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"I did it without hesitation. Am I the bad guy?" Online conversations in response to controversial in-game violence

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Abstract

Video game content has evolved over the last six decades, from a basic focus on challenge and competition to include more serious and introspective narratives capable of encouraging critical contemplation within gamers. The "No Russian" mission from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* casts players as terrorists responsible for the murder of innocent bystanders, sparking debate around how players engage and react to wanton violence in modern video games. Through thematic analysis of 649 Reddit posts discussing the mission, 10 themes emerged representing complexity in player experiences. Those themes were grouped into categories representing (descending order), (1) rote gameplay experiences, (2) dark humor, (3) comparing the mission to other games and real-world events, and (4) self-reflective eudaimonic reactions to the mission. Although less common, the presence of eudaimonic media effects (in at least 15% of posts) holds promise for the use of video games as reflective spaces for violence prevention.

Keywords

video game violence; violence prevention; entertainment theory; eudaimonia; guilt; Reddit

The prevalence of violence in video games (Lynes & Hoffin, 2020; Smith et al., 2003; Thompson & Haniger, 2001) and concerns over the influence of that violence on players (Mathur & VanderWeele, 2019) permeate academic and popular video game discourse. Video games are common spaces for challenge and competition (Sherry et al., 2006), often centered around violent content and themes (Waddington, 2007). In turn, media scholars are challenged with describing and explaining a broad range of media effects, including the potential for violent video game content to have prosocial outcomes (Bowman et al., 2020). Such prosocial effects are common in traditional entertainment media (e.g., books, film, television), as there is general recognition that even abhorrent content can inspire a broad range of eudaimonic reactions in viewers (Oliver & Raney, 2011; Oliver et al., 2018). However, in part due to presumptions about video games as a less serious medium (Ivory,

Disclaimer: The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

2015), less consideration is given to the more self-referential, poignant, and meaningful outcomes of video game play—so-called eudaimonic media effects (Daneels et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2016).

The current study analyzes the eudaimonic potential of entertainment-focused violent video games[1] through an emergent thematic analysis of nearly 700 posts to the online platform Reddit spanning 12 years, reflecting players' unprompted online discourse regarding their perspectives on the "No Russian" level of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (*MW2*). When first released in 2009 (and re-released in 2019), "No Russian" became a flashpoint in video game history, controversial not for violence *per se* (as the franchise has always featured first-person gun violence), but because of its contextualization of that violence—encouraging players to actively commit an act of terrorism (Campbell, 2013; Schulzke, 2013). However, in analyzing the themes of these online debates, it becomes clear that players do critically evaluate video game violence (Denham & Spokes, 2018). These findings contribute to advances in entertainment theory broadly (Oliver & Raney, 2011), including eudaimonic media effects in video games (Daneels et al., 2021). We conclude with a discussion of the potential educational and therapeutic benefits of critical engagement with violent video games.

Violence and Video Games

The earliest video games featured challenge and combat between players, often presenting violence through abstract representations (Waddington, 2007). Although early versions of *Tennis for Two* (1958) and *Pong* (1972) could hardly be considered violent, other games such as *SpaceWar!* (1961), *Galaxy Game* (1971), and *Computer Space* (1971) could be construed as such—all three involved some form of interstellar combat, in which one player was tasked with destroying the other. Likewise, the release of *Death Race* (1976) marked one of the earliest public concerns about violent video games. In that game, players control an on-screen race car around a single-screen track, earning points for striking human-like figures with their vehicle. In addition to being rewarded for vehicular homicide, players controlled the action using authentic passenger car controls (a steering wheel, gear shift, and gas pedal). For Kocurek (2012), the public discourse around *Death Race* "forged a strong tie between video gaming and violence in the public imagination" (para. 1), and this discourse continued into the 1990s with games such as *Mortal Kombat* (1993), *Night Trap* (1992), and *Doom* (1993) and more recently with games from the *Grand Theft Auto* and *Manhunt* franchises (both from Rockstar Games, a publisher known for exceptionally violent gaming content; see Kohler, 2008)[2].

As video game content became more mature, research into the potential effects of video game violence also emerged. The literature on violent gaming and aggressive outcomes has been chronicled in several meta-analyses (see de Vrieze, 2018), some reporting statistically significant effects (Calvert et al., 2017) and others that challenge those findings (Ferguson

[1]We use "entertainment-focused" here to distinguish between games designed primarily for entertainment (the focus of our study) and games designed with specific learning outcomes in mind.

