotic or dangerous outsiders. In the case of conservative media outlets, this moral binary valorizes political figures supporting conservative causes as true Americans and demonizes political figures promoting liberal causes as ill-informed, unpatriotic, or in possession of nefarious ulterior motives (Jacobs & Townsley 2011; Jamieson and Cappella 2008). In the case of NeoGAF, this moral binary distinguishes between true or hardcore video game players and fake or non-video game players. According to this division, true video game players properly understand video games and are thus capable of discussing matters pertaining to the video game community in an informed and appropriate manner. In contrast, non-video game players possess a deficient level of video game knowledge that renders their opinions on video games flawed, illegitimate, and potentially dangerous. Both NeoGAF and conservative media outlets rely on these powerful moral distinctions as their primary interpretive lens to render a diverse array of issues comprehensible.

NeoGAF’s critical discourse shares another feature in common with conservative media outlets. Besides both spaces’ propensity to position media outlets whose coverage they find problematic on the polluted side of their respective moral binaries, NeoGAF and conservative media outlets also frequently ridicule other media outlets in order to further marginalize their positions. Jacobs and Townsley (2011) and Jamieson and Cappella (2008) both document how conservative media outlets regularly characterize mainstream media outlets whose coverage they disagree with as idiotic and biased. Many
NeoGAF posters portray video game media outlets in a similar manner. Beginning with posters’ characterization of video game media outlets as idiotic, conversations in all three threads describe video game critics as horrible writers, critics, and journalists. Indeed, there exists a popular consensus amongst posts focusing on media coverage that video game critics and video game journalists are largely terrible at their professions. For example, posts on the *Killzone 2* thread praise one member’s detailed description of the game as “a thousand times better” than the majority of high-profile reviews. These posts note that the member’s impressions are both far more informative and better written than the majority of “professional” reviews for the game (*KZ2*: Post 272, Post 935). Similarly, discussants on the *Uncharted 2* thread characterize reviews from prominent websites including *GameSpy, 1up*, and *GamePro* as poorly written and entirely uninformed. One post disapprovingly notes that these reviews “read like bloggers wrote them” and expresses concern that “most people have been dumbed down by most video game writing” (*UC2*: Post 1584).

Consistent with many popular conservative media outlets, the second manner in which NeoGAF members react to what they identify as negative coverage is by characterizing the critical video game media outlets as biased, thus rendering their judgments worthless. Although the media bias narrative appears quite often in general, it occupies a prominent position in threads devoted to video games exclusive to Sony consoles. Sony video game enthusiasts participating in forum discussions repeatedly characterize major video game media outlets as prejudiced against Sony. Often times, posters describe media outlets as “Xbox fanboys”, meaning that these outlets are unabashed supporters of Microsoft’s Xbox 360 video game console. According to this
logic, media figures who are Xbox fanboys are incapable of objectively covering video games on Sony consoles since Sony is in direct competition with Microsoft. Consequently, this narrative predicts that media coverage of Sony video game products written by Xbox fanboys will be overwhelmingly cynical, erroneous, and even spiteful.

Of course, most media figures don’t publically describe themselves as “Xbox fanboys”. Instead, forum members treat the manner in which journalists and critics cover Sony products as an indication of their prejudiced nature. For thread discussants, the most obvious instances of bias occur when a critic writes a negative review for a Sony game that thread members consider to be superb. In such instances, posters perceive the game’s excellence to be self-evident. Based on this logic, any media figure who fails to recognize the game’s obvious excellence must be an Xbox fanboy. Indeed, discussants in both the *Killzone 2* and *Uncharted 2* threads are so concerned with biased coverage that they post rallying statements before the first reviews even hit. For example, prior to *Killzone 2*’s official release, one poster in the *Killzone 2* official thread notes: “The best thing about this is game is that it helps to show us the xbox fanboys in the media (KZ2: Post 609)”.

Even though *Killzone 2* had not yet been released (which means that most posters had yet to play the final game), many discussants agreed with the poster’s sentiment, thus preparing the community with the appropriate response in advance of any negative reviews. Essentially, former members preemptively disqualified all negative reviews by portraying any video game critic who did not enjoy the game as an Xbox fanboy, thus rendering their position mute.

The UK-based publication *Edge* is one of the media outlets NeoGAF members most frequently characterize as biased. A monthly magazine with a strong online
presence throughout Europe and North America, *Edge* cultivates a unique position in the video game media space by focusing on video game aesthetics to a much greater degree than most major publications, including extensive explorations into game design, mechanics, software technology, and detailed video game retrospectives. Moreover, *Edge* also distinguishes itself from other publications with its strong industry connections, as evident by its in-depth features on game designers and game studios. Moreover, *Edge*’s online website includes *Edge Jobs*, a space where industry recruiters post job openings and individuals looking for work in video game design, sales, or even academics can share their CV’s. Due to its distinctive editorial voice and strong industry connections, game enthusiasts in forums such as NeoGAF and other major video game media spaces alike pay close attention to *Edge*’s coverage.

Although a few posts in the *Killzone 2* and *Uncharted 2* threads praise *Edge* for its sophisticated aesthetic criticism, the majority of posts discussing *Edge* describe the publication as elitist, biased, and thus untrustworthy. Several posts express outrage over *Edge*’s critical review for *Killzone 2*. The article describes the game as technologically marvelous but possessing exceedingly shallow gameplay and inadequate narrative elements. The piece includes such scathing statements as “*Killzone 2* is a testament to craft and imagination, if only because one is so immaculate while the other barely exists” and “if *Dead Space* shows just what can be gained when you approach the familiar with a mind to making changes, *Killzone 2* shows just what can happen when you don’t”\(^{122}\)

Overall, *Edge* gives the game a middling score of 7/10.

Not surprisingly, thread discussants are extremely irritated with Edge’s score. Much of the discussants’ ire focuses on the article’s portrayal of the game as generic from a creativity standpoint. As I have previously discussed, NeoGAF generally dismisses creativity as an important aesthetic criteria for judging video games. Although some posters assert that Killzone 2 is in fact creative, discussants predominantly claim that the game is simply fun to play, which is ultimately all that matters. Indeed, several posters take exception to the review’s contrasting assessments of Dead Space and Killzone 2. As one post explains:

Such a puzzling statement. Dead Space is in the exact same boat as Killzone 2 - a game that doesn't really bring anything new to the table, but has very strong core gameplay mechanics, is an audio-visual marvel and is polished to a spit-shine. The biggest criticisms of Dead Space all have to do with its perceived lack of innovation, so to try and contrast that with Killzone 2 is nonsensical - there's nothing to contrast when they're identical in that respect. (KZ2: Post 955)

For this poster, Dead Space and Killzone 2 are essentially the same game from an aesthetic standpoint. Consequently, the poster finds the magazine’s distinction between Dead Space and Killzone 2 to be perplexing. For many thread posters, Edge’s confusing distinction between the two games is representative of something much more sinister than simply an inconsistent review policy or sheer stupidity. Although Killzone 2 is a PS3 exclusive, versions of Dead Space are available for the PS3 and the Xbox 360. Consequently, many posters view Edge’s strong praise for Dead Space relative to its tepid response for Killzone 2 as indicative of the outlet’s extreme bias against Sony.

NeoGAF posters’ reaction to this Edge review mirrors conservative media outlets’ portrayal of mainstream media coverage in two ways. Consistent with conservative media outlets’ response to what they consider to be problematic or unfavorable mainstream media coverage, NeoGAF users upset over Edge’s review of Killzone 2 depict the media
outlet as biased against the PS3 console, thus rendering *Edge*’s opinion on any PS3-exclusive game null and void. Besides portraying *Edge* as biased, NeoGAF users also ridicule the publication for exhibiting what forum members consider to be a double standard. The double standard critique is a reoccurring theme present in many conservative media outlets. Jamieson and Cappella (2008) highlight how conservative media outlets often react to mainstream media coverage that depicts Republicans or advocates of conservative causes unfavorably by insisting that mainstream media outlets have ignored similar offenses committed by Democrats in the past. For example, Jamieson and Cappella (2008) document how popular conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh, the conservative cable news outlet Fox News, and the editorial pages of *The Wall Street Journal* all responded to mainstream media’s coverage of controversial statements made by Trent Lott allegedly in support of Strom Thurmond’ segregationist campaign by highlighting the Democratic party’s own checkered history with segregation and civil rights. According to these conservative media outlets, the fact that mainstream media outlets strongly rebuked Trent Loot while ignoring similar offenses committed by Democrats indicates that mainstream media outlets hold conservatives to a higher standard than liberals. According to this evidence, conservative media outlets conclude that mainstream media outlets are biased against conservatives (Jamieson and Cappella 2008: 25).

NeoGAF posters often make use of a similar rallying cry to marginalize video game coverage they find unfavorable. In the example above, NeoGAF users repeatedly ridicule *Edge* for praising *Dead Space* while criticizing *Killzone 2*, two games that these users consider to be nearly identical in aesthetic merits. These users treat the fact that the
PS3-exclusive game (*Killzone 2*) received a lower review score as evidence of *Edge*’s double standard and consequently a testament to the publication’s bias against the PS3. For both NeoGAF and conservative media outlets, the portrayal of other media outlets as possessing a double standard serves to marginalize media coverage they consider to be unfavorable. As I will document in the following chapter, double-standard allegations play a prominent role in NeoGAF’s heated debate over *RE5*’s imagery.

Illustrative of the tight connection between video game media outlets and major game enthusiast forums such as NeoGAF, the fervor over *Edge*’s review score eventually reaches such a heightened level that *Edge* publishes a “reader submitted” opinion piece responding to the criticism. In the piece, the author uses a “not quite scientific method” to determine if *Edge* is in fact biased against Sony. To do so, the author compiles all of *Edge*’s review scores for PS3 and 360 games (though the author admits to having missed some articles). The author then compares *Edge*’s average score to the average score for these same games on *Metacritic*, a website that aggregates review scores from major video game media outlets. Explaining the findings from these calculations, the author writes:

> [T]he 48 Xbox 360 games averaged a score of [6.67] in *Edge* and 73.79 on *Metacritic*. This made for a difference of just over 7 points. The 41 PlayStation 3 games averaged a score of [6.63] in *Edge* and 76.78 on *Metacritic*. This gives us a difference of about 10.5 points.¹²³

The author concludes from these findings that *Edge*’s average PS3 review score is “almost identical” to the publication’s average Xbox 360 review score and characterizes the comparisons with the Metacritic scores to be “close enough as to be meaningless”.

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Consequently, the author determines that there is no evidence indicating that *Edge* is biased against Sony, at least “nowhere near enough to make a song and dance about”.

Rather than put an end to the media bias discourse, the article defending *Edge* sparks even further discussion of the publication’s prejudice against Sony. According to several posters, the article’s findings actually demonstrate the opposite of the author’s conclusions. In the minds of several vocal NeoGAF members, the article’s take away point is that *Edge* systematically scores Sony games lower than Xbox 360 games. In discussing the meaning of these findings, posters treat the article as a vain attempt by *Edge* to silence critics. Discussants focus the majority of their condemnation towards *Edge* rather than the author of the actual article. As one poster explains, “They did a very poor job trying to convince people that they're not biased” (KZ2: Post 901). Similarly, a different post writes “lol @ edge response. That response was equivalent to the good ol ‘I'm not racist, I've had 3 black people at my house’ schtick” (KZ2: Post 945). Even a poster who claims to not believe that *Edge* is actually biased notes: “if you're trying to prove you're not you don't run the numbers, realize that they are consistently lower and then give them out anyway... that's just stupid. I mean seriously learn when to lie people” (KZ2: Post 902). Consequently, NeoGAF members’ reaction to *Edge*’s response further reinforces many forum members’ portrayal of *Edge* and other video game media outlets as both idiotic and biased.

*Edge* is not the only publication NeoGAF members depict in this manner. Thread discussants occasionally apply this biased label to discredit what they consider to be unfavorable coverage from such other prominent media outlets as *IGN, Eurogamer*, and *GameSpy*. In general, the forum’s reaction to media outlets whose coverage forum
members disagree with essentially disqualifies contrasting opinions from the conversation. Whether thread participants characterize such outlets as idiotic, unprofessional, or biased, this critical media narrative discredits dissenting opinions and consequently preserves an understanding of the game’s excellence as the predominant portrayal in each thread.

*The Discursive Structure of NeoGAF*

The heated debates over a particular video games’ aesthetic worth provide the strongest insight into NeoGAF’s discursive structure. As my analysis indicates, participants in these debates define who belongs in the community and use a critical discourse to delegitimize opinions from both other posters and video game media outlets they disagree with. However, given this project’s primary interest in moments where entertainment publics facilitate the construction of an aesthetic public sphere, it must be noted that these hermeneutically-rich debates on the proper way to evaluate a video game rarely expand into discussions of broader sociopolitical issues. In other words, heated conversations in the most popular threads on NeoGAF predominantly remain at the aesthetic level. To be certain, this does not mean that NeoGAF never functions as an aesthetic public sphere. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, the forum steadfastly engages in a debate over a broader sociopolitical issue during a critical episode potentially implicating the video game community. However, such instances do not appear to be common occurrences in the most popular threads. Nevertheless, we should still be interested in the discursive characteristics present in the predominantly aesthetic debates that emerge in this entertainment public. It is possible that the discursive
framework present in NeoGAF’s most popular threads may inform how users engage in broader sociopolitical discussions when the forum functions as an aesthetic public sphere.

The large amount of critical statements present in these evaluative posts is perhaps the forum’s most striking feature in terms of the characteristics scholars identify as vital to a democratic public sphere. In this sense, the forum is similar to Kotaku in that both spaces devote considerable attention to rebuking statements made by influential public figures. However, whereas Kotaku mainly levies its critiques against mainstream media outlets, the vast majority of NeoGAF’s evaluative posts in these three threads criticize video game media outlets. The frequency in which posters unfavorably portray media figures and entire media outlets as idiotic, unprofessional, or biased illustrates how forum members do not view NeoGAF and the video game press as occupying the exact same social space. Certainly, forum members often use the gaming press as a valuable source of information and posters enthusiastically celebrate when their favorite games receive glowing reviews from major media outlets. However, members quickly utilize a critical discourse to rebuke media outlets during instances where they consider media coverage to differ from their own sensibilities or expectations. NeoGAF members’ critical response to unfavorable media coverage not only discredits the press’s depiction, the thread’s response also establishes a strong moral distinction between the two communities by portraying media figures or outlets as not true gamers. During such episodes, NeoGAF members use a critical discourse to elucidate the notion that the video game press and NeoGAF may share a similar interest, but they do not share the same mindset.
Besides its strong tendency to criticize video game media outlets, NeoGAF is also the only media space I examine in this project that occasionally directs its condemnation towards itself. Such commentary never occurs in my samples from The New York Times or Kotaku. In contrast to these other media spaces lack of reflexive engagement with their own content, NeoGAF posters intermittently include critiques against other forum members with whom they disagree while arguing for their position on a game’s aesthetic value. For example, several posters on the Uncharted 2 official thread chastise other users for overreacting to the less than perfect review scores some media outlets gave the game. These posters often ridicule such users for exhibiting “militant fan shit” (UC2: Post 1487) or derogatorily refer to them as “review whores” (UC2: Post 1619). In other instances, posters extend their critiques to the entire forum. For example, one user in the Uncharted 2 official thread expresses disgust over the whole review score debate by asking “Why is it so hard to be hyped for an exclusive game without having the extremists make you want to punch them?” (UC2: Post 1607). Although the posters never include themselves in their critiques against other forum users, these critical statements do indicate a degree of reflexivity in the forum’s thread discussions. To a certain extent, the critical statements posters direct at the forum may function in an ironic manner, disrupting the assumption of a mutual understanding or commonality by exposing differences even within the NeoGAF community (Jacobs and Smith 1997). Indeed, some civil society scholars have suggested that strong ironic narratives may help foster a more democratic civil society by fostering greater reflexivity and combating a conformist worldview (Jacobs and Smith 1997:71).
Although exchanges in NeoGAF’s most popular threads contain a high amount of critical statements, posters rarely attempt to substantiate their positions. Instead, users primarily participate in thread debates by stating their position and rejecting their opponents. For example, most of the posters in the *Street Fighter IV* thread reject one author’s attempts at constructing a tier system by insisting that everyone who is anyone already knows the true rankings. Besides for one poster’s inclusion of a list of the characters used by the top ranking Japanese players, most users simply reject the article in question and rarely provide any accompanying evidence as to why their tier system is better. Similarly, one of the most common ways in which posters in both the *Killzone 2* and *Uncharted 2* threads argue for either games’ aesthetic credentials is by insisting that all “true gamers” will immediately recognize each games’ excellence and reviewers who think otherwise are biased, professionally inept, or not true gamers. In this sense, the predominant manner in which NeoGAF posters substantiate their claims shares a certain similarity to *The New York Times*’ social threat narrative. Both spaces primarily support their positions through appeals to common sense and shared sensibilities. However, the two forms are not entirely homologous as *The New York Times* often includes quotes from authority figures, even though these authority figures usually appeal to common sense rather than point to what is conventionally recognized as objective evidence. However, it is important to note that NeoGAF users’ tendency to not substantiate their claims may at least be partially the result of the subject matter. As I mentioned in the previous chapter on *Kotaku*’s argumentative style, debates over the proper aesthetic evaluation of a particular video game do not lend themselves easily to statements relying on what is conventionally considered to be objective or factual evidence.
NeoGAF users rarely invoke personal stories to defend their position in these exchanges. For some, this finding may be somewhat surprising given NeoGAF’s informal and anonymous structure. The forum is not a mainstream media outlet nor do forum users publically characterize themselves as active participants in the journalistic enterprise. Consequently, thread discussions are not privy to journalism’s professional principle of avoiding subjectivity. Moreover, the forum allows users to remain anonymous; a feature which some scholars suggest may lead participants to feel more comfortable sharing personal experiences with other forum members (Christopherson 2007). However, similar to the forum’s reliance on appeals to common sense, the small presence of personal stories may be influenced by the fact that these debates center on the aesthetic credentials of particular video games. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, posters’ use of personal stories expands during the forum’s debate over RE5’s potentially problematic imagery.

Additionally, posts in these three NeoGAF threads contain proportionately much fewer intertextual references relative to Kotaku. It is clear from my analysis that NeoGAF posters frequently include commentary on video game media outlets in their posts. However, the majority of these posts do not identify specific media outlets, figures, or articles. Instead, posts include statements directed at video game media outlets in general. To be fair, posters occasionally reference specific articles or publications as evidence for video game media outlets’ general shortcomings. Moreover, posters also occasionally reference other video games in their debates on a particular game’s aesthetic credentials. For example, numerous posters liken Killzone 2 to the critically-acclaimed video game Dead Space in an effort to demonstrate Killzone 2’s merits. However, NeoGAF’s
intertextual references primarily remain vague and overall these three threads contain fewer specific intertextual references relative to *Kotaku*.

NeoGAF’s conversational conventions make it difficult to quantitatively evaluate the level of ideological pluralism in the forum. It is a common practice in all the threads I examined for users who are responding to a previous comment to include an italicized version of the original statement in their own post. In that sense, the majority of evaluative posts in NeoGAF’s threads include multiple perspectives. Although it is important to recognize this feature of thread discussion, we must also be careful not to overinflate its significance. Many posts include a copy of the original post, but rarely critically engage with its position. Instead, the vast majority of posts include brief excerpts from a previous post to illustrate that the author of that particular post is ignorant or inept. Such posters then move on to sharing their own position and never really engage with the other argument. Furthermore, the overall number of viewpoints present in each thread is generally limited to whether or not posters consider the game under discussion to be a quality video game and subsequently those who agree or disagree with a particular review of the game.

In terms of institutional pluralism, forum users’ anonymity makes it impossible to accurately determine posters’ institutional affiliation or occupations. Moreover, users in these three most popular threads rarely incorporate statements from outside sources. Only 9% of the hermeneutically-rich posts include quotes from media outlets. Similarly, statements by artists and other creative figures only appear in 3% of these evaluative posts (see Table 9). Quotes by individuals from any other institutional affiliation I’ve identified do not appear at all in these three threads. Of course, this lack of quotes may be
a reflection of the forum’s primary function as a place for video game fans to voice their own opinions. It may be the case that the majority of the most active users in these threads are from precisely those institutions the least likely to be quoted in the other media spaces I’ve examined. In this sense, NeoGAF may be providing a valuable service by offering an alternative public space for marginalized groups to express their own positions. Nevertheless, from a democratic deliberation perspective, the forum clearly contains the lowest levels of institutional pluralism out of the three spaces.

Although NeoGAF posters certainly construct dramatic caricatures of video game publishers, media figures, and even other forum users, these portrayals largely remain at the low-mimetic level. Users clearly express concern over how major publishers handle the marketing for their favorite video game or how prominent media outlets review these games. However, most posters do not portray these events as having massive societal ramifications. Posters want their favorite video games to do well, but the manner in which they discuss this concern indicates that it won’t be the end of the world or even the video game industry if the game receives negative reviews or performs poorly in the market. Yet at the same time, we should not quickly dismiss these low-mimetic characterizations. Similar to Kotaku’s portrayal of political figures and mainstream media outlets, NeoGAF users repeatedly portray video game media outlets as unprofessional and utterly clueless. In this sense, the forum deflates and delegitimizes (Ku 2001) many of the most popular video game media outlets.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from my analysis in this chapter that NeoGAF provides an online space for video game enthusiasts to express and share their excitement for this medium and the
community that surrounds it. This excitement manifests itself in the intense conversations NeoGAF members engage in over the games they love (or love to hate). In sharing their enthusiasm, thread participants scour the web for relevant information, construct what they consider to be ideal business strategies, comment on video game coverage from major media outlets, define their own aesthetic criteria for evaluating video games, and use these aesthetic standards to fervently debate the merits of various video games. There is little doubt that the enjoyment and consumption of video games is an explicitly active process for many of the more frequent posters on NeoGAF.

The aesthetic debates that emerge in all three forms reveal the presence of a powerful moral binary on NeoGAF that distinguishes between true or hardcore gamers and casual, fake, or non-gamers. Posters participating in the debates occurring in all three forums frequently invoke this moral distinction to lend support to their position and discredit their opposition. During these episodes, posters always position themselves and NeoGAF on the true or hardcore side of this binary, thus instilling the forum and its members with a specific identity, purpose, and sense of self worth. The significance of this moral distinction becomes most readily apparent during episodes where users criticize video game media coverage that they consider problematic or flawed. During these instances, forum members routinely situate authors and media outlets whose video game coverage they disagree with on the polluted or impure side of the video game player binary, thus delegitimizing the outlet’s position on the topic at hand. Although users may rely on media outlets for information about upcoming video games, they clearly don’t trust their aesthetic evaluations nor do they even consider many media figures to even be true video game players. In short, the manner in which NeoGAF
posters portray video game media outlets insists that both groups are not one in the same. In this sense, this moral distinction between true gamers and non-gamers and the frequency with which users utilize this binary to delegitimize video game media outlets provides the forum with its own unique social space.

Although this moral distinction helps provide the community with a strong collective identity and protects the forum from what some users identify as profane encroachments on their space’s autonomy, forum member’s reliance on this moral distinction as the primary interpretive lens with which to explore and address a wide array of topics limits the forums’ contributions from a deliberative democratic perspective. As this chapter illustrates, NeoGAF users apply this moral binary to a variety of issues, treating disagreements over the aesthetic worth of a specific video game or the proper tier-ranking for characters in a competitive fighting game as indicative of the broader conflict between true gamers and casual or non-gamers. In general, NeoGAF users in these threads do not treat disagreements over video games as differences in opinion. Instead, they portray opposing viewpoints as further evidence of non-gamers’ cluelessness and prejudice when it comes to matters pertaining to video games and the true video game community. This interpretive tendency is yet another discursive feature that NeoGAF shares in common with popular conservative media outlets. According to recent work on this subject, conservative media outlets predominantly interpret all sociopolitical topics or debates through the framework of a “perpetual conflict” (Norton 2011:33) between heroic conservatives and nefarious Democrats who are solely focused on political brinksmanship (Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Jamieson and Cappella 2008).
Several of the scholars exploring conservative media outlets have identified a few possible limitations with this discursive framework. According to these scholars, conservative media outlets’ tendency to view all issues through an oppositional logic reduces complex social issues to simple, rudimentary narratives that fail to capture the multifaceted nature of the contemporary social world (Jacobs and Townsley 2011:243; Norton 2011:33). Moreover, Jamieson and Cappella (2008) suggest that this interpretive framework marginalizes dissenting opinions and thus creates an insular interpretive community. According to this logic, by characterizing all oppositional viewpoints as idiotic, disingenuous, and dangerous, conservative media outlets shield their audiences from information and opinions that contradict their pre-existing worldview. Based on this analysis, the same concerns also apply to NeoGAF. The forum’s tendency to pollute individuals or media outlets espousing opinions in opposition to forum members’ own opinions reduces potentially complex topics into simplistic conflicts between knowledgeable gamers and idiotic non-gamers, thus prohibiting the forum from taking opposing viewpoints seriously. This is especially the case when a video game media outlet promotes an opinion forum members find to be problematic. The reoccurring portrayal of video game media outlets as ill-informed, unprofessional, and non-gamers provides forum members with a quick and easy interpretive framework for disqualifying oppositional positions without having to explore these oppositional positions in detail. The net result is an insular interpretive community that treats forum members as the only individuals who possess the appropriate level of knowledge to be qualified to engage in any discussion involving video games. This may not to be too problematic during the relatively mundane aesthetic conversations that occur in the forum’s most popular
threads, but as I explore in the following chapter, these discursive tendencies also emerge during episodes where forum members engage in discussions of more explicitly sociopolitical concerns.

Before moving on to examine how NeoGAF users participate in the debate over *RE5*’s imagery, it is worth taking a moment to explore the potential origins of this discursive framework that plays such a powerful role in structuring discussions on NeoGAF. Bourdieu’s (1993) description of the logic of cultural fields offers perhaps the easiest and most straightforward explanation for the presence of this moral distinction in NeoGAF discussions. According to this approach, the gamer/non-gamer binary reflects the symbolic contestation present in all major cultural fields. Members of this forum utilize this moral distinction in an attempt to carve out their own autonomous space for the video game community and to protect this space from what they identify as mainstream civil society’s potential encroachment.

However, even if this moral distinction does represent the cultural logic underpinning all major cultural fields, more insight is required for us to understand why these forum members seemingly feel the need to carve out and protect an autonomous space for video games in the first place. Williams’ (2003) research and my own exploration into the social construction of video games identifies a historical impetus for precisely this type of discursive framework. Both of our works document how prominent public figures and influential media outlets had by the early 1980s begun denigrating video games and video game players. By the early 1990s, these critical portrayals escalated into government investigations into video games’ potential link to violence and threats of government censorship. Even today, calls for government action against video
games often emerge in response to tragic events. Consequently, the moral binary that surfaces in forum discussions today may reflect a longstanding rallying cry for a community that has spent several decades under the harsh limelight of mainstream civil society. Keeping this historical insight in mind, it may be the case that this moral distinction is not so much the result of what forum members have to gain as what they have to potentially lose if they remain inactive. Confronted with mainstream civil society’s often critical portrayal of the video game community and repeated threats of government intervention, video game players have constructed a powerful moral distinction in an attempt to shelter the community from government intrusion. Although forum members may utilize this framework to counter mainstream civil society’s harsh portrayal of the community, it is clear from this analysis that the gamer/non-gamer moral distinction has also become a quick and easy way for forum members to rebuke anyone whose position they find problematic.
CHAPTER 7: NEOGAF’S DEBATE OVER RESIDENT EVIL 5’S IMAGERY

My analysis in the previous chapter reveals the powerful discursive framework that helps structure conversations in three of the most popular threads devoted to discussing video games on NeoGAF. Although this framework usually serves as the backdrop for the majority of exchanges in the most popular NeoGAF threads, this framework most visibly manifest themselves during moments of disagreement in the forum. What is perhaps most interesting about these hermeneutically-rich events is that they occur in threads devoted to seemingly innocuous topics. Ostensibly, all three threads function as conversational spaces for forum members to gather information and express excitement about their favorite video games. However, the appearance of opposing opinions on such seemingly mundane matters as a video game’s aesthetic credentials spark heated moments of intense discussion and debate. During such moments, discussants visibly invoke elements of this discursive framework to silence or dismiss dissenting opinions. Consequently, the presence of these symbolically rich episodes in such seemingly noncontroversial threads illustrates just how seriously many NeoGAF members treat potential encroachments against the principles that help structure the forum’s semi-autonomous mediated space.

In this chapter, I examine interactions occurring in threads devoted to what on the outset appears to be a more explicitly contentious topic: the debate over *Resident Evil 5*’s (*RE5*) potentially racist imagery. As my analysis of *Kotaku*’s participation in this conversation demonstrates, this debate is perhaps one of the most prominent events during the time frame of my analysis, as it marked one of the first times a discussion starting within the video game community permeated into mainstream media coverage.
Although I have already examined how one prominent video game media outlet participated in this event, it is important to recognize that game enthusiasts actively engaged in this conversation as well, congregating in the comments section of video game media outlets and major forums such as NeoGAF to voice their own thoughts on whether or not RE5 contains racist imagery.

NeoGAF devotes two specific threads to discussing RE5’s potentially problematic imagery. The first thread (Thread #1), entitled “N’Gai Croal - RE5 Trailer Imagery is Racist”, debuts on April 13, 2008, three days after MTV Multiplayer publishes the article containing N’Gai Croal’s widely publicized comments. While the NeoGAF thread only stays open for approximately 12 hours, it contains 1,375 posts.\textsuperscript{124} Such a high post count over a relatively short period of time illustrates just how significant many NeoGAF members consider this issue to be. The second thread (Thread #2), entitled “Resident Evil 5 Not Redesigned After Race Criticism, Says Producer”, appears on June 3, 2008. This thread initially focuses on comments made by RE5’s producer in a recent Kotaku article. In the article, the producer claims that the public’s concern with RE5’s imagery did not change the game’s development in any significant manner. This thread did not attract as much attention as the first thread and contains only 164 posts.\textsuperscript{125}

NeoGAF members take this debate quite seriously. Many thread posters who do not consider RE5 to contain racist imagery treat such allegations as a dangerous encroachment onto their favorite activity or even an attempt at censorship by uninformed


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critics and political opportunists. Similarly, NeoGAF members who consider the game to contain problematic imagery insist on the need for other thread members to recognize *RE5*'s broader social implications and treat the entire episode as an embarrassing indication of the video game community’s immaturity. In short, NeoGAF members on both sides of this debate treat this episode as a moment of crisis for the video game community. Moreover, my analysis demonstrates how NeoGAF members participating in this passionate debate construct powerful social narratives that address broader sociopolitical concerns such as racism’s continued presence in America.