[2]*Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* were at the center of the creation of the Entertainment Software Ratings Board in the US during the early 1990s, and *Doom* was among the very first games rated "M" for mature by that same board (Webster, 2013).

et al. 2020). Various accounts are given for these effects, one of the more prominent being the general aggression model (Bushman & Anderson, 2002) in which playing violent video games increases the accessibility of hostile scripts of behavior—for example, responding to interpersonal conflict in violent ways (e.g., verbal or even physical aggression; similar findings reported by Krcmar & Farrar, 2009). More recent meta-analysis from Mathur and VanderWeele (2019) suggest that there is consensus among existing literature and reported that the generalized effect of violent video gameplay on aggression is statistically significant but overall small (nearly no studies reporting effects explaining more than 4% of explained variance; for detailed overview see Bowman et al., 2020).

"No Russian" and Contextualized Video Game Violence

Broadly speaking, fighting and shooting video games are perennial best sellers in the US (Grubb, 2020), with games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise featuring graphic violence while merging elements of both game genres and others (e.g., racing, role-playing mechanics). Against this backdrop, it might seem inconsequential to focus on "No Russian"—a single mission in one game (*MW2*) from a single franchise of war-themed first-person shooting games (*CoD*). However, the controversy around "No Russian" did not revolve around shooting and violence *writ large*, but rather the context of that violence: murdering innocents during an act of terrorism.[3]

For "No Russian," the player performs as Joseph Allan, a US Army Ranger working as an undercover CIA agent under the assumed name Alexi Borodin. Allan/Borodin's goal is to infiltrate a Russian terrorist group led by Vladimir Makarov, who plans to attack an airport. At the start of the mission, Makarov reminds the all-Russian terrorist cell to speak "no Russian" during the mission. Shortly afterwards, the terrorists (including the player) open fire on airport security, staff, and presumably innocent passengers before control shifts back to the player, who is encouraged (although not required) to fire on the bystanders.[4] The mission ends with Makarov turning on the player, fatally shooting Allan/Borodin in the chest. As the player dies, he overhears Makarov explaining Allan/Borodin's participation was a ruse to convince the Russian government that the attack was backed by the US—hence, Makarov's agents speak only English (i.e., no Russian) during the attack.

Almost immediately after the game's release (Emery, 2009; Senior, 2012) and again on the game's re-release in 2019 (Hester, 2019; Hornshaw, 2020), debates raged about the appropriateness and morality of "No Russian." During initial testing, several people (including at least one US combat veteran) refused to play the mission and others critiqued the mission for being unnecessary and gratuitous (Evans-Thirwell, 2016). The mission was censored in Japan and Germany (players would see a "Game Over" screen if they opened fire on civilians; Ashcraft, 2009), and removed altogether from *MW2*'s Russian release (Welsh, 2009).

[3]The controversy seems to have been anticipated by the game's developers, who included a graphic content warning at the start of the mission and allowed players to skip the mission entirely.

[4]If the player chose to attack the other terrorists, the mission is failed, and the player must play again if they want to complete the mission.

Contemplating Contextualized Video Game Violence as Eudaimonic Media Effects

When asked about "No Russian," the game's developers explained:

> "It isn't really relevant whether that makes you enjoy the entertainment experience even more because you're being naughty (à la Grand Theft Auto) or it engrosses you further into the story and makes you resent your actions. *What's relevant is that the level managed to make the player feel anything at all* (Totilo, 2020, p. 2, emphasis added.)"

Video game play elicits a range of emotional experiences that include basic, blended, and mixed affective states (Hemenover & Bowman, 2018). Likewise, entertainment outcomes from gaming can be both hedonic (associated with fun and pleasure) and eudaimonic (associated with poignancy and self-reflection; Oliver et al., 2016)—sometimes, in the same video game (Rogers et al., 2017). These potential eudaimonic effects are the focus of the current study.

Although there is no formal theory of eudaimonic media effects, they can be understood broadly as more complex and pensive emotional responses to media content. Eudaimonic reactions are more cognitively and emotionally demanding, as they stem from one's critical engagement with on-screen content (Sicart, 2013). In a scoping review of 82 manuscripts on eudaimonia and video games, Daneels et al. (2021) noted that while a focal explication of eudaimonic media effects is lacking, the experience has been documented and discussed in terms of appreciation, emotional challenge (i.e., "being moved"), and self-reflection (among others). From this perspective, violent video games could be experienced in ways that encourage players to critically consume the content (Bowman et al., 2020). For example, both Hartman et al. (2010) and Grizzard et al. (2014) found that when contextualized as terrorism, players felt guilty after shooting victims in first-person shooter games. Gollwitzer & Melzer (2012) found evidence of moral cleansing practices after playing violent video games, such as using hand sanitizer after gameplay.