Thread users’ participation in this broader debate transforms NeoGAF into an aesthetic public sphere. Users engaging in these conversations share their thoughts on whether or not racism still endures in contemporary America and criticize those who express opposing positions. Consistent with the previous chapters on video game coverage in *The New York Times* and *Kotaku*, in this chapter I examine the discursive dynamics of the arguments posters put forward in this discussion on NeoGAF. Moreover, I also compare the discursive attributes of this discussion to the forum’s manner of engagement during less overtly political moments. I find that NeoGAF users rely more heavily on intertextual references and personal anecdotes to defend their position during the debate over *RE5*'s imagery relative to the aesthetic debates present in the three threads I analyzed in the previous chapter. However, the manner in which users characterize and respond to video game media outlets and thread users who possess opposing viewpoints in the *RE5* debate threads remains predominantly consistent with the discursive framework present in the most popular (and less overtly political) threads I examined in the previous chapter. In other words, the discursive dynamics present in
NeoGAF’s debate over RE5’s imagery are not entirely different or new, but instead serve as a somewhat amplified form of the manner in which NeoGAF users normally engage in discussion. The only major difference is that users are now discussing broader sociopolitical concerns. In the following sections I summarize the positions of the two opposing camps in this debate and document how in issuing their position both sides construct narratives addressing broader sociopolitical concerns.

**Resident Evil 5 Is Not Racist**

NeoGAF users participating in this debate over RE5’s imagery never arrive at a consensus over the meaning of the imagery present in RE5. The community divides itself into two camps: those that support Croal’s concerns with the original RE5 trailer and those who fully dismiss the idea that the trailer contains any elements that can be considered racist. Overall, the majority of posts reject the idea that there is anything problematic about RE5’s imagery. However, a vocal minority of posters do exist in these two threads who insist that the game contains problematic imagery. Of course, posts on each side of this debate present a variety of reasons to support their position. This is especially the case amongst posts rejecting Croal’s original statements.

Amongst the posts rejecting the claim that RE5 contains racist imagery, several major arguments repeatedly appear. One of the most popular arguments insists that the game’s context justifies the imagery and thus prevents the game from being considered racist. For example, many posts simply note that the reason all the zombies in the trailer are black is because the game takes place in Haiti or Africa. For example, one poster writes:

I'm an African American and not the least bit offended by Resident Evil 5… The game takes place in a Country where there is a large African American
community. If the game took place in Connecticut or Ohio and all the enemies were still all black then maybe we would really have something to make a fuss about, but as it stands now we don't. (Thread #1: Post 585)

Other posts more succinctly express the same argument. Early on in the thread, one poster dismisses Croal’s original claims by stating “It's set in Africa. Black people live in Africa” (Thread #1: Post 12). Similarly, an alternative post notes that “99% of the Haitian population is black” (Thread #1: Post 121). According to this explanation, the reason all the zombies in the trailer are black is not a reflection of an insidious racist agenda but simply the result of the developers’ decision to set the game in Haiti or Africa. In fact, many posters promoting this argument note that the fact that the bulk of the enemies the protagonist encounters in the trailer are all black enhances the gameplay experience by immersing the player in a realistic depiction of the game’s setting. Indeed, several users suggest that it would be much more problematic if the majority of the enemies were white. According to these posters, such a scenario would clash with the game’s setting and thus provide players with a jarring gameplay experience.

A second popular explanation posters use to defend Resident Evil 5’s imagery notes that the protagonist is fighting zombies in the trailer, not humans. Similar to the setting defense, posters repeatedly and emphatically explain that critics are taking the trailer’s imagery out of context. As proponents of this argument explain, despite what many critics appear to be arguing, the protagonist is not combating these enemies because they are black.

126 The original NeoGAF thread contains a large amount of confusion over Resident Evil 5’s setting. Many initial news articles suggested that the game takes place in Haiti. However, the developers eventually announced Africa as the setting. Although this change received a large amount of media attention, many posters in the first NeoGAF thread still refer to Haiti as the game’s setting, even though many frustrated posters repeatedly emphasize the game’s switch in locale.
More accurately, the protagonist is fighting them because they are zombies. The following post illustrates this rationale, stating:

Oh, you're right, he's shooting those black people because they are black. Right? I'd agree, that's racist. Oh wait...they're ZOMBIES!!!!!! He's shooting them because they're zombies, and THEY are trying to kill HIM, or more likely they are trying to turn him into a zombie and maybe eat a little bit of his brain. (Thread #1: Post 253)

Not only does this post urge critics to recognize that the antagonists are zombies and not humans, it also serves as an accurate representation of the anger and frustration present in posts of this nature. A large number of discussants vehemently insist that critics of *RE5* have either forgotten or chosen to ignore the fact that every installment in the *Resident Evil* franchise involves the protagonists fighting off zombies and that the series has never included killing humans.

Besides these two common explanations, posters who do not consider *RE5*’s imagery to be racist also argue that the game’s presentation is consistent with established horror genre conventions in both film and video games. Discussants issuing these defenses specifically take exception to Croal’s criticism that the African characters appear dangerous even before they become zombies. Responding to Croal’s criticism, many posters argue that the trailer uses dark and mysterious imagery to convey a foreboding, dangerous mood consistent with previous games in the series and popular horror films. For example, one poster explains:

MAYBE if the trailer ended 1/3 of the way through, someone without knowledge would be confused when "Resident Evil 5: Coming Soon" appeared, but as soon as the 3rd man transforms, it should be completely obvious to anyone who has even basic cultural osmosis that the darkness, isolation, high shot, quiet soundtrack, and overly bright sun are all hallmarks of the horror movie genre throughout nearly all of film history (I think that the light/dark contrast, in particular, fits in with the early Expressionists, especially Germany's, even though even that would be a stretch to compare.). (Thread #1: Post 455)
As this post illustrates, many NeoGAF members do not perceive any racist intentions on the part of the game’s trailer. Instead, they assert that the imagery makes sense given the game’s genre aspirations. Overall, posters’ insistence that RE5’s context justifies its imagery resembles the gamer/non-gamer binary present in the forum’s most popular threads. Consistent with the moral distinction present in NeoGAF’s most popular threads during my analysis, posters promoting this style of justification for RE5’s imagery treat others’ criticisms against the game as indicative of the fact that these critics do not understand RE5, zombie games, or standard conventions of the horror genre. Consequently, these posters suggest that RE5’s critics are ill-informed and thus not qualified to comment on RE5’s imagery.

In a manner also consistent with the discourse present in NeoGAF’s most popular threads, many posters accuse the RE’s critics of possessing a double standard. Users pushing this argument repeatedly point out that these critics never complained about the enemy’s race in other Resident Evil games or any other popular game for that matter. One post frustratingly writes: “There are tons of games where you kill arabs/asians, and nobody out there nobody gives a shit about it. Why dont they talk about those games?” (Thread #1: Post 73). Similarly, a different poster states “This is the point where N'Gai's argument just goes bust. You can't have your cake and eat it too” (Thread #1: Post 177). These posters treat the critics’ silence on previous games where the player kills enemies from other races as an indication that RE5’s critics had no problem with those scenarios. As a result of this revelation, NeoGAF members portray critics of RE5’s imagery as inconsistent and thus flawed.
Besides meticulously identifying the reasons why *RE5* does not contain racist imagery, NeoGAF members opposing this critique also berate Croal and anyone else who claims the game contains racist imagery. Many of these critical posts launch ad hominem attacks at Croal, describing him as “retarded” (Thread #1: Post 88; 217), an “idiot” (Thread #1: Post 394; 544; 796), a “douchebag” (Thread #1: Post 774), a “dumbass” (Thread #1: Post 891), and an “assclown” (Thread #1: Post 740). Moreover, numerous posters take exception to an *Arizona Daily Star* article covering the debate that describes Croal as “the deepest thinker and best writer in the field of video game journalism”. For example, one poster disdainfully notes that “video game journalism is pretty fucked” if Croal truly is the deepest thinker and best writer in the field (Thread #1: Post 740).

These personal attacks are not the only way in which NeoGAF users attempt to discredit Croal. Many posters condemn Croal in a manner more consistent with the critical media narrative present in the three threads I examined in the previous chapter. Similar to posters in the forum’s most popular threads that describe media figures whose coverage differs from their own opinions as unprofessional or terrible journalists, many NeoGAF users participating in this debate criticize Croal for completely misrepresenting the medium he is supposed to be covering. Posters repeatedly point out that many of Croal’s concerns with the *RE5* trailer are also present in some of the most popular contemporary video game franchises. For instance, numerous posters respond to Croal’s complaint that the trailer portrays all the African villagers as dangerous by noting that this theme appears in every previous installment in the series. As one poster explains:

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127 The first post in the thread includes a summary of the debate largely derived from a *GamePolitics* article covering this topic. Unfortunately, I am currently unable to find the original *Arizona Daily Star* article and the *GamePolitics* link is also broken. The original *GamePolitics* article was published on April 12, 2008 and can be found at the following address: [http://www.gamepolitics.com/2008/04/12/newsweeks-ngai-croal-re5-contains-racist-imagery](http://www.gamepolitics.com/2008/04/12/newsweeks-ngai-croal-re5-contains-racist-imagery); Retrieved May 29, 2012.
This is just like how RE4 opened, except you didn't have people still being infected, or the "zombies" having enough intelligence to hide the fact they are infected until the "outsider" became a threat. I really wish N'gai would do his homework on stuff if hes going to throw bombs like this. (Thread #1: Post 264)

According to this poster, Croal’s statements indicate a complete lack of video game knowledge. As I explored in the previous chapter, this is a particularly harsh condemnation within the NeoGAF forum. Criticisms of this nature not only rebuke Croal’s journalistic credentials, they also question his video game fandom. Similar to many posters’ response to the “casual” tier-system article in the official Street Fighter IV thread or how posters respond to video game media outlets whose review they disagree with, Croal’s failure to recognize the connection between RE5’s imagery and previous games in the franchise places him squarely on the polluted side of the gamer/non-gamer moral binary.

Finally, NeoGAF users also characterize Croal’s comments as an attempt to gain publicity. Users repeatedly describe Croal as a self-promoter and claim that he manufactured the entire controversy simply to advance his own public standing. As one post states:

Typical of N'Gai to over analyze a subject in the most obnoxious way possible. I am not surprised at his latest attempt to grandstand in front of the mainstream media pretending to be the only person capable of intellectual thought in his field. (Thread #1: Post 482)

Posts criticizing Croal in this manner focus on Croal’s moral character rather than his position in this debate. These posters claim that Croal is so eager to be recognized as a gifted journalist and cultural commentator that he is willing to exploit America’s current racial tensions in order to gain broader media attention. Consequently, his concerns with RE5 are not genuine and should thus be ignored.
Although Croal receives a significant proportion of forum members’ ire early in the thread, posters frequently launch ad-hominem attacks against other forum members who oppose their own position in this debate. Overall, posters who do not consider the game to contain problematic imagery rely heavily on character attacks to discredit their opposition. Posters frequently portray Croal’s supporters as a group of idiots who like to complain for the sake of complaining. The following three posts illustrate this sentiment:

There is no reason why this game should be scrutinized by anything more than local news when it arrives, but it will be because people on the internet will bitch and complain about dumb shit like "Why are they so dark?". (Thread #1: Post #274)

The only shame I can see is that if somehow this game gets altered to some shittier less amazing version because a bunch of ignorant assholes bitched about racism.....I don't even know what I'll do, but I won't be happy. (Thread #1: Post #429)

They just need to create a racist on/off option in the menu. Shutting it off would make everyone white and in that way it would eliminate any bitching from anyone. (Thread #1: Post #442)

These posts do not offer any explanation for why RE5’s imagery is not problematic. Instead, these posts harshly characterize forum members who find RE5’s imagery to be problematic in order to discredit their position. Overall, this style of ad-hominem attack is one of the most popular ways in which NeoGAF users respond to posters who support Croal’s position.

As this analysis demonstrates, NeoGAF users utilize a variety of strategies in order to reject the notion that RE5 contains racist imagery. Overall, these strategies closely resemble the discursive framework present in the forum’s most popular threads. Posters reject the notion that RE5 may contain problematic imagery by highlighting how the game’s critics do not possess the appropriate level of game knowledge, which thus
delegitimizes their opinions on this matter. In other words, posters characterize \textit{RE5}'s critics as non-gamers, which consequently disqualifies their opinions on the game. Consistent with the forum’s most popular threads, these posters devote much of their attention to criticizing video game journalists, critics, and media outlets. NeoGAF posters treat comments by the prominent video game journalist N’Gai Croal as a clear indication that Croal does not possess a strong understanding of video games and he is more interested in using his position to promote himself rather than cover the field in any substantive or objective manner. Moreover, posters frequently launch ad-hominem attacks against Croal and other forum members who consider \textit{RE5}'s imagery to be problematic. Besides defending \textit{RE5} from critics, many of these posts share an additional commonality: a similar worldview. Many of these posts treat the \textit{RE5} debate as illustrative of a larger social problem. In the next section, I examine the social narrative that emerges from the manner in which these users describe this problem.

\textit{America’s Hypersensitivity and Its Dangerous Implications}

Posts refuting claims that \textit{RE5} contains racist imagery often do much more than simply defend the game’s visuals. Many posts assert that this debate perfectly epitomizes what is wrong with America today. In their discussion of this issue, these posts construct a detailed account of the particular problem America is facing, the social groups who are to blame for this problem, as well as a possible solution.

According to the social narrative present in NeoGAF users’ defense of \textit{RE5}, contemporary America suffers from a severe predisposition to view everything as racist. These posters view the media’s rush to describe \textit{RE5} as racist without first gathering all the relevant information or examining the context as just the latest illustration of this
problem. Posters in both threads often express their disgust with this debate by noting that only Americans would consider a video game set in Africa to possess racist imagery. One of the first posters to communicate this irritation simply writes “only in America” (Thread #1: Post 282). Others quickly agree with the poster’s sentiment. For example, in response to the original “only in America” comment, one user notes “Pretty much. Nowhere else will anyone care” (Thread #1: Post 306). Similarly, an alternative discussant wonders: “Why do people try SO hard to find things racist? Especially in the U.S.?” (Thread #1: Post 850). As these posts illustrate, many NeoGAF users consider the alarm over RE5 to be a distinctly American tendency.