When making moral decisions in video games, players avoid in-game actions that conflict with their own moral intuitions, such as not harming other characters in a game (e.g., Boyan et al., 2015; Joeckel et al., 2012; Weaver & Lewis, 2012). Tamborini et al. (2018) found that in-game elements can even make certain moral concepts (e.g., caring for others, treating others fairly) temporarily salient to players after they finished playing. Krcmar and Cingel (2016) found that players relied more on moral than strategic reasoning when an in-game action was highly aligned with players' moral foundations. Similarly, Denham and Spokes (2018) found that in-game decisions in *Grand Theft Auto V* (an open-world game based around violent criminal behavior) varied widely to include a range of anti-social and pro-social behaviors—this study also suggests that the game's intense and extremely violent narrative discourages players from committing the same.

Some of the effects noted above can transcend the *in situ* gaming experience, resonating with players beyond gaming sessions. Gamers' moral deliberations and have been identified in prior research for example in focus groups (Holl et al., 2020) and in the message boards

attached to online game reviews (Malazita & Jenkins, 2017), and violent video games can serve as catalysts for more complicated contemplations of and dialogues on violence (Mekler et al., 2018). McKernan's (2013) analysis of *New York Times* coverage of video games from 1980–2010 suggests that in the latter decade video games' artistic merits and functional benefits for players were being recognized (e.g., mood management and social interactions), which could also influence how players engage the medium in ways deeper than hedonic enjoyment.

Current Study

Just as iconic films like *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) are used to provoke deeper reflections—both in an entertainment context (Bartsch & Mares, 2014) and in classroom environments (Barlow, 1997; Frieden et al., 2007), video games can confront players with deplorable content potentially capable of facilitating eudaimonic reactions regarding violence. The current study investigates this potential through an emergent thematic analysis of online Reddit posts. That said, and taking care not to bias our investigation into only finding those eudemonic media effect we are interested, we pose instead a broad exploratory question:

RQ1:

(How) do players engage in eudaimonic reflection after committing in-game violence?

Method

The current study consists of an emergent thematic analysis followed by a quantitative content analysis of a sample of nearly 12 years' worth of Reddit posts related to "No Russian."[5] Data acquisition and reduction (i.e., coding) procedures are discussed below.

Data Acquisition

Reddit's internal search feature was used to identify gaming-related discussion forums (or "subreddits") for inclusion in the analysis, employing the following search terms: "CoD," "CoD 2," "MW2," "Modern Warfare," "No Russian", and related combinations (e.g., "Cod No Russian," "CoD MW2," "Modern Warfare No Russian," "CoD2 No Russian," "MW2 No Russian"). This search resulted in 227 subreddits with content for potential analysis, which included forums focused on *CoD* specifically (e.g., r/CallofDuty, r/MW2) and video games broadly (e.g., r/pcgaming, r/games), and a few forums with a broader popular culture focus (such as r/memes and r/tipofmytongue)[6]. All posts from the identified subreddits were collected through a public repository of Reddit data (https://pushshift.io) in February 2020. The collected posts were filtered for references to the "No Russian" level in either the submission's title or associated text using a list of filter terms (i.e., CoD MW2," "Modern Warfare No Russian," "CoD2 No Russian," "MW2 No Russian"). Submissions that were

[5]Research materials for this project, including data collection code, are made available via an Open Science Framework folder at https://osf.io/2ruz4/?view_only=13671aa604cc4720aff2fac4b1850808

[6]One unexpected forum included in our study was r/airsoft, which is a community of Airsoft gun users who often stage realistic gun battles (including *Call of Duty*-themed reenactments; https://www.airsoftgi.com/).

removed by moderators or deleted by original posters (n = 309) and duplicate submissions s (n = 14) were excluded. This initial collection resulted in 1,591 potential posts across all subreddits identified for analysis.

Those 1,591 posts were then manually filtered for relevancy (e.g., some posts focused on Russian or Balkan region politics independent from video game discussions; n = 874), thus ensuring that only threads containing target language related to *CoD MW2* were retained. Archived posts that were no longer available for reading and coding (n = 68) were also removed, resulting in a final dataset of N = 649 posts. About half of them (n = 321, or 49.5%) contained links to either news articles (n = 47), videos (n = 61), or images (n = 213). The remaining posts (n = 328, or 50.5%) were text-only posts ranging from a single word to 5,667 (M = 233.87, SD = 521.64), with 68 of the text-only posts contained their statement or question in the title of the post rather than the body of the thread. When coding, both textual and non-textual content were considered to interpret the themes in posts.

Data Reduction

Given the study's core focus is identifying and describing the frequency of themes across discussion posts, a combination of emergent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; for discussion of emergent themes see Given, 2008) and quantitative content analysis (Rigge et al., 2005) was employed—the former to reduce the dataset into meaningful and interpretable themes for context, and the latter to analyze patterns in those themes.

Emergent thematic analysis.—An independent coder (the fourth author of this manuscript) assessed a random sample of 10% of all posts (n = 65) for initial read and data familiarization purposes. Each post served as an independent unit of analysis, yet a post could have more than one theme. Next, a deep read was conducted to reduce the data to broader codes. Lastly, the codes were combined into broader categories using a constant comparison method. To protect against the introduction of coder subjectivity effects (i.e., a single inductive coders' lens promoting some interpretations over others), a second independent coder (fifth author) assessed another 10% random set of posts. The two coders differed with respect to their relative familiarity with the context of the data, which *de facto* influenced the lenses through which they saw the data (Harris, 1976). The first coder was less familiar with "No Russian" and the debates around the game and thus, coded through an etic (or external) lens. The second coder was familiar with "No Russian" and the ensuing online debates and thus, coded through an emic (or internal) lens. The second coder confirmed the validity of the codes generated by the first coder.[7] Neither coder was informed about the purpose of the study at the coding stage to further protect against subjectivity biases. Ten emergent themes were identified, and data saturation was reached within the 10% random sample.

[7]The decision to invite the coders to the manuscript as formal authors was done following authorship recommendations of the American Psychological Association (https://www.apa.org/research/responsible/publication). Initially, both coders were paid staff not considered part of the authorship team. However, they were invited later in the process (after coding and initial data analysis) as we realized that they could provide critical insights on data interpretations (e.g., the Discussion section of this manuscript), while also informing the lead authors' interpretation of codes towards our RQ.

Quantitative content analysis.—Following the establishment of themes, a codebook was created formalizing all themes identified in the emergent thematic analysis. Still unaware of the study's purpose, both coders independently coded the entire dataset for the presence or absence of the themes. Intercoder reliability was calculated at three phases: prior to training (T1), immediately following a training session (T2), and at the conclusion of coding (T3). Training in this context refers to a standard practice in which coders meet with study authors to review and discuss the overall coding process, including resolving discrepancies or misunderstandings regarding coding categories (e.g., coders might ask questions of a study author regarding the intended meaning of a given code). We chose an initial untrained coding phase as a way of testing the intuitiveness of our codebook (T1) and used the results of that phase to meet with coders and understand (and coalesce) their interpretation of each code's definition (T2). At the conclusion of all coding, we did an additional check to protect against interpretation slippage (i.e., one or both coders shifting their interpretation of a code during the coding process; T3). Krippendorf's α was calculated at three phases, each time employing a unique 10% random subset of the data (see Table 1). As expected, intercoder reliability was unacceptable at T1, robust at T2, and this robustness held at T3.

Results

Of our 10 emergent themes, closer inspection revealed four clusters, or combinations of those themes with semantic similarity: general discussions, dark humor, non-eudaimonic reflections, and eudaimonic reflections. In reporting results, we focus our presentation and further discussion on the four overarching clusters, discussing the themes within each cluster (Table 2). Notably, the individual themes varied greatly with respect to how often these were represented in the data, from less than 6% of all data to more than 40%. However, even the smallest observed difference (1.2%) was significant at the $p < .001$ level via paired-samples *t*-test. Thus, the frequencies of all themes were statistically significant from each other. Posts were assigned an average $M = 1.71$ themes ($SD = 1.11$).

Subsequently, both coders independently coded the entire dataset for the presence or absence of all 10 themes. Krippendorf's α was calculated at three phases, each time employing a unique 10% random subset of the data (see Table 3). As expected, intercoder reliability was unacceptable at T1, robust at T2, and this robustness held at T3.

Cluster 1: General Video Game Discussions

The most prominent themes in our sample focused on players discussing gameplay and narratives within the context of the *MW2* or the larger *CoD* franchise narrative—not from a reflective or eudaimonic perspective, but more generally as fans invested in the game experience. The most frequently occurring themes included a focus on general video game debates (42.8% of posts), comparisons of "No Russian" to other *CoD* games (19.3%) and video games broadly (8.3%), and unedited gameplay footage (6.8%). Broadly, it is unsurprising that most themes in our data represent more generalized gaming discussions, as most of the subreddits in our sample were dedicated to gaming (and in particular, to *CoD*).

One aspect of these gameplay discussions was players critiquing or debating the narrative surrounding the "No Russian" mission:

> "Why would the "No Russian" attack be pinned on America just because Allen's body was found, considering two actual Russians, Lev and Kiril, also died and would be found?"

Another player noted:

> "He [Makarov] already has a history of attacks against Russia. During No Russian ge [he] 12ould12n [doesn't] wear a mask so security cameras would have surely picked him up, making it obvious he was the perpetrator and not America. Or am I missing something?"

Yet another player wondered how Makarov was able to uncover Allan/Borodin, given that:

> "We're led to believe that the Russian government was aware of Makarov and didn't trust the ultranationalists [Makarov's terrorist cell]… so any 'intel' given to them by the ultranationalists wouldn't be taken seriously."

In these critiques, we see players critically engaging with the story narrative, including reading additional (and non-diegetic) materials to better understand the context of the mission.