Among the posts that elaborate on this subject, the primary reason why America erroneously considers so many topics racist is that Americans have become “hypersensitive” to race. The country’s problematic history of race relations has left Americans extremely uneasy about any subject involving a racial dynamic. Consequently, this anxious condition leads many Americans to incorrectly identify racist themes in subjects completely unrelated to the problem or to at least support public figures that raise such concerns. Indeed, some posters frustratingly explain that Americans are hypersensitive in general. One user utilizes this narrative to dismiss critics’ claims by explaining:

I can look at absolutely anything and find something in it to be offended about. If you are offended by this game, it’s because you’re choosing to look at it like that. You’re choosing to ignore logic and follow the ridiculous trend of hypersensitivity to everything. People who are offended are looking for something to be offended about. (Thread #1: Post 1082)
As this post explains, there is nothing racist about *RE5*. Instead, critics’ concerns with the game simply reflect America’s propensity to examine everything through a hypersensitive racial lens.

Discussants employing this narrative note that although at least some of these hypersensitive Americans who interpret the game as racist may have good intentions, they are ultimately causing more harm than good. Posters repeatedly complain that the game’s critics are directing their attention towards non-issues. For example, one poster writes:

The fact that people are so on edge about race that they actively try to invent hidden racial agendas in something in the *RE5* game trailer demonstrates just how clueless we still seem to be about how to address racial confusion and conflicts. This hypersensitive nonsense isn't addressing anything. (Thread #1: Post 1226)

As this example illustrates, one of the main concerns posters have with critics’ hypersensitivity is that it diverts attention away from genuine racial issues. According to this argument, discussions of racial imagery in popular culture distract Americans from substantively addressing America’s very real and serious racial conflicts. Posters promoting this narrative explain that debates over alleged racist imagery in popular culture leave advocates with a sense of accomplishment while the true racial issues remain unnoticed and consequently unresolved.

Many posters characterize America’s hypersensitivity as having a second and even more dangerous consequence. According to these users, critics complaining that *RE5* contains racist imagery are actually helping to promote racism’s continued existence. Below are just a few examples of this popular sentiment on the thread:

You know, I'll just say it. Mindsets like this help feed racism and keep it alive (Thread #1: Post 263)
[B]y drawing attention to the perceived offense, people are just reinforcing the outdated views which they claim it represents. I don't think it's very productive. It's being over-sensitive and reading too much into things. (Thread #1: Post 384)

People complain that racism is not going away. How can it when "visionary" people like N'Gai are constantly reminding everyone about it. (Thread #1: Post 531)

Leave the fucking past behind. We are trying to make this world better and not see certain differences. This means, as an example, the guy writing that article could have had a clue and not write this up. But he couldn't 'cause instead of trying to look at the world the right way, he's still in the archaic old way. (Thread #1: Post 532)

It's only because people throw hissy fits like this that the "race" thing is still around, anyways! (Thread #1: Post 1069)

As these examples illustrate, many discussants consider the concern over RE5’s imagery to be an antiquated and quite dangerous worldview. For posters operating from this position, individuals who distinguish between different races in popular culture forms consequently possess and disseminate a racist mindset. The thread devoted to Croal’s comments is filled with posters repeatedly reprimanding critics for precisely this reason.

For some, the notion that individuals who voice concerns of racism are in fact promoting racism may appear to be a contradictory or at least puzzling statement. Fortunately for this analysis, some of the posts espousing this position provide an explanation. According to proponents of this narrative, hypersensitive critics perpetuate racist beliefs by distinguishing video game characters based on the color of their skin. Reflecting this sentiment, one poster claims that “racism will never die if a person's race is a more (or even equally) differentiating factor from other human beings than that person's name” (Thread #1: Post 445). This user is not alone in expressing this concern. Users frequently find it troubling that critics’ first reaction to the trailer was to note that all the enemies are black and the protagonist is white. Again, these users argue that such
observations promote the arbitrary and dangerous idea that humans can be classified by the color of their skin.

This notion that those who criticize RE5 for including racist imagery are themselves racists demonstrates another connection between the forum and certain elements of conservative rhetoric in contemporary America. Many prominent figures conventionally associated with conservative causes have issued similar public statements, including politicians, media personalities, and even Supreme Court Justices. For example, in his written opinion in Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1, Chief Justice Roberts wrote that “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.”128,129 In this particular case, the Supreme Court ruled that public school systems cannot integrate schools through measures that explicitly take into consideration racial characteristics.

Moreover, proponents of this viewpoint explain that critics who argue that video games where the protagonist kills whites and other ethnicities are not as problematic as a game where the protagonist kills blacks are guilty of promoting a racial hierarchy. One post expresses this concern by writing “I also agree that in order to be truly equal then everything should be viewed the same, but it seems as though that is not the case” (Thread #1: Post 335). According to these users, such hypersensitivity only leads to new inequalities. Consequently, posters claim that this argument is guilty of attaching disparate standards and values to different races. These posts build from users’ rejection

129 I would like to thank Richard Lachmann for identifying this connection and sharing Chief Justice Roberts’ statement.
of critics’ concerns as a double standard to portray such statements as not just illogical but also dangerous.

Posts disseminating this narrative further maintain that America’s hypersensitivity is also racist in the sense that it often treats Africans and African Americans as the same. Several posts express frustration towards what they identify as Americans’ problematic tendency to treat the two different groups as one in the same.

I love how these African American people, who barely have any ties of their own to the countries of the mother land, jump at the notion of racist imagery. I actually know people who truly are African, zimbabwe, cape verd, angola, etc. They don't give a shit, heck i've shown a friend of mine the video, it wasn't even brought up, he just said it looked awesome. Seriously, just because he's black doesn't mean he is connected to you, he probably doesn't speak your language, he doesn't share your culture, etc. Stop dividing things by color, fuck color man, we are all the same, flesh and blood, what sets us apart is culture. So seriously, if white people don't care about the imagery shown in Hostel/Res4 (Crazy ass white people, violent without morals, cult shit) then African Americans should stop thinking they are all that and realize that they are just fighting for attention. You're not the center of the world. I'm just sick of this shit, if only because i actually have african friends. (Thread #1: Post 260)

A second user voices support for this original statement, writing:

YES[.] My friend is from Zimbabwe, and he hates it when a random black dude at our college will come up to him and just assume things because they both happen to share the same skin color. His culture is so far removed from any of the shit here, and the presumption that you share a common bond is stupid. It just furthers the delineation of the world by race, when culture is the real boundary for everything. (Thread #1: Post 301)

These examples illustrate how discussants frequently reprimand critics for operating under the flawed assumption that Africans and African Americans face the same hardships, share the same experiences, and thus possess identical values and a matching worldview. For these users, the problem stems from critics’ failure to recognize that America and every African country possess their own unique cultural values and experiences. Moreover, many users use a personal narrative to note that they have friends
or family from Africa who are extremely irritated at America’s tendency to group all black-skinned people together. According to this social narrative, the problem with grouping all black-skinned individuals together is not just that it is factually wrong but also that it problematically divides the world by race.

One of the key elements of this description is that thread users do not treat the *RE5* debate as an isolated incident. NeoGAF members espousing this position describe the *RE5* debate as just the latest example of America’s dangerous hypersensitivity. In their evaluation of this debate, these discussants construct a powerful narrative documenting how America’s hypersensitivity promotes the continued existence of a racist worldview. According to this account, this racist worldview inhibits progress and true racial harmony by keeping people divided.

The manner in which NeoGAF members describe public figures they identify as contributing to America’s hypersensitivity varies. Although posters utilizing this narrative agree that such a mindset is dangerous, posts chronicling this story vary in how they describe the intentions of the public figures responsible for maintaining America’s racist worldview. As my earlier analysis indicates, one of the most common portrayals among posts of this nature describes public figures disseminating this flawed and problematic perspective as simply misinformed or ignorant. According to this portrayal, these critics are sadly unaware of their concerns’ racist ramifications. Some posts suggest that these figures may even have the best intentions in mind, but their ignorance to the real issues blinds them from their arguments’ problematic consequences.

There is however a second way in which posts characterize the public figures responsible for disseminating this harmful ideology. According to this account, public
figures exist in America that feign outrage over what they describe as instances of racism not for the better of society but for their own gain. Indeed, such figures may even be fully cognizant of the fact that erroneously crying racism can have dangerous ramifications. Many posts refer to such individuals as “race hustlers” or “political hustlers”. For example, in response to other posts’ questioning of Croal’s journalistic credentials, one post explains: “N’Gai is the least of their worries as I can easily see actual race hustlers making an issue of this when the game comes out” (Thread #1: Post 164). Similarly, a different post ominously predicts that “[s]oon almost every video game will be accused of being racist, or homophobic, or anti-environment, or fascist or whatever popular catch-phrase the political hustler class are making the most money off at the moment (Thread #1: Post 1049) These posts illustrate a reoccurring concern in these threads that Croal’s comments will grab the attention of “race hustlers” who will elevate this debate into a much larger issue with potentially disastrous consequences.

In this narrative, the character of the race hustler is a self-centered individual that manipulates America’s problematic racial history and the country’s current hypersensitivity for their own gain. For example, one post explains that race hustlers deliberately “stir up the crucible” of racism to “create controversy” (Thread #1: Post 658). Moreover, posters describe these hustlers’ focus on race as an apt choice, as America’s current hypersensitivity to such issues essentially shields race hustlers from claims of dishonesty or insincerity from mainstream media sources. Instead, most Americans view these individuals as concerned citizens. In short, race hustlers are guilty of “playing the race card” for their own benefit. Posters spend much less time

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130 Several users promoting this social narrative even include an image of a “race card” in their posts. The image’s features are reminiscent of playing cards from the card game Magic The Gathering. The “race
specifying what exactly race hustlers gain from “playing the race card”, but some posts mention fame, political power, and material profit.

Although the overwhelming majority of posts including this social narrative do not identify any particular public figures who match this characterization, a few users describe Al Sharpton as the epitome of a race hustler. For example, one discussant expresses their disappointment with Croal by noting that they “expect this from Al Sharpton, you know, someone who judges the cover without even bothering to look at the pages (Thread #1: Post 380). Similarly, a different poster expresses their frustration over claims that RE5 is racist by mockingly asking “has al sharpton posted in this thread yet? (Thread #1: Post 674). These posts never elaborate on why Al Sharpton is a race hustler in any more detail than noting that he rushes to find racism without examining the context, but in certain respects the thread’s caricature of the race hustler is reminiscent of many political pundits’ and social commentators’ enduring depiction of Al Sharpton as a political opportunist or race-baiter.

Posts containing this narrative describe race hustlers as an extremely destructive force in contemporary America. Many posts explain that the hustlers’ reliance on “playing the race card” to create controversy for their own gain is particularly nefarious. Numerous posts express concern that this tactic can only result in more racial tension and possibly even racial conflict. For example, one poster expresses their outrage over Croal’s comments by noting:

I am not suggesting racism does not exist anymore by any means, but in the context of Resident Evil 5, this isn't pouring salt into the existing wound - this is tearing open a new wound where a scar had formed of an old wound and then

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“card” includes a picture of Martin Luther King Jr. and the following text “When the Race Card comes into play, all arguments are destroyed. New arguments cannot be created until the Race Card leaves play” (For an example, see Thread #1: Post 591).
looking for salt to pour into it to see what happens and hope it sells pages. (Thread #1: Post 559)

Numerous users share this sentiment. Consistent with the earlier descriptions of hypersensitive critics fostering a racist ideology, these posters fear that race hustlers are promoting a potentially violent racist mindset by repeatedly reminding everyone of America’s troubled history with race. According to this narrative, rather than help America move forward, race hustlers are willing to keep America in the dark and dangerous days of its past for their own interests.

A second concern that frequently appears in these threads asserts that race hustlers’ self-serving allegations of racism diminish the public’s awareness of and response to legitimate race issues. For example, one poster writes:

I don't see this as a racial matter, I see this as some self-important "journalist" trying to make it a racial matter in order to get attention. Attempting to exploit political correctness cheapens it, and shows a callous disregard for the weight of real racism. (Thread #1: Post 774)

NeoGAF users’ portrayal of “race hustlers” reveals an important aspect of this narrative. Only a very small number of posts in these threads claim that racism in its entirety no longer exists in America. Instead, advocates of this narrative claim that critics’ particular reaction to RE5 and most major media outcries over allegedly racist imagery in popular culture in general are not truly instances of racism. Consequently, this social narrative explains that race hustlers’ propensity to create or exploit such episodes actually distracts America from addressing genuine racial issues.

Although this narrative presents a cynical portrayal of America, posters frequently include recommendations for how to address America’s hypersensitivity and deal with this group of race hustlers. Indeed, posters regularly share their hopes that America will
one day become a truly egalitarian and harmonious society. Consistent with this social narrative’s plot, users suggest that the only way for this to happen is if America tones down its current level of hypersensitivity. For example, one poster explains:

In a few generations we might be truly color blind. I mean, MY people, they starved, they lived in filth and poverty, they were oppressed...but I'm not going to consider depictions of white people in such conditions as being racist, or be sensitive to it beyond how I'd be sensitive to the depiction of any human in such circumstances. But that all did happen a little further back than black enslavement in the US (or, at least, stopped before slavery did), so maybe it'll take a little longer for some people to shake that same sensitivity. But it does need to be shaken, or true equality never really will be achieved. (Thread #1: Post 533)

As this post illustrates, the only way the country will ever become a truly egalitarian society is if Americans eliminate their current hypersensitivity to controversial issues or themes. Otherwise, American’s hypersensitivity will continue to promote a divisionary worldview.

Of course, perhaps the more difficult question is how exactly can America “shake” its sensitivity to such issues. Fortunately, discussants are generally in agreement on an appropriate course of action. In fact, many users argue that the solution is easily attainable: the quickest way for the country to eliminate this problem is to pay no attention to the hypersensitive critics and race hustlers disseminating these dangerous messages in the first place. In other words, simply ignore public figures issuing accusations of racism and eventually such claims will disappear. One post bluntly expresses this sentiment with the statement “Forget racism...and...Pretty soon, the whole world will” (Thread #1: Post 431). According to this logic, if Americans stop consuming news coverage of race hustlers’ allegations, eventually media outlets will realize that Americans aren’t interested in these issues and will consequently stop providing a public forum for such concerns. Without a public forum, race hustlers will be unable to attract
the wide scale attention they need, thus severely reducing the proliferation of a racially-divisive ideology. Indeed many users apply this strategy to NeoGAF. The thread is filled with posters pleading with other users to stop debating this issue and even begging NeoGAF’s moderators to close the thread.

**Resident Evil 5’s Imagery is Problematic**

Despite the fact that the majority of posts do not agree with Croal’s comments, there does exist a vocal minority of NeoGAF users in these two threads who repeatedly insist that *RE5* contains troubling imagery. These users plead for the opposition to recognize the serious problems with the game’s imagery and some even ask Capcom to make appropriate changes to the final version of the game. These discussants also construct a complex argument in defense of Croal’s initial concerns and use this debate as an opportunity to discuss racism’s continued presence in America.