Upon comparing "No Russian" to other *CoD* experiences (19.3%), players acknowledged the uniqueness of the level, while also commenting on its moral gravity. Some pondered whether or not similar content would be included in other *CoD* entries, reflected in discussion questions such as: "What are the chances of having a similar mission as No Russian? *And if it does, would you play the mission?"* and "Kotaku [gaming news media] said that in his new article. This post is about the campaign and not already revealed title. *OMG we are getting likely another inevitable civilian massacre*" (emphasis added).

When comparing "No Russian" to video games broadly (8.3%), posts were often more straightforward. For example, one post framed "No Russian" under the broader heading of "Like things in video games that made you go yo hold up" and asked players to recall other games providing similar experiences (e.g., "Are there any games which focus on killing npc [non-player character] civilians (like active shooter/standoff)?" and "How do you 13oul [sic] games that include extreme amounts of violence like COD's "no 13ould13n" level or GTA?"). Notably, some of these posts were made to subreddits dedicated to other games and franchises. Posts in this category generally recognized that "No Russian" was unique in its portrayal of unjustified violence (i.e., towards civilians), but did not offer specific moral deliberations or points of reflective discussions.

Other posts featured more generic presentations of game environments or game mechanics (such as screenshots or video of in-game footage). Yet even in these posts, there was recognition of the mission's uniqueness. One post discussing *CoD* games in a broader sense noted that *MW2* was important because it "told the world that Infinity Ward wasn't afraid to be bold and express the gravity of the story they wanted us to experience"—here, the player is not reflecting their own feelings towards the mission but recognizing it as having a more

serious and meaningful tone. Another post shared a screenshot that showed flight arrival and departure times, which could be interpreted as an ironic observation juxtaposed against the backdrop of a civilian massacre.

Cluster 2: Dark Humor—The second most frequently occurring theme was "No Russian" related memes, making up nearly one-third of our sample (30.4%). Most all these posts were memes invoking "No Russian" in some manner, many posted in meme-specific subreddits. Most were shared or re-posted from other online sources, and nearly all of them were presented as dark humor or satire. One post shared a popular meme showing civilians standing around the airport (a screenshot from the start of the mission) with the text: "flying home for the holidays in a couple hours!!! (stet)[8]. Another one shared an image from the level with the headline "Top 10 Pictures Taken Before a Disaster" alluding to clickbait headlines. Another one used the popular "Awkward Look Monkey" meme (Adam, 2018) showing (a) "my mom walking into my room to tell me that videogames can cause mass shootings (stet)" and (b) a gamer making an awkward over-the-shoulder gaze right with the opening frame from "No Russian" clearly visible on their computer—the player is about to engage a mass shooting. One more shows a juxtaposition of "girls at airports" (showing normatively attractive Caucasian women toting designer luggage and dressed in high fashion) and "boys at airports" (showing the terrorists from "No Russian" checking their weapons before starting their massacre).

Broadly speaking, such memes are indicative of a larger participatory culture in which users actively co-opt and re-construct meaning from the media content that they consume (Jenkins, 2006). Due to a confluence of features (e.g., digital, networked, and interactive nature), video game content features heavily in the larger body of online memes (Benaim, 2018). The cultural production practices of memes can be understood through the broader lens of gaming capital—a term coined by Consalvo (2007), analogous to social capital applied within gaming spaces. Here, gamers might derive implicit or explicit gaming capital by creating and/or sharing the "dankest" (the oddest or most outrageous) memes of the day (Barnes et al., 2020). Some have suggested that dark humor (also referred to as gallows humor) is often invoked as a tension-release or coping mechanism with respect to emotional regulation (Samson & Gross, 2014). When presented in memes, dark humor related to "No Russian" contains cues that allow viewers to laugh (Zillmann, 2000, p. 42), even if the meme, the mission, or both were otherwise uncomfortable experiences.

Cluster 3: Linking Gameplay to Reality—Comprising four themes, this subset featured debate and discussion about the mission in comparison to other real-world events and experiences. For example, a frequently occurring (yet non-eudaimonic) deliberative theme was "sociopolitical climate" (20.2%), in which posters wondered if "No Russian" contributed to broader discussions of video game violence. Discussion topics were wide-ranging and while we did not code the frequency of all topics, a few stand out as more central to the theme. In at least 12 posts, gamers debated video games and children, for example: "Why do some parents blame their childs [sic] (and other parents child's)

[8]The post was shared from a popular Tweet: https://twitter.com/ultra15151/status/1209638263264288774

bad behavior on violent video games?" In another 12 posts, players discussed potential censorship of the game, for example wondering if game developers 16ould "pander to the pro censorship croud [sic]" and in doing so, would skip over what was perceived as "a core part of the story and a plot building device" or if "games have to be tamer than they are now?" Some posts expressed outright concern that the senseless violence in "No Russian" was too much even for anyone. In at least five posts, players wondered if the game was simply too intense—for example: "I generally think it's bullsh*t when people say that video games make killers, but this is one of a few where I'd say this is too far and actually could." In these discourses, clear divisions can be seen over perceptions of appropriateness of the "No Russian" gameplay, reminiscent of debates observed by Korucek (2012), but not necessarily reflecting on the content itself (i.e., from a eudaimonic perspective). However, these divisions were being expressed by gamers themselves, suggesting that not all who played the level were supportive of the content.

Finally, 11.8% of posts used "No Russian" as a point of departure for broader conversations about historical and contemporary events in the physical world in ways that suggested broader contemplations about geopolitics and warfare. For example, one post asked "Is there any real life event where a CIA operative had to commit a terrorist attack like Modern Warfare 2's "No Russian"?" and others invoked the mission when referencing current affairs, such as the "Storm Area 51" social media campaign of late 2019 in which US civilians were planning to invade the Nevada Test and Training Range to uncover evidence of extraterrestrial life held in secret by the US government (no such raid ever materialized; Frank, 2019). One post simply pondered "What would have actually been the global reactions if the "No Russian" mission happened inbound world?" In a more elaborate post, one player asked:

> "If this situation were real [mass airport shooting by CIA operative] … what repercussions would PFC Allen have faced for his actions? He was undercover, trying to gain trust to get information to keep the world from going to war a 3rd time, but he participates in the Terrorist act which kills hundreds and ends up causing war. So I guess I'm asking: what would his punishment be, even though his goal was for the greater good?"

Common in these posts was a recognition that the in-game events—a US operative murdering civilians of another country as part of a broader mission— were morally and politically complicated.

Cluster 4: Eudaimonic reflections of "No Russian."—Although the least-frequently occurring, our final three themes were the most focal to players directly confronting their experiences in "No Russian" and doing so in varied and complex terms—themes most representative of the eudaimonic media effects from prior work (Daneels et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2016). Themes ranged from "prompting complex emotional reflections" (14.9%) to reflecting on "perpetrating violence" (10.6%) and discussions of "avoiding violence" (5.6%).

For the broader "prompting complex emotional reflections" category, a common post was that players would first share their own complex emotional reaction to the mission (feelings

of guilt and shame were common), and then ask the community to share in turn. In these initial prompts tended to focus specifically on more contemplative and disruptive emotional experiences key to eudaimonia (see Daneels et al., 2021). For example:

> "People who played MW2 Campaign. Are you one of those who got disturbed playing No Russian mission? What did you feeling [sic] during gameplay and why did you feel disturbed?"

Although we did not formally code post replies, these original posts seemed to elicit two clear types of responses relevant to understanding the context of these prompts: those who were also disturbed by the gameplay (e.g., "Seeing people crawling on the ground after having been shot...I felt sickened"), and those who distanced themselves from the gameplay (e.g., as "just a mission in a video game," "just pixels on a screen," or "I was aware it was a game"). On both sides, we see some players embracing the deeper narrative contexts of their in-game actions and others rejecting this context as fantasy (Waddington, 2007).

For posts discussing perpetrating violence, players referred to "innocent victims" that were the victims of "murder." In this language and similar references to "terrorism" and discussions of wanton bloodshed, players clearly acknowledged both their actions and the immorality of those actions—for example, one player regretted murdering civilians "without hesitation" and ended their post asking, "Am I a bad guy?" Another asked "Is such guilt and realism too much for players to handle?" Similar reactions have been found in research directly manipulating the narrative contexts of shooting violence in video games, in which guilt reactions are strongest for players made to believe that their actions were unjustified (Grizzard et al., 2014; Hartmann et al., 2010).

Regarding avoiding violence, many players referenced the option to skip the level without penalty (this option was provided in the original and remastered versions of *MW2*): "... at any one point in the game when you are playing the mission you can skip it and not have to play it with no punishment to your progress at all." Of course, even this was used as a source of critique, with some questioning if the skip option was appropriate: "Do we want other mission that'll spark controversy like No Russians [sic] did, even if we had the option the [sic] skip the mission?" Others simply pondered why they couldn't alter the narrative to avoid the events, for example, by stating: "wouldn't it make more sense to kill Makarov while you have a chance than help him kill innocents?" or more bluntly: "Do you think no Russian was a necessary addition to the game?" To the latter point, others discussed the narrative brilliance of the level as evidence of video games' "maturity as an art form." In this discussion, players openly acknowledged the viciousness and repugnance of the level itself but frame it as a requirement for more serious narrative—in line with discussions about games and appreciation (Daneels et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2016). For example, in one post a player wrote that "the attack carried out was damnable, but this stage was so very necessary for the game's story to end up as good as it was."