It is important to note that very few posts in defense of Croal’s comments consider *RE5* to be overtly racist. Instead, the majority of users describe the game’s imagery as problematic or troubling. For example, one user writes: “I agree with everything that N’Gai said here. Is the imagery racist in intent? Perhaps not. Is it racially insensitive? You bet” (Thread #1: Post #96). As this example illustrates, supporters of Croal’s original comments are quick to point out that they don’t believe *RE5* is promoting a racist agenda nor do they consider the developers to be racist. Instead, these users are concerned with what they describe as the game’s racially insensitive imagery. Many users take this distinction between racism and racially insensitive imagery quite seriously and express frustration when they believe the opposing side is wrongfully portraying their
argument. For example, after a series of posts criticize the notion that *RE5* is racist, one discussant posts the following reply:

I'm seriously about to punch my monitor. PEOPLE ARE SAYING THE GAME HAS ELEMENTS THAT ARE RACIALLY INSENSITIVE, RACIAL INSENSITIVITY $\neq$ RACIST. (Thread #1: Post 584)

This user is not alone in expressing frustration over what they consider to be the other side’s misrepresentation of their argument. Posts repeatedly appear throughout these threads that frustratingly issue similar corrections.

Posts in support of Croal’s comments generally identify two major elements present in the game’s imagery which they consider to be particularly problematic. Many posters note that they do not object to the game’s African setting, but they consider it problematic that the game features a white protagonist battling a group of enemies who are all black. As an illustration of this sentiment, one poster writes “There is a colossal difference between ‘acknowledging these places in the world’ and ‘sending in a giant white guy to shoot African peasants in the face’” (Thread #1: Post 236).

NeoGAF users’ aren’t only concerned with what they describe as the game’s white versus black plotline. Consistent with Croal’s original comments, many NeoGAF users are also troubled with the way the game portrays the African characters before they become zombies. For example, one user defends Croal’s comments by posting the following statement:

Why do the non-zombified Africans in the trailer look so cold and menacing….Why not create a more noticeable and effective contrast between how Africans actually live their day-to-day lives, and when they become zombies? Why isn't Chris Redfield trying to interact with them if he’s trying to investigate a potential zombie infestation? (Thread #1: Post 389)
Posters such as this user describe the zombie portions of the trailer as less troubling than the earlier sections where the antagonist is walking around the African village. According to proponents of this argument, the game portrays the pre-zombie African villagers as already subhuman and treacherous, or as one poster explains, “dark, dangerous others” (Thread #1: Post 313).

Many posts go beyond identifying what they consider to be problematic imagery and explain what precisely is racially insensitive about this imagery. In general, posters agree with Croal that the main problem with RE5’s imagery is its historical context. In particular, proponents of this argument connect the game’s imagery with what they consider to be Africa and Haiti’s “extremely unfortunate history” (Thread #1: Post 76). Several posters explain that the game’s depiction of a white protagonist combating a group of black antagonists (infected or not) is extremely similar to the West’s historical depiction of Africans as inferior savages. For example, two different posts summarize NeoGAF users’ concerns with the following statements:

The idea of blacks as “savages” has been used repeatedly for hundreds of years in Western culture, originally as an explicit aid to the colonial exploitation of Africans by European whites; that imagery still exists in our culture, although the context is quite different. (Thread #1: Post 678)

According to this sentiment, the problem with this imagery is not just that it depicts Africans as a subspecies relative to Europeans, but also that Europeans and Americans have used this portrayal in the past to justify colonialism. Consequently, these users argue that RE5’s imagery evokes Africa’s terrible and not too distant experience under European subjugation and exploitation. Proponents of this argument insist that it is extremely insensitive for RE5 to include such imagery, as the scars left from European colonialism have not fully disappeared just yet. Moreover, these users express concern
that *RE5* perpetuates the continued existence of a dangerous cultural stereotype for players who lack a colonial/postcolonial experience.

Although the majority of NeoGAF users explain that the imagery is problematic due to its historical context, other users point out how the violence in the trailer dovetails with more recent atrocities in Africa. One user shares this reasoning in the following lengthy post:

I think the problem is that the trailer really heavily mirrors common scenes that HAVE been portrayed in dozens of movies where massacres have recently (within the last 10-20 years) happened in Africa and other primarily black countries. Creating footage that looks the same, and then saying "Well they're zombies in this case, so its OK to kill them" is a bit retarded. Rather like creating a game where you were organizing suicide bombers in the middle of Baghdad. Not that its illegal to make that game. Just that, to do so and not expect some sort of reaction from people would make you infinitely dumb. It should create a reaction. Horrible things have been done over there and if people didn't (and don't) react, that's a problem. (Thread #1: Post 566)

For users such as the author of this post, the game’s depiction of the poor, depraved African villagers and its reliance on gun violence to solve conflict are strongly reminiscent of the terrible civil wars and massacres that many African countries have suffered in the last few decades.

Similar to some of the posts that reject the claim that *RE5* contains racist imagery, several users describe how family members or friends from Africa would react to this footage or even share their own personal experiences living in Africa to defend their argument that the game contains troubling imagery. The family/friend connection is by far the more common of the two. For example:

I've personally been to Africa numerous times (Specifically South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria) where I have a lot of family (On my step fathers side but we're still really close). I'd imagine they'd be uncomfortable with the game, especially my family from South Africa that lived through Apartheid. (Thread #1: Post 319).
I'll personally find it awkward to play considering I have close relatives (That I know personally) in Africa, several of whom live in horrid township conditions. It does hit a little to close to home, at least in my case. (Thread #1: Post 866)

In these two examples, the posters not only note that their family members who live in Africa would most likely find this imagery insulting, but they also offer an explanation as to why their family members would be offended. According to both posts, RE5 includes imagery reminiscent of the terrible catastrophes their family members have endured. For this reason, Capcom should drastically change the game if not cancel it entirely.

Although not as common as familial justifications, it is worth mentioning that a few posts share their own personal experiences living in Africa or Haiti. For example, one user writes:

I am african, ive been through a civil war, seen people in poverty. This not material for a game, it isnt about freedom of speech its about having respect for these people that have been through hell most of their lives and then displaying the game like this? fuck you capcom. (Thread #1: Post 876)

Similar to the posts describing family members’ experience living in Africa, these personal testimonials describe their horrified reactions to seeing imagery reminiscent of their own hardships. Again, for these users, the imagery hits too close to home and touches upon experiences that game developers should not exploit for entertainment.

Posters who consider the game to contain problematic imagery also address their opposition’s claim that they possess a double-standard. In response to opposition’s argument that those offended by the violent imagery in RE5 should also have been offended by the violent imagery in Resident Evil 4, NeoGAF users insist that the imagery between the two games is not the same. Consistent with their emphasis on context, these users argue that the imagery in Resident Evil 4 does not have the same history as the
imagery in *RE5*. For example, one poster responds to the double standard argument with the following statement:

Because Spaniards have been traditionally vilified because of the color of their skin? Spaniards are white Europeans. What terrible events of the past does having an American white guy killing Spanish white guys invoke? A war is one thing but the invasion, subjugation, and dehumanization is another. What stereotype that Spaniards are a sub-human villain to be perpetually feared can be seen in RE4? (Thread #1: Post 728)

This post is emblematic of the rationale underpinning many NeoGAF users’ response to the double standard critique. Overall, NeoGAF posters who consider *RE5* to contain troubling imagery recognize that the previous game in the series took place in Spain. However, they contend that *Resident Evil 4* did not contain racially insensitive imagery because the Spanish do not have the same history of subjugation and exploitation nor have they ever been the victim of dangerous racial stereotypes by Western powers.

Similar to posters who do not consider the game to contain problematic imagery, one of the most frequent ways in which these posters participate in this discussion is by mocking or ridiculing forum members who do not consider the game’s imagery to be problematic. Several posters express disgust over what they describe as the community’s embarrassing and immature reaction to people’s legitimate concerns with *RE5*. These posters claim that the community is acting like a bunch of children who can’t handle alternative viewpoints or the thought that outsiders might view their favorite pastime differently. For example, one user writes:

Many of you don’t understand, it seems. You’re responding to his general argument and statements without knowing what his support is: A straw man like that demonstrates pretty well that you won’t consider his opinions. GAF has very much a knee-jerk reaction to these sorts of criticisms. It’s an ‘outsider’ commenting on our hobby and that’s really never been tolerated. Often we’re right in dismissing them, but this guy raises some very valid, worthwhile points. It’s a
shame that so many of you are not only ignoring them, but outright vehement against him. (Thread #1: Post 912)

This user attributes the opposition’s “knee-jerk reaction” to the fact that many NeoGAF users foolishly do not tolerate video game criticisms from those they identify as outsiders. Several other posts offer a similar explanation. These posters attribute the community’s hostility to an underlying fear that such criticism will somehow ultimately intrude upon their own video game experience.

Besides characterizing their opposition as immature, other posts simply describe forum members who refuse to recognize the game’s problematic imagery as idiotic. The following three posts illustrate the type of curt statements that Croal’s supporters frequently use to rebuke their opposition:

The ignorance in this thread is really telling, but I guess what else would you expect when the logic of console wars is mixed with issues that are actually relevant. (Thread #1: Post 419)

[S]ome of you people need to read a book but since I know you're not the type, just watch Bamboozled instead. (Thread #1: Post 736)

GAF never ceases to amaze me with it's inherit stupidity. (Thread #1: Post 295)

This type of post offers no justification for Croal’s comments, but instead insults the intelligence of members who do not consider the game’s imagery to be problematic. Several other posts attack the opposition by sardonically characterizing their participation in this debate. For example, one poster writes:

I'm not surprised, however, that most of GAF has responded with a collective "OMG N'GAI HAS JOINED THE PRO-CENSORSHIP PC POLICE FUCK HIM!!1!!!". (Thread #1: Post 320)
This poster and several other similar posts mock the opposition by constructing rudimentary statements complete with grammatical errors that they treat as emblematic of the opposing side’s viewpoint and approach to engaging in this discussion.

Users promoting this portrayal describe NeoGAF’s reaction as embarrassing and immature. Posters frequently express frustration that such childish antics ultimately set back video games from being recognized as a valid artistic format. One user includes this concern in the following post:

A lot of gamers have been pushing for a long time to have games evaluated as art. And if you want that, this is what happens-- video games will be evaluated as art. I know it bugs a lot of gamers because they want critics not to meddle with their awesome zombie head-blowing-off extravaganza (hey, it's fun, I admit), but I think a lot of people are ignoring what this kind of imagery means to some people. (Thread #1: Post 49)

According to this sentiment, Croal’s critics aren’t just embarrassing themselves; they are embarrassing the entire video game community. Interestingly, a different poster cites a Kotaku article on this subject to support their position. In the article, Brian Crecente expresses frustration over many of Kotaku users’ posts on the RE5 debate, which he describes as a “cacophony of stupidity.” The NeoGAF user who shares Crecente’s article offers a similar conclusion, noting “How can we advance this medium when people like Brian Crecente have to publicly admit their embarrassment at the response of their audience to this issue?” (Thread #1: Post 839).

As I have previously discussed, the majority of the posts do not agree with Croal’s argument that the game contains racially insensitive material. Explanations of the imagery’s problematic historical context generally receive critical if not overtly hostile replies in these threads. In response to such criticisms, proponents of this argument insist

that experience matters in terms of how someone views the world. According to this logic, the reason why so many NeoGAF users don’t find the imagery to be problematic is because they have not experienced racism, colonialism, or other atrocities. One poster expresses this sentiment in the following statement:

[It's a shame this thread is simply degenerating into "OMG SHOOTING WHITE PEOPLE IS OKAY BUT NOT BLACKS NGAI YOU IDIOT!" when in reality all Ngai (to me) is trying to do is point out how people's history and perspective can cause them to view things differently. (Thread #1: Post 351)]

In one sense, these posters appear to be espousing a form of relativism in their argument. As these examples illustrate, proponents defending Croal’s argument assert that there is never only one correct way to interpret a cultural object. Instead, an individual’s personal experiences shape the manner in which they understand and view the world. Subsequently, individuals’ who have experienced racism or suffered the effects of colonialism will be particularly sensitive to imagery reminiscent of their own experiences, even if the imagery is from the seemingly innocuous realm of entertainment.

On the other hand, those who have been fortunate enough not to experience such tragedies will find no problem with the same image. Despite this push for a certain type of relativism, these users insist that the gaming community must recognize and respect the fact that many Africans, Haitians, and African Americans will find this imagery disturbing even if they themselves do not. Moreover, these posters argue that this realization should lead the entire community to pressure Capcom into changing RE5.

Racism’s Enduring Presence and The Dangers of Denial

Similar to their opposition in this debate, posters asserting that the game contains troubling imagery treat this entire episode as emblematic of a deeper problem in America. Whereas the commentators critical of Croal’s remarks view the debate as representative
of America’s dangerous hypersensitivity, posters who agree with Croal’s claims instead
treat this incident as a testament to racism’s enduring presence in America. Posters
frequently invoke racism’s continued existence in response to critics who claim that
racism is no longer a major issue in America. For example, one poster expresses shock
and dismay over what they consider to be the community’s unwillingness to recognize
the social significance of this imagery. The poster writes:

   Does anyone here really think that racial profiling no longer exists? Does anyone
   not believe that there are still large expanses of the United States in which people
   are looked down upon based solely on the color of their skin? Does anyone out
   there NOT believe that much of this shit has become institutionalized in a sense,
   and become a part of "everyday" life? We've come a long way, but it's far from
   over. (Thread #1: Post 546)

Other likeminded posts point to racial segregation, police brutality/discrimination, and
the fact that many whites are simply uncomfortable around blacks as evidence of
racism’s continued existence. Other posters share their own experiences dealing with
discrimination. For example, one user writes:

   White people, you will never understand black pain on these issues because
   contrary to your belief, racism is still VERY much alive. So instead of making up
   different reasons why it's not racist, understand that it is and maybe Capcom will
   do something about it. Whether or not Capcom knew what they where doing is
   not the point, it's there and it needs to change. (Thread #1: Post 150)

These posters extend the conversation beyond a concern with insensitive imagery into a
broader conversation about racism and the different experience of blacks and whites in
America. By insisting on racism’s continued existence, these users assert that much more
is at stake than simply whether or not RE5 contains offensive imagery. Instead, the crux
of this debate centers on whether or not the gaming community is willing or able to
recognize America’s problematic race relations.
NeoGAF users also point to other troubling events in popular culture to demonstrate racism’s continued existence. Similar to Kotaku’s participation in this debate, many users connect RE5 to the controversial works Heart of Darkness and The Birth of a Nation in an effort to explain the game’s problematic imagery to critics. Although these two works continue to be some of the most powerful examples of popular culture’s capacity to perpetuate troubling and dangerous racial stereotypes, they both are roughly a century old, making them perhaps not the most effective examples to demonstrate racism’s continued existence to cynics. Consequently, users also identify more recent episodes that have occurred in the last few years. Several users note the appearance of characters embodying the “jive talkin’ negro brute stereotype” (Thread #1: Post 1117) in many of the most popular video games, including Cole from Gears of War, CJ from Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, and Barret from Final Fantasy VII. Discussants also mention the almost complete lack of major Hollywood films or popular television shows featuring minorities as main characters. Additionally, several posters cite the controversial Vogue cover featuring basketball star Lebron James and the model Gisele Bundchen. Many media commentators expressed concern that the cover, which features James baring his teeth while holding Bundchen, is consistent with the savage other imagery found in many classic Hollywood films.\footnote{For a summary of this episode, see “LeBron James’ Vogue cover called racially insensitive.” USA Today, March 24, 2008; Retrieved July 14, 2013 (http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2008-03-24-vogue-controversy_N.htm).} NeoGAF posters treat these examples as evidence of popular culture’s continued promotion of racist imagery.