Discussion

Released with much controversy in 2009, "No Russian" represents a watershed moment in popular video game development—a violent shooting mission that unapologetically cast

the player as terrorist and compelled them murder innocent bystanders. Concerns about the mission's controversial violence were both swift and long-lasting, and hotly debated in various media accounts and public fora. In our analysis of nearly 12 years of content from Reddit spanning *MW2*'s original release date and 2019 re-release, players' framing of their experience with "No Russian" were complex and varied. While most of these online discussions were more broadly focused on debating and discussing the video game as a video game (i.e., fans talking about gameplay, narrative concerns, or other game-related notes), we also saw the emergence of players engaging in more contemplative and reflective ways that can be understood as eudaimonic effects (Daneels et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2016). This emergence of these discussions of eudaimonic effects—especially using an inductive analysis method in which we did not specifically search for them—is interpreted as evidence that players can and do engage in more critical considerations of in-game actions.

With respect to "No Russian" driving deeper discourse into video game violence, two patterns seemed to emerge in our data: those that dismissed the reality of the content (that it was "just a game"), and those that directly engaged the reality of the content and saw it as *intentionally* morally challenging. The former is relevant through the lens of moral disengagement (Hartmann, 2017), in which gamers absolve themselves of responsibility for their in-game actions. One reason for this could be that some players might have more deeply ingrained orientations towards video gaming broadly as activities meant to be enjoyed rather than critiqued—that is, their held model for what a video game "is" precluded them from more critical consideration of the game content. Such an effect could be especially concerning for violent video game effects, as these players engaged a terrorist act as "just a game" akin to many other past violent games. However, those players who saw content as intentionally challenging demonstrated experiences akin to eudaimonic media effects (Daneels et al., 2021), and reactions show the greatest promise with respect to leveraging video game violence towards potentially prosocial means (Bowman et al., 2020; Denham & Spokes, 2018). Players openly and actively questioned their in-game actions and expressed feelings of guilt, disgust, anger, and feeling otherwise disheveled by the experience—all feelings conceptually aligned with eudaimonic effects and key to the transformative potential of digital narratives (Murray, 1997).

Implications for Violence Research and Prevention

Given there is at least one gamer in 75% of US households (ESA, 2019), our observations are potentially useful from a public health perspective to better understand how gamers make sense of the diverse content and environments experienced while playing video games. For example, having "families with attitudes accepting of or justifying violence or aggression" (CDC, 2019) is considered a risk factor for adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as being involved in or witnessing different types of violence. With regards to children, playing violent video games in the home (or even the ownership of such games) could be seen as *implicit* family acceptance of violence—especially if these games' content is not critically discussed. To this end, Jiow et al. (2016) suggest using discursive parental (or caretaker) mediation strategies in which video game content is central to meaningful conversations about the underlying values of on-screen decisions. Through such strategies, children are encouraged to become more critical consumers of game content (suggested by

Sicart, 2013) and as part of a broader critical media literacy (Sanford & Madill, 2007). Such strategies might have the effect of eliciting more eudaimonic emotional reflections to on-screen violence, which could in-turn prompt more deliberative conversations about the realities of perpetrating violence against others.

There is natural hesitation to engage violent video games as violent prevention tools (Bowman et al., 2020). For example, recent meta-analysis research suggests that such content is slightly correlated with desensitization, and violent video games can have small short-term impacts on aggressive thoughts and cognitions (Mathur & VanderWeele, 2019). However, meta-analysis work by Drummond et al. (2020) was unable to confirm that violent video games have long-term impacts on adolescents, and even short-term impacts could be mediated through more critical consumption of content (as suggested above). Furthermore, discursive mediation strategies could bolster protective factors associated with safer and more supportive relationships (CDC, 2019), perhaps positioning caretakers as mentors and role models for these conversations. Notably in the current study, it is unclear if those posting content were adolescents or adults potentially in caretaker roles themselves. More research is needed in this area, as insights could inform the development of strategies to promote healthy behaviors for individual and community wellbeing. For example, gaming-focused messaging and programs could be developed to help unpack popular gaming content for online and offline discussion and foster contemplative conversations like those observed in online discussion forums. Related to this, another compelling line of research could be the coactivation of both aggressive thoughts and eudaimonic ones. As descriptive data from an inductive analysis of secondary data, our study is not equipped to unpack the nature of players' *in situ* activated thoughts and feelings. That said, research could consider for example of eudaimonic effects moderate (via suppression effects) the established relationship between violent video game content and aggressive outcomes. If such effects were found, then this sort of more serious gaming content could be framed as disorienting dilemmas designed to provoke broader dialogues (see Mezirow et al., 2000) —players contemplating the consequences of their actions, both in-game and out-of-game. With respect to younger players, similar guided gameplay and subsequent discussions could be additionally facilitated through parental mediation strategies (Martins et al., 2015; Jiow et al., 2016), although this might be influenced by familial socio-economic status.

From a methodological perspective, online discussion forums can provide unsolicited critical insights into the experiences of gamers regarding violent video game content. That said, we must acknowledge that such participation is likely a consequence of those gamers willing and able to engage in online discourse, as well as having the requisite levels of cognitive and emotional development likely necessary to engage them in earnest.

Limitations and Future Research

As an archival analysis of public posts this study is reliant on the researchers' interpretations of content, with no specific knowledge of the individuals sharing them. A strength of this approach is that the posts are unprompted from researchers and possibly more authentic to the individual's own experiences, and the users are likely to be topic-involved. However, it is possible that at least some posts were performative, for example individuals simply

mimicking discussions seen elsewhere (and likewise, we have no way of confirming individuals' actual experience with "No Russian"). Online discussions are likely subject to other self-selection biases, and individuals might only share insights that they feel will be well-received by others.

As noted in our methodology, some posts were archived or removed, and we have no insights as to why any given posts was removed (by a moderator) or deleted (by the original poster). One presumption is that particularly insidious or toxic posts were more likely to be removed, but we caution against this presumption given that many subreddits use auto-moderation features that remove post for a variety of banal reasons (e.g., not following specific formatting instructions) and for many subreddits, toxicity is normative (see Mohan et al., 2017). Considering this study relied on search terms and publicly available posts at the time of analysis, there is always potential that "No Russian" related Reddit posts were missed. This point is represented further in our reliance on Reddit's internal search algorithm which, like any other algorithm, has its own limitations and biases not ready apparent to users (Sunstein, 2019). Broadly, we would encourage sampling from other gaming communities that might have different memberships, communication norms, or algorithmic structures.

Finally, we should note that our focused investigation into the "No Russian" level mean that our data are restricted to a single game event, and future research should replicate and extend these findings to other games. In addition, even though we used multiple coders with different experience with and perspectives on video games, emergent thematic analysis involves a *de facto* researcher bias that should be considered on replication and extension of this work.

Conclusion

Over the last six decades, video game design has matured to include the intentional and unintentional elicitation of a wide range of emotional reactions in players. Violent themes are not new to video games, content such as the "No Russian" mission of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* represent a shift from more basic enjoyment via mastering in-game challenges and competitions to feelings of grief, guilt, and genuine remorse through the murder of innocent others. To borrow from Williams (2013), simply because we are the players of video games does not mean that we are the heroes of those games. On reflection of their actions—and subject to further research and analysis (see Bowman et al., 2020)—players might learn to be more critical of wanton violence in their digital and physical worlds.

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Table 1.

Inter-coder reliability (Krippendorf's α) of two coders for all emergent sub-themes

	Untrained Coding (T1)	Trained Coding (T2)	Exit Coding (T3)
video game discussion	.315	.883	.807
memes	.930	.967	.920
sociopolitical climate	.318	.961	.871
level comparisons	.361	.800	.818
emotional reflection	−.075	.926	.818
real world comparisons	.453	.900	.901
perpetrating violence	.477	.845	.841
level to game comparisons	.471	.870	.785
gameplay footage	.882	1.00	.858
avoiding violence	.355	.902	.881

Table 2.

Emergent themes (and clusters) from forum coding, with sample-wide frequencies

Cluster	Theme	Definition	Freq. (%)
General video game discussions			
	video game debates	players offering critiques or discussion points about "No Russian"	278 (42.8)
	level comparisons	comparing "No Russian" to other *CoD* missions	125 (19.3)
	level to game comparisons	comparing "No Russian" to video games broadly	54 (8.3)
	gameplay footage	unaltered images or footage of "No Russian"	44 (6.8)
Dark humor			
	memes	"No Russian" images or references repurposed	197 (30.4)
Linking gameplay to reality			
	sociopolitical climate	debates around whether content would be allowed or censored due to cultural or political norms	131 (20.2)
	real world comparisons	speculating on or comparing "No Russian" to real or hypothetical real-world events	76 (11.7)
Eudaimonic reflections			
	prompting complex emotional reflection	Instigating conversations about complex emotional reactions	97 (14.9)
	perpetrating violence	reflections on committing in-game violence	69 (10.6)
	preventing atrocity	circumventing (or wanting to avoid) engaging in the terrorist acts	36 (5.6)

Note: Posts could contain multiple themes, so frequencies do not total 100%; bolded themes reflect those indicative of eudaimonic effects of "No Russian;" CoD = Call of Duty; We appreciate the input of our anonymous reviewers in helping us refine the clusters and themes presented in this manuscript.

Table 3.

Inter-coder reliability (Krippendorf's α) of two coders for all emergent themes

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