Although these NeoGAF users examine racism’s continued presence in America, the narrative they construct is not entirely cynical or tragic. Instead, many posters insist that the only way America can ever successfully eliminate racism is by identifying
problematic events and confronting these episodes head-on. In this sense, the narrative these posters create contains an optimistic element. According to this description, America’s current situation is potentially alterable if the public remains vigilant in exposing racism. For example, one poster includes this optimistic component in a response to a previous post. Consistent with my summary of those users who reject the notion that RE5 contains troubling imagery, the initial poster in this exchange insists that racism will never go away as long as people continue searching for it. The second poster replies to this comment with the following statement:

What you have to realize is that in terms of history this is all tremendously recent. Most of our parents lived through segregation and Jim Crow in America. To assume that these attitudes would have somehow have been erased in less than a generation is entirely ignorant. Criticism of art is how a culture progresses, beyond being necessary it is a vital part of the growth process. (Thread #1: Post 571)

Reflective of this group’s overall argument, this poster asserts that exposing racism is the only way America will ever be able to eliminate it. What is perhaps even more interesting about this statement is that the poster insists that “criticism of art” plays an integral role in this process. Several posts in these threads express a similar sentiment. The significance of this argument should not be overlooked. By framing their concerns with RE5 as an imperative form of aesthetic critique, these posters insert themselves into their own narrative. According to this description, users expressing concern with RE5’s imagery are not simply expressing their own cultural preferences, but engaging in a sophisticated form of aesthetic criticism that is absolutely vital to ending racism in America.

Similar to their opposition in this debate, NeoGAF posters who consider RE5 to contain troubling imagery also portray their opponents’ response as supporting racism.
Posters promoting this argument claim that those who deny the game’s troubling imagery are consequently ignoring America’s very real racial issues. One poster writes that imagery deniers prefer to sweep “the issue under the rug” rather than “properly address these issues” (Thread #1: Post 96). Early on in the thread conversation, a different poster (Thread #1: Post 539) shares a link to a LiveJournal post entitled “How to Suppress Discussions of Racism”. The article provides a satirical guide for how to successfully silence discussions of a legitimate race issue. The article’s facetious introduction explains:

Tired of discussions of racism in literature, television, and film? Worn out from the unexpected criticism of your leisure pursuits? Exhusted by the effort of having to respond to each new argument carefully and conscientiously? We'll teach you how to suppress discussion of racism in six easy steps.

The six easy steps the article outlines include such strategies as “don’t quote your opponent’s word in context”, “attack the person, not the argument” and “argue against straw men”. Several users re-post the link to this article throughout the thread discussion, insinuating that this is precisely what their opposition is guilty of doing. Others comment on it, including one user who writes “Wow, haven't seen this before, but I'm guessing the vast majority in this thread haven't. Way to many people are using the ideas in that article” (Thread #1: Post 693).

Other posters strongly rebuke critics’ claims that Croal and other concerned journalists are merely “playing the race card”. Posters respond to such accusations by explaining whites always issue “race card” allegations in order to silence discussion of a

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133 LiveJournal is a social network site where users can post public or private blogs. The author of the original post published the article on July 17, 2006 but has since moved the post to the alternative social network site Dreamwidth. The address for the original post is http://coffeeandink.livejournal.com/607897.html. The post can now be found at http://coffeeandink.dreamwidth.org/435419.html; Retrieved 07/27/2012.
legitimate issue. For example, one user posts a link to an article entitled “The Absurdity and Consistence of White Denial: What Kind of Card is Race?” by noted author Tim Wise for the political newsletter *Counterpunch.* In the article, Wise explains that allegations of “playing the race card” are symptomatic of the white majority’s longstanding reluctance to recognize racism’s enduring salience and propensity to blame the victim. The poster sharing Wise’s work simply copies portions of a previous post criticizing Croal for “playing the race card” and their own response, which includes a hyperlink to Wise’s article with the caption “lol, race card” (Thread #1: Post 581).

As these examples demonstrate, this group of posters describes their opposition as employing all sorts of insidious techniques to obfuscate the fact that racism is very much still alive in America. Consequently, these users characterize their critics as posing a legitimate threat, as their refusal to identify racism and assault it head-on allows racism to endure. Overall, this group attaches a strong moral dimension to the entire debate, constructing a powerful social narrative on America’s continued problem with racism in which the posters heroically seek to end racism while their opposition cowardly or insidiously turns a blind eye to the problem.

*The Discursive Structure of NeoGAF’s Resident Evil 5 Debate*

Although NeoGAF users participating in this discussion disagree on the meaning of *RE5*’s imagery and consequently construct different social narratives about this debate, the discursive styles both sides use to engage with this issue exhibit a strong degree of symmetry. Despite the fact that the two camps do not agree on the significance of the game’s imagery, both sides in this debate more frequently attempt to substantiate their

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position and respond to their opponents’ claims and critiques relative to posters in the forum’s most popular threads that I analyzed last chapter. For example, posters occasionally elaborate on the game’s insensitive imagery by identifying its similarities with real world tragedies and other fictional works long recognized by scholars and cultural commentators as problematic. Similarly, posters who contend that the imagery is not problematic point to the game’s implementation of horror genre conventions and trace this imagery’s lineage throughout the *Resident Evil* series. The frequency in which forum users on both sides substantiate their claims in this manner is a drastic change from posters’ tendency to rest their positions solely on appeals to common sense and shared sensibilities in the three threads I examined last chapter. This finding lends some credence to the notion that the predominant manner in which posters support their claims is at least partially guided by the nature of the topic being debated. In other words, the forum’s informal structure does not automatically result in posters issuing claims based on sheer assertion alone. Instead, the manner in which an entertainment public engages in debate will be influenced by the particular topic under discussion and the entertainment public’s own cultural structure.

Moreover, my analysis indicates that posters on both sides of this debate rely most heavily on intertextual references to offer evidence in support of their position. NeoGAF users on both sides of the debate frequently draw connections between *RE5*’s imagery (or the outcry over *RE5*) and other entertainment, historical, and political texts and figures. Furthermore, posters repeatedly draw connections between *RE5* and previous games in the franchise or other popular games to establish what they consider to be the legitimate context for *RE5*’s imagery or to expose critics’ double standard. Moreover, these users
associate Croal’s criticisms with other prominent individuals who they describe as race hustlers, including Al Sharpton. Similarly, users who consider *RE5* to be problematic associate the game’s imagery with other controversial entertainment texts and reference pieces of sociopolitical commentary to problematize their opponents’ position. Overall, the two threads devoted to discussing the *RE5* debate exhibit a much greater degree of intertextuality relative to NeoGAF’s most popular threads.

The type of critical statements present in NeoGAF’s participation in the debate over *RE5*’s imagery is more insular relative to *Kotaku*’s coverage or the NeoGAF threads I examined last chapter. This is not to say that posts do not critically engage with the meaning of *RE5*’s imagery. As my analysis indicates, the thread is divided between the majority of posters who strongly agree with Croal’s comments and a vocal minority of posters who vehemently disagree. However, participants in this debate are much less likely to criticize specific authority figures relative to the NeoGAF threads I examined in the last chapter. Whereas the most popular NeoGAF threads focus on reprimanding video game media outlets for their inability to recognize a particular video game’s greatness, much of the conversation occurring in the *RE5* threads takes place in the realm of ideas. Posters frequently criticize the opposition’s arguments, but they rarely direct their vitriol towards specific actors or prominent public figures endorsing that opinion.

To be certain, many of the early posts in the first thread directly engage with Croal’s original statement. However, the conversation quickly shifts to posters criticizing statements made by other NeoGAF users or a de-contextualized focus on the opposing viewpoint’s inaccuracies and logical flaws. Among those posts that criticize specific public figures, the particular authority figure criticized depends on the author’s
overarching position in the debate. Posters who do not find the imagery to be troubling often utilize the critical media narrative to specifically rebuke Croal’s original statement. Such posts describe Croal as ill-informed or biased. Posts insisting that the game contains racially insensitive imagery are much less likely to include statements criticizing specific public figures. The few that do include such critical statements generally condemn Capcom for developing a game with such troubling imagery. It should also be noted that despite this shift in criticism relative to the other NeoGAF threads I examined, NeoGAF’s 
*RE5* threads still contain more critical statements directed towards authority figures relative to *The New York Times*’ video game coverage.

Although personal stories did not appear very often in the most popular NeoGAF threads I examined last chapter, such accounts do occupy a more prominent position in the forum’s debate over *RE5*’s imagery. NeoGAF users on both sides of the debate share personal experiences to defend their position. For example, several users dismiss Croal’s criticisms by identifying themselves as African American and explaining that they do not find the imagery troubling. Others note that their friends from Africa have no problem with the game and can’t stand when Americans try to collapse Africans and African Americans into one homogenous group. Similarly, several users that support Croal’s criticisms note that *RE5*’s imagery resonates too closely with their own experiences or that of their family living in Africa. Moreover, users also point to their own experiences as evidence that racism still exists in America. Although personal stories are still far from the most common way posters substantiate their positions, these accounts appear more frequently here relative to the other media spaces I examined in previous chapters.
The level of ideological pluralism present in NeoGAF’s *RE5* threads remains relatively consistent in form with the forum’s most popular threads. Similar to the threads I analyzed in the previous chapter, it is common practice for users to include excerpts from a previous post whose position they reject. Again, such posts rarely engage with the previous statement. Instead, the poster quickly dismisses the previous post and moves on to their own position. However, overall the NeoGAF threads debating this issue do contain a certain degree of ideological pluralism given the fact that posters do not agree over the meaning of *RE5*’s imagery. Although the majority of posts insist that the imagery is justified by the game’s context, there exists a vocal minority of posts who consistently maintain that the imagery is problematic throughout the thread discussion. The presence of this disagreement should not be overlooked considering the general lack of any dissenting positions in *The New York Times*’ predominant portrayal of video games.

The level of institutional pluralism present in NeoGAF’s *RE5* threads is also consistent in form and frequency to that found in the forum’s most popular threads. During this debate, posters rarely bring in quotes or arguments from outside the thread discussion. When posts do incorporate statements from outside sources, the vast majority is from media figures or outlets (see Table 9). Consequently, although the forum may be open to multiple opinions, it is by far the least open to including “outside” positions beyond video game media figures.

NeoGAF users participating in this debate dramatically portray this issue as having much more at stake than simply the content of one video game. Even though they may disagree over whether or not *RE5* contains racially insensitive imagery, both sides
depict this debate as emblematic of broader problems, including the enduring legacy of racism, Americans’ continued denial to recognize racism’s continued existence, or conversely America’s dangerous hypersensitivity to claims of racism and race hustlers’ propensity to exploit this hypersensitivity for their own means. This dramatic portrayal differs from Kotaku’s coverage of the issue. Kotaku’s articles on this debate primarily focus on whether or not RE5’s imagery is problematic and rarely move beyond this concern to examine what the imagery or the debate around the imagery says about racism in general or other social issues.

NeoGAF users do not just instill this debate with broader social significance; they also dramatically characterize the opposition. To be certain, both sides in this debate use low-mimetic portrayals to dismiss their opposition. Similar to the manner in which the most popular NeoGAF threads characterized media outlets whose coverage they considered to be wrong, participants in the debate over RE5’s meaning frequently portray their opposition as foolish, immature, and inept. In this sense, both sides seek to delegitimize their opposition’s viewpoint. However, unlike the three NeoGAF threads I examined in the previous chapter, both sides in this debate also use powerful moral codes to valorize their own position and disqualify their opposition. Compared to NeoGAF, Kotaku’s coverage is much more civil in terms of how the publication’s authors characterize their opposition. Kotaku’s articles generally treat opposing positions as well-meaning but ultimately misguided. In contrast, NeoGAF users frequently characterize public figures or other users whose opinions they disagree with as not only immature or ignorant but also self-interested or racist. According to such portrayals, the opposition is both ill-informed and dangerous and should thus be ignored if not censored.
Despite the expansion of certain discursive attributes in these two threads relative to NeoGAF’s most popular threads, forum members’ discussion of RE5’s imagery exhibits a strong degree of consistency with the discursive framework present in the threads I analyzed in the previous chapter. Similar to NeoGAF’s most popular threads, the majority of posters engaging in this debate characterize RE5’s critics as non-gamers, thus rendering their position on the matter mute. In this sense, NeoGAF’s overarching cultural structure even influences the manner in which thread discussions engage with sociopolitical topics that move beyond aesthetic concerns. Posters’ application of the gamer/non-gamer moral binary to help make sense of the debate over RE5’s imagery funnels discussion of the topic into the forum’s predominant emphasis on identifying insiders and outsiders, and thus limits the amount of attention the forum devotes to exploring this sociopolitical issue in greater detail. Although some posters attempt to counter this orientation by explaining why some individuals may find the game’s imagery problematic, a significant proportion of thread discussion focuses on portraying RE5’s critics as non-gamers.

NeoGAF users’ tendency to portray themselves and those whose position contradicts their own through a highly polarized lens also appear in the subset of articles that characterize this issue as emblematic of a larger social problem. Both sides in this debate portray the other side as promoting a racist and thus dangerous worldview. The combination of these high-mimetic portrayals with the posters’ tendency to characterize their opposition as ill-informed or immature results in two separate discourses where posters argue that the video game community should take their rival’s seriously but not their rival’s argument. For example, posters who do not agree with Croal’s comments
describe Croal’s position as ill-informed. However, although these posters reject Croal’s position, they also portray Croal and his supporters as either promoting a racist worldview or distracting society from legitimate race issues. Similarly, users who support Croal’s position describe those who refuse to recognize RE5’s problematic imagery as immature. However, Croal’s supporters in these two threads also explain that this immaturity helps foster racism’s enduring legacy. This highly polarized discursive framework reduces the complex issue of popular culture’s potential role in promoting and/or sustaining a racist worldview into two simplistic accounts of the morally pure versus the universally evil.

**Conclusion**

NeoGAF’s intense debate over the meaning of RE5’s imagery clearly indicates the ability of an entertainment public not connected to a professional media outlet to facilitate the construction of an aesthetic public sphere. The provocative comments and heated exchanges that occur in these two threads extend into topics far beyond the site’s conventional focus on whether or not a game is fun to play. For posters who consider the game’s imagery to be problematic as well as their dissenters, the initial criticism RE5 received as well as the subsequent response by avid video game players in forum threads and comments sections is representative of a much broader social issue. In the case of those who consider the game’s imagery to be problematic, this entire episode is illustrative of racism’s continued presence in America. In contrast, for those who do not find the game’s imagery to be problematic, this episode is indicative of how America’s problematic hypersensitivity renders the country prone to race-baiters and a racist
worldview. Regardless of position, both arguments illustrate how an entertainment topic serves as an opportunity for fans to discuss broader social issues.

Furthermore, the manner in which NeoGAF posters engage in this debate demonstrates how discussions occurring in informal entertainment publics are capable of exhibiting many of the discursive characteristics valued by scholars. Compared to the most popular NeoGAF threads I examined last chapter, posts in the threads devoted to discussing *RE5*’s imagery more frequently substantiate their claims, present more intertextual references, and include more personal accounts. Moreover, whereas *Kotaku*’s discussion remains relatively insular, NeoGAF posters dramatically characterize this issue as emblematic of broader social concerns. Although these features are present in NeoGAF’s most popular threads, my analysis indicates that they became much more pronounced during instances where posters engage in discussions of broader concerns. In other words, my analysis demonstrates that informal entertainment publics are not only capable of functioning as aesthetic public spheres, but doing so in a manner that involves at least some of the traits scholars consider vital to a strongly democratic civil society.

Despite such advances, NeoGAF’s discursive format remains limited even during the forum’s engagement with topics that are more overtly sociopolitical in nature. The majority of posters in these two threads engage with this topic in a manner consistent with the discursive framework present in the forum’s most popular threads. Similar to the three threads I examined last chapter, the majority of posters characterize individuals whose position they disagree with as non-gamers, thus rendering their opinions invalid and not worthy of further exploration. Moreover, posters on both side of this debate focus much of their attention on ridiculing their opponents in attempts to delegitimize their
positions in this discussion. Although some posters extend the debate into a broader discussion of racism in contemporary America, they largely focus their attention on what they describe as their opposition’s dangerous worldview. In general, although NeoGAF users engage in a discussion of racism, they largely do so through a somewhat impoverished discourse that focuses more on dividing the world rather than exploring racism and its potential connection to popular culture in contemporary America.
CHAPTER 8: THE MULTIPLE TYPES OF AESTHETIC PUBLIC SPHERES IN CIVIL SOCIETY

My analysis clearly demonstrates the capacity of video game commentary to serve as an aesthetic public sphere. During certain instances, video game coverage in The New York Times, Kotaku, and the internet discussion forum NeoGAF all engage with or address broader sociopolitical concerns. In this sense, my work offers strong support for the growing literature on the aesthetic public sphere. Whereas previous works in this area primarily focus on how television commentary often functions as an aesthetic public sphere (Jacobs 2007, 2012; Jacobs and Wild 2013; Wu 2011), my work identifies how video game commentary also possesses this capacity. The three entertainment publics I examine cumulatively address a wide array of sociopolitical topics in their discussions on video games, including violence, the obesity epidemic, race, sexuality, gender, and journalism’s democratic imperative. Given these findings, my work lends further support to the aesthetic public sphere literature’s insistence that civil society scholars must widen their analytical lens beyond their conventional understanding of “serious” news and commentary and take into consideration entertainment commentary’s role in promoting social solidarity and stimulating discussion on matters of common concern.

Perhaps most importantly, my work pushes the aesthetic public sphere literature forward by revealing how entertainment publics differ in terms of the type of aesthetic public spheres that emerge from their entertainment commentary. Although all three entertainment publics function as aesthetic public spheres in certain instances, it is clear from my analysis that the frequency in which they do so and the type of sociopolitical topics they explore vary. Based on my samples, The New York Times’ video game
commentary most often addresses broader sociopolitical concerns. However, the aesthetic public sphere that emerges from this commentary is limited to discussions of how video games may adversely impact America’s youth. Although Kotaku’s video game coverage less frequently functions as an aesthetic public sphere, the online publication addresses a wider variety of sociopolitical topics relative to The New York Times, including racism, gender discrimination, sexuality, and even the newspaper industry’s decline and its potential democratic ramifications. In short, Kotaku may not engage in sociopolitical discussions as much as The New York Times’ video game commentary, but Kotaku explores a broader range of topics in the instances in which it does function as an aesthetic public sphere.

NeoGAF is the least likely of the three media spaces I examine in this work to discuss sociopolitical concerns. The discussions occurring in the forum’s three most popular threads on the date of my data collection remain primarily at the aesthetic level and forum posters rarely if ever engage in deeper discussions of broader sociopolitical issues. This is not to say that forum discussions never extend beyond aesthetic matters. My analysis of the two threads NeoGAF devotes to discussing the video game community’s debate over RE5’s imagery clearly illustrates that forum members do occasionally explore sociopolitical concerns. However, this type of discussion does not appear in the forum’s most popular threads. Indeed, these two threads devoted to discussing RE5’s imagery only appear after this topic received widespread coverage in the video game enthusiast press. These findings indicate that the forum may be more reactive rather than proactive in serving as an aesthetic public sphere. The forum is certainly capable of discussing sociopolitical issues and thus functioning as an aesthetic
public sphere, but it is most likely to occur during instances in which prominent video game or mainstream media outlets have devoted considerable attention to a specific sociopolitical topic with some connection to the video game community.

It is clear from my analysis that entertainment publics vary in the frequency in which they address broader sociopolitical concerns. However, we must be careful not to overinflate the significance of these quantitative indicators in terms of what it they tell us about the type of aesthetic public spheres these spaces construct. For example, Kotaku’s video game coverage may predominantly remain at the aesthetic level, but the articles that do address broader sociopolitical issues are among the most likely to garner attention from other video game media outlets and discussion forums. Similarly, NeoGAF’s most popular threads may rarely examine sociopolitical issues, but the RE5 threads clearly indicate that many posters will vigorously debate these topics when such threads appear on the forum. What is perhaps more important in understanding entertainment commentary’s role in civil society is not a quantitative indicator of how often sociopolitical discussions occur, but the sociopolitical topics these spaces discuss when they do address such matters, the manner in which these entertainment publics explore these topics, and the sociological factors that influence the form these conversations assume. Before I summarize the form of these discussions, it is important to take a moment to examine the sociological factors that influence the type of sociopolitical topics these spaces explore.

My findings indicate that the different type of topics these entertainment publics address is at least partially influenced by the specific meaning that each space attaches to the entertainment form under discussion. For example, The New York Times
predominantly treats video games as an entertainment form and a children’s activity, both of which possess very specific meanings in mainstream civil society. As the aesthetic public sphere literature illustrates (Jacobs 2007, 2012), mainstream civil society predominantly understands entertainment as superficial or a harmful distraction from serious concerns. Similarly, mainstream civil society primarily treats children as a special population in need of protection, which results in evaluations of children’s activities according to how they will support or impede children’s desired growth into full citizens (Davies 2001; Ryan 1992). Consequently, The New York Times’ focus on the serious social threat video games pose reflects mainstream civil society’s overarching understanding of the position of children and entertainment in civil society.

In contrast to The New York Times’ predominant understanding of video games as a type of entertainment primarily geared towards children, Kotaku treats video games as a valuable form of artistic expression. This interpretive difference proves to significantly alter the type of aesthetic public sphere that Kotaku creates relative to The New York Times. Similar to television coverage in prominent media outlets (Jacobs 2007, 2012), Kotaku authors frequently identify and explore the manner in which particular video games touch upon serious subject matters and also utilize events occurring within the video game community to examine broader sociopolitical concerns. This type of coverage is most likely to happen in places that take video games seriously. The website’s portrayal of video games as a legitimate art form results in coverage that takes seriously video games’ ability to provide insight into the contemporary world. In other words, an entertainment public is most likely to examine the way in which video games
address broader social themes when it treats video games as having something valuable or insightful to say about such matters in the first place.

In contrast to Kotaku and The New York Times, the majority of posts on NeoGAF attach no deeper significance to the medium beyond the fact that video games should be fun to play. This understanding of video games helps explain why the most popular threads on the forum rarely engage in discussions of broader sociopolitical concerns relative to The New York Times or Kotaku. The forum’s predominant interest in video games is unapologetically pleasure-driven, which consequently reduces the type of topics that garner widespread attention on the forum to debates over whether or not a particular game is fun to play and why. As a result of this orientation, the introduction of serious sociopolitical topics to forum discussions goes against the majority of users’ understanding of video games. Such topics will most likely be met with extreme resistance from other users, as evident by many forum members’ harsh reaction to Croal’s comments on RE5. This does not mean that NeoGAF threads are incapable of addressing broader sociopolitical concerns. Instead, it simply means that the forum is most likely to examine broader sociopolitical concerns during major episodes implicating the entire video game community.

Frequency and subject matter are not the only ways in which the aesthetic public spheres that emerge from these entertainment publics differ. My work also identifies key differences among each space’s discursive attributes. As Table 11 illustrates, none of the three spaces I examine strongly satisfy all of the discursive principles championed by the civil society literature. In short, there is no “perfect” aesthetic public sphere from a deliberative democratic framework amongst these three spaces.
One of the predominant differences between these three aesthetic public spheres involves the manner in which each space engages in critical commentary. *Kotaku*’s video game coverage most closely mirrors the type of criticism advocated by prominent civil society scholars (Benson 2010: 4; Wessler 2008) in the sense that the website frequently engages in extensive critiques of the positions put forward by influential public figures and institutions, including mainstream media outlets, politicians, academia, and even video game media outlets. In contrast to *Kotaku*, *The New York Times*’ video game coverage is limited to criticizing the video game industry and the newspaper rarely rebukes statements put forward by politicians or individuals affiliated with other influential institutions. Video game media outlets are the only influential figures that NeoGAF posters frequently criticize. Consequently, NeoGAF’s critical commentary is also deficient relative to *Kotaku*. However, NeoGAF is the only space I examine to include an element of reflexivity in its critical commentary. As my analysis illustrates, posters frequently criticize other forum members whose positions contradict their own and occasionally even indict the entire forum.

These spaces don’t just differ based on who they criticize; they also differ in terms of the form these criticisms assume. *The New York Times* primarily utilizes a high-mimetic narrative to portray video games as a serious social threat. For some scholars, this type of high-mimetic framing may strengthen civic engagement by elevating the mundane realm of policy discussions into epic contestations demanding immediate responses (Alexander 2006; Jacobs 2000; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Jacobs and Sobieraj 2007; Smith 2005). *Kotaku* also utilizes a high-mimetic lens to instill video games and the topics the website addresses in its video game commentary with a sense of
social significance. However, Kotaku combines this dramatic portrayal with a low-mimetic characterization of public figures whose positions contradict the website’s own. Such portrayals amplify Kotaku’s form of critical commentary by “demystifying” authority figures’ monopoly on critical deliberation (Ku 2001). NeoGAF’s critical discourse is the most limited in terms of the literature’s conventional understanding of the type of discourse needed to facilitate democratic deliberation. Posters in the forum’s most popular threads predominantly use low-mimetic portrayals to ridicule and delegitimize their opposition. These low-mimetic portrayals remain prominent during the forum’s debate over RE5’s imagery. However, posters participating in this discussion also use a high-mimetic portrayal to characterize their opposition as possessing a dangerous worldview that will only exacerbate current racial tensions.

The New York Times possesses the lowest level of ideological pluralism amongst the three spaces. Articles in the newspaper that portray video games as a serious social threat rarely include contrasting interpretations. To be fair, the Arts section does include coverage that treats video games as a valuable art form. However, this type of coverage only appears in the Arts section and these articles rarely engage with the newspaper’s predominant portrayal of video games. In essence, the newspaper’s two major video game narratives are completely isolated in different sections and rarely engage with one another. Kotaku’s coverage is more pluralistic relative to The New York Times in the sense that the website frequently includes quotes from public figures espousing positions that go against the website’s portrayal of video games as a uniquely valuable art form. On the other hand, the authors of these articles primarily include positions that contradict their own interpretation of video games in order to rebuke them. In other words, the
website frequently presents alternative positions, but only to reject them and thus reaffirm the website’s own position. NeoGAF’s level of ideological pluralism is generally restricted in its most popular threads to disagreements over the proper aesthetic evaluation of a particular game. Posters certainly disagree with each other, but conversation overwhelmingly remains at the aesthetic level. Of course, disagreements emerge over a more overtly sociopolitical matter in the forum’s two threads devoted to discussing RE5’s imagery, but this type of discussion does not appear in the forum’s most popular threads.

The degree and type of institutional pluralism in these three entertainment publics also varies. NeoGAF contains the lowest degree of institutional pluralism among the three spaces. The forum occasionally includes quotes from video game journalists and critics, but posters mainly focus on supporting or rejecting other posters’ statements. The New York Times and Kotaku much more frequently include comments made by outside figures in their video game coverage relative to NeoGAF. However, the institutional affiliation of these figures varies. The New York Times’ coverage relies heavily on statements by politicians and academics to lend support to the newspaper’s portrayal of video games as a social threat. On the one hand, the inclusion of these figures from two different institutional settings does expand the voices present in The New York Times’ video game coverage beyond simply the newspaper’s own journalists and critics. However, the newspaper’s type of pluralism is still limited in the sense that both politicians and academics already occupy prominent social positions. Consequently, their inclusion does not expand the type of voices conventionally present in mainstream civil society.
Politicians and academics also appear in Kotaku’s coverage, but to a much lesser extent relative to The New York Times. Media professionals occupy the most prominent position in Kotaku’s coverage. Kotaku’s video game coverage frequently includes pieces where the author critically examines mainstream media video game coverage or uses particular mainstream media pieces to support the author’s own position. Media professionals certainly possess a different institutional affiliation relative to politicians and academics. However, similar to both these other groups, media professionals also occupy a prominent social position. Consequently, video game coverage in both The New York Times and Kotaku fail to expand the participants involved in public discussion beyond the confines of the conventional social groups and institutions.

All three of these spaces vary in terms of the predominant manner in which authors or posters substantiate their position. Articles in The New York Times primarily use appeals to common sense in order to support the publication’s portrayal of video games as a serious social threat. In other words, authors treat the newspaper’s description of video games as self-evident. To be fair, the newspaper does occasionally include corroborating statements from academics, politicians, and other public figures. However, these statements generally rest on the figure’s authority or public prominence rather than provide relevant research in support of the article’s portrayal. In contrast to The New York Times, Kotaku’s primary approach to substantiating the authors’ claims involves intensely scrutinizing the alternative position combined with a heavy reliance on intertextual references to other popular culture texts. In a manner somewhat similar to Kotaku, NeoGAF users devote much of their attention to their opponents’ position. However, whereas Kotaku authors often critically examine positions that contradict their
own, NeoGAF users primarily focus their attention on polluting their opposition and thus disqualifying their position on the matter at hand. In addition, NeoGAF users often rely on sheer assertion alone in order to defend their position. To be fair, NeoGAF users’ approach to substantiating claims does partially expand in the two *RE5* threads to incorporate more intertextual references. However, even in these two threads, posters still heavily rely on assertion and the moral pollution of their opposition.

Intertextual references do not only appear on Kotaku and NeoGAF as a rhetorical device. Both spaces devote considerable attention to discussing video game coverage in other media outlets. My analysis demonstrates how *Kotaku* often dedicate entire articles to exploring or rebuking video game coverage in mainstream media outlets. Similarly, NeoGAF users in the threads I studied often devote dozens of posts or entire threads to examining comments made in video game media outlets. These findings indicate a certain degree of interdependency between these three media spaces. Although *The New York Times* never references members of the enthusiast press in their video game coverage, *Kotaku* devotes considerable attention to how influential media outlets such as *The New York Times* portray video games and the video game community. Similarly, even though NeoGAF users frequently characterize video game media outlets as ill-informed and non-gamers, video game coverage from the enthusiast press clearly plays an influential role in guiding the conversations occurring in the forum.

Overall, *Kotaku* comes closest to exhibiting the most characteristics that civil society scholars consider to be essential for facilitating democratic deliberation. *Kotaku*’s video game coverage critically engages with other positions without usually resorting to uncivil characterizations. Moreover, *Kotaku*’s video game coverage dramatically portrays
the topics it examines and thus treats these issues as socially significant. Furthermore, its frequent use of intertextual references may help render the sociopolitical topics the forum discusses comprehensible to a broader audience than those who normally engage with this type of subject matter. Moreover, Kotaku’s sociopolitical coverage touches upon the widest range of topics compared to NeoGAF and The New York Times. However, the online publication falls short on certain discursive principles relative to the other spaces. For example, NeoGAF involves more personal accounts relative to the other two spaces and the forum is the only one that includes a degree of reflexivity in its discussions. However, the conventional way in which posters on NeoGAF deal with opposing positions creates a shallow critical discourse and consequently an insular interpretive community. Forum members frequently respond to opposing positions by morally polluting the individuals espousing such positions. This approach usually results in forum members launching ad hominem attacks against each other rather than any serious attempt to engage with the opposing position.

The form of institutional pluralism present in The New York Times’ video game coverage is less media-centric relative to Kotaku and NeoGAF. Moreover, quotes from politicians and academics appear much more frequently in The New York Times compared to the two other spaces. However, the newspaper’s discussions of these issues are not just limited thematically to explorations of the social threat video games pose, they are also limited discursively. The New York Times’ predominant portrayal of video games as a social threat never presents opposing positions and largely rests on appeals to common sense.
Although my findings indicate how these three different aesthetic public spheres vary in their discursive attributes, we should not assume that such differences are entirely sporadic or unpredictable. The discursive styles present in a particular aesthetic public sphere may be at least partially influenced by the space’s own position (or lack thereof) in the journalistic field and civil society in general. For example, *The New York Times*’ discursive format reflects its influential position within the journalistic field and thus its prominent position in civil society. As I previously mentioned, *The New York Times*’ portrayal of video games as a social threat is consistent with mainstream civil society’s predominant understanding of entertainment and children. The newspaper’s prominent position in mainstream civil society may also help explain why the newspaper rarely substantiates this portrayal besides through appeals to common sense or the inclusion of corroborating quotes from public officials and figures. According to this logic, the newspaper’s audience shares a similar understanding of video games and thus no justification is required. Moreover, the fact that the newspaper critically portrays video games without engaging in uncivil speech acts reflects one of the overarching journalistic norms in the United States (Bennett 2001).

In contrast to *The New York Times*, NeoGAF provides an informal space for avid video game players to explore their fandom. In this sense, the forum occupies a peripheral space in civil society. The forum is not engaged in what is conventionally understood as serious matters of common concern. Moreover, the forum is not a journalistic enterprise. Instead, many of the most avid posters repeatedly characterized the forum first and foremost as an exclusive space for only the most devoted or resolute gamers. Although the forum may occupy an extremely peripheral position in civil
society, this marginality also results in a strong identity and worldview. Consequently, this peripheral position may influence the forum’s shallow and insular discursive format. The posters respond to video game’s semi-polluted position in mainstream civil society by carving out their own semi-autonomous space in which any harsh portrayal of video games is treated as a threat not only to the source of their fandom but their community in general.

*Kotaku* occupies a unique position in civil society. Although *Kotaku* may not occupy as prominent a position in the journalistic field as *The New York Times*, the website still maintains a journalistic orientation. Many of *Kotaku*’s staff members during this period come from a background in journalism. Indeed, *Kotaku* articles frequently describe the site as a journalistic enterprise and emphasize how the site strives to protect certain journalistic principles, such as journalistic autonomy. It is possible that *Kotaku*’s infrequent use of uncivil speech relative to NeoGAF is at least partially influenced by the site’s journalistic orientation, specifically the journalistic norms of observing prevailing standards of decency and good taste (Bennett 2001). On the other hand, despite the website’s journalistic orientation, *Kotaku* still occupies a peripheral position in the journalistic field and thus mainstream civil society given its focus on covering a semi-polluted entertainment form. Consequently, the website’s focus on treating video games seriously and its critical engagement with the positions put forward by prominent figures who fail to share this viewpoint may serve as an attempt by the

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136 *Kotaku* devotes several articles to discussing the need for video game media outlets to protect themselves from the influence of video game publishers. For example, see: Good, Owen. 2008. “Exclusive Reviews: Ethically Troubling.” *Kotaku*, April 27, [http://kotaku.com/384477/exclusive-reviews-ethically-troubling](http://kotaku.com/384477/exclusive-reviews-ethically-troubling); Accessed on 9/18/11.
publication to both legitimate video games and carve out its own semi-autonomous space in the journalistic field.

The three entertainment publics’ positions in civil society also influence the predominant manner which these spaces interact with each other. The fact that The New York Times rarely engages with or directly references the two other entertainment publics serves as a testament to the newspaper’s influential position in civil society and thus strong connection with the United State’s official public sphere. Indeed, it is quite telling that The New York Times’ article on RE5 refers to the media figures that first expressed concern over the game’s imagery as “some black journalists” rather than identify who these journalists are or mention that they work for video game media outlets. This is especially interesting considering that the article appears in the Arts section, which is perhaps the section of the newspaper closest to videogame media outlets in terms of cultural orientation.

In contrast to The New York Times, Kotaku does not have a strong connection to the United State’s official public sphere. Due to its smaller audience size and focus on entertainment, the website clearly functions as an informal public sphere. Kotaku’s informal or more peripheral position in civil society helps explain why the outlet devotes so much attention to mainstream media coverage. Kotaku focuses so heavily on how The New York Times and other major mainstream media outlets portray video games because these outlets have much more influence over mainstream civil society’s understanding of both video games and the video game community. However, although Kotaku clearly recognizes mainstream media’s influential position, it is clear from my analysis that the publication is far from deferential to such outlets. In this sense, similar to Fraser’s (1992)
discussion of the roles and functions of counter-publics in civil society, Kotaku’s more peripheral or informal position in civil society provides the video game community with a space to both critically engage with mainstream media’s portrayal of video games and construct their own counter narratives.

On the other hand, Kotaku rarely references fan forums such as NeoGAF. Although NeoGAF’s membership is large relative to other fan forums, its user base is still much smaller than Kotaku’s circulation. Moreover, Kotaku’s journalistic orientation provides the publication with a certain degree of legitimacy relative to NeoGAF. The combination of NeoGAF’s lower audience size and more peripheral position in civil society helps explain why Kotaku doesn’t devote as much attention to forum interactions relative to the video game coverage taking place in more influential media outlets such as The New York Times. In other words, Kotaku rarely attaches much significance to NeoGAF’s video game discussions because NeoGAF does not have much impact on greater civil society’s understanding of video games.

Finally, NeoGAF’s more peripheral position relative to the other two entertainment publics helps explain why the forum devotes so much attention to the video game discussions occurring in both mainstream media outlets and video game media outlets. Both types of entertainment publics exert greater influence on mainstream civil society’s and the video game community’s understanding and engagement with video games. Of course, forum members are extremely hostile towards the discussions occurring in these alternative spaces, and much of the conversation focuses on delegitimizing mainstream media outlets and the enthusiast press by portraying them as non-gamers. In this sense, analogous to Kotaku’s treatment of mainstream media outlets,
NeoGAF users rely in part on the portrayal of video games in both mainstream media outlets and the enthusiast press in order to construct their own narratives and thus provide their interpretive community with a clear social identity.

In general, my work demonstrates how aesthetic public spheres are not isomorphic in terms of form or content. In other words, there is not one type of aesthetic public sphere. Instead, aesthetic public spheres vary according to the type of topics they address and the manner in which they do so. Furthermore, aesthetic public spheres are not isolated entities, but are interconnected to various degrees and thus exist in a richly intertextual media landscape. Although video game coverage in mainstream media outlets such as The New York Times rarely engage with discussions occurring in other entertainment publics, both Kotaku and NeoGAF clearly base much of their discussions according to what is happening in more popular or influential spaces. Overall, my analysis highlights how the manner in which entertainment publics function as aesthetic public spheres is a complex process that often results in some promising features and some significant limitations from a democratic deliberative perspective. Keeping this in mind, civil society scholars should not ignore the discussions occurring in entertainment publics. However, we must also exercise caution and not blindly assume that every entertainment public always functions as an aesthetic public sphere or that the interactions occurring within these spaces continuously promote the type of discourses or forms of deliberation that scholars consider vital to a democratic civil society.

Analogous to the rich literature on political public spheres and the growing literature on the space of opinion (Jacobs and Townsley 2011), scholars must rigorously examine how a wide range of aesthetic public spheres engage with particular
sociopolitical topics and more fully identify the sociological factors that influence the
types of aesthetic public spheres that develop from different entertainment publics if we
are to gain a stronger understanding of entertainment’s role in civil society. Moreover,
future research should also examine the similarities and potential differences between
how sites presumably devoted to political commentary and sites ostensibly intended for
entertainment commentary discuss specific sociopolitical issues. For example, it would
be insightful to compare the manner in which Kotaku and NeoGAF discuss race issues to
how mainstream media outlets such as The New York Times cover this topic. Topic-
focused comparisons such as this would greatly strengthen our understanding of how
certain entertainment publics may do a better job engaging with these issues from a
democratic deliberation perspective and vice versa. Furthermore, future research should
also explore how entertainment commentary may function as an aesthetic public sphere
in other countries. The frequency in which entertainment commentary addresses broader
sociopolitical concerns, the particular topic such commentary addresses, and the potential
social influence such commentary may have is unquestionably influenced by local
contexts. For this reason, it is vital that scholars engage in cross-cultural studies in order
to expand our understanding of entertainment commentary’s social functions and the
structural factors that may influence the particular form such commentary assumes. My
analysis adds valuable new insights to the aesthetic public sphere literature, but there is
still much more work to be done.
### TABLES

**Table 1: Distribution of Evaluative Articles By Section of The New York Times**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper Section</th>
<th>1980s</th>
<th>1990s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major News (Metro, National, Foreign/International)</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts/Cultural</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science/Technology/Health</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/Finance</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Evaluation of Video Games in The New York Times**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moral Evaluation</th>
<th>1980s</th>
<th>1990s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
<th>(\chi^2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Threat</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Benefits</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† p < .10; *p < .05; ** p < .01; ***p < .001; ns = not significant (two-tailed chi-square tests).

**Table 3: Percentage of Section’s Coverage That Portrays Video Games as a Social Threat**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper Section</th>
<th>1980s</th>
<th>1990s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major News (Metro, National, Foreign/International)</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts/Cultural</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science/Technology/Health</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/Finance</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4: Social Threat Narrative by Type of Newspaper Article**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Newspaper Article</th>
<th>1980s</th>
<th>1990s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts/Cultural</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 5: Portrayal of Video Games in *The New York Times* by Narrative Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Type</th>
<th>1980s</th>
<th>1990s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
<th>χ²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dumbing of US</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Issues</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Benefits</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† p < .10; *p < .05; ** p < .01; ***p < .001; ns = not significant (two-tailed chi-square tests).

### Table 6: Portrayal of Video Games in the Art Section of *The New York Times*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Narrative Type Located in Arts Section By Decade</th>
<th>Social Threat</th>
<th>Social Benefit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 7: Video Game Coverage in *Kotaku* by Narrative Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Type</th>
<th>Percentage of Sample Articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Video games’ Aesthetic Merits</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticizing Others</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism Ethos</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociopolitical Issues</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 8: Author Institutional Affiliation by Publication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Politic</th>
<th>Corp</th>
<th>Acad</th>
<th>Writer</th>
<th>Civic</th>
<th>Creative</th>
<th>Educ</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>NYT Threat</em></td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kotaku</em></td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NYT Threat* = *The New York Times* articles portraying video games as a social threat from 2000 to the end of 2009.
### Table 9: Institutional Affiliation of Figures Present in Video Game Coverage by Media Space

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Space</th>
<th>NYT Threat</th>
<th>Kotaku</th>
<th>NeoGAF</th>
<th>Neo RE5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politic</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corp</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acad</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educ</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NYT Threat = The New York Times articles portraying videogames as a social threat from 2000 to the end of 2009.*

*NeoGAF = All the evaluative posts present in the three NeoGAF threads I examined*

*Neo RE5 = All the evaluative posts present in the two NeoGAF threads devoted to discussing the debate over RE5’s imagery*

### Table 10: Aesthetic Criteria in NeoGAF’s Three Most Popular Threads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thread</th>
<th>Visual</th>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Gameplay</th>
<th>Difficult</th>
<th>Creative</th>
<th>Tech</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>#Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SF4</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KZ2</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U2</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*SF4 = The Official Street Fighter IV Thread; KZ3 = The Official Killzone 2 Thread; UC2 = The Official Uncharted 2 thread*
Table 11: Discursive Attributes For Video Game Coverage in *The New York Times*, *Kotaku*, and NeoGAF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discursive Attributes</th>
<th>NYT (Social Threat)</th>
<th>Kotaku</th>
<th>NeoGAF</th>
<th>NeoGAF RE5 Threads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical Coverage</td>
<td>Condemn video game industry&lt;br&gt;Never question authority figures</td>
<td>Frequently rebuke mainstream media, politicians, public figures, academia, video game industry, video game media</td>
<td>Hostile towards vgame media, other forum members</td>
<td>Hostile towards vgame media, other forum members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form of criticism</td>
<td>High-mimetic social threat</td>
<td>High-mimetic portrayal of topics&lt;br&gt;Low-mimetic portrayal of opponents</td>
<td>Low-mimetic name calling</td>
<td>Low-mimetic name calling&lt;br&gt;High-mimetic social threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Pluralism</td>
<td>Articles never include dissent&lt;br&gt;Counter-narrative only in Arts</td>
<td>Include opposing position&lt;br&gt;But ultimately rebuke it</td>
<td>Posts frequently disagree over a video game's quality</td>
<td>Majority find imagery unproblematic&lt;br&gt;Minority consider it problematic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Pluralism</td>
<td>Quotes from politicians, academics</td>
<td>Quotes from media, creative workers</td>
<td>Rare, mainly video game media</td>
<td>Rare, mainly video game media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intertextuality</td>
<td>Vague references to other harmful entertainment</td>
<td>Heavily references other media outlets, popular culture</td>
<td>Rare reference to video game media</td>
<td>Heavily references popular culture, politics, and history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Accounts</td>
<td>Rare</td>
<td>Rare</td>
<td>Rare</td>
<td>Rare, but more frequent than others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Style</td>
<td>Assertion&lt;br&gt;Appeals to Common Sense&lt;br&gt;Reliance on figure's authority (except obesity)</td>
<td>Critically examine counter-position, Intertextual references</td>
<td>Assertion&lt;br&gt;Pollute opposition</td>
<td>Assertion&lt;br&gt;Pollute opposition&lt;br&gt;Intertextual references</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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