

### **Interactivity and Power**

Considering game studies as media studies affords a new perspective by which we can explore user agency in media consumption: how do users construct meaning and interact with media? I contend that interrogating games in concert with media studies can shed light upon users' sometimes resistant relationships with increasingly interactive media forms.

Exploring consumer agency seems intuitive when the medium in question is inherently interactive like a game, but traditional media forms also invite interactivity. These days, we not only construct the meaning of a television show (for example) as audience members, we choose when to watch shows through time-shifting, we skip commercials and block ads, we engage in second-screen watching practices. The qualities of contemporary televisual technology afford audiences more choice and interaction with media forms. Considering game studies within the context of a changing media delivery system, then, sheds light on the power relationships between consumer and producer as glimpsed through consumption practices.

I do not, however, mean to suggest that audiences are more empowered than ever before, whether watching a television show or playing a video game. There are limits to the interaction and empowerment that both media forms allow. Players and consumers may imagine that they are more empowered thanks to the controller that they grasp, but where do the boundaries lie? What *can't* we do, and what are the politics and effects of those limitations?

To illustrate how players reckon with the politics of in-game control, I turn here to an intriguing case where a game imposes strong limits upon the actions that players can and cannot enact. Released in 2004, *JFK: Reloaded* is an historical simulation of President Kennedy's assassination: the player plays as Lee Harvey Oswald in efforts to kill Kennedy with as much historical accuracy as possible. The intent of the game, according to its designers, is to put to rest counter-narratives and conspiracies that challenge the official government narrative of Kennedy's assassination. In other words, if we can kill Kennedy just like Oswald did, we will realize that the government's conclusion was not improbable.

Beyond the broad ideology of the game's intent that limits player agency—we are supposed to validate an existing historical narrative rather than create and engage with a new one—the game's controls also limit its interactive nature. Players cannot move from their perch in the Texas State Book Depository. Players can only look around and fire a gun. Not only do these limited controls hamper a player's engagement with the story unfolding in Dallas 1963, they also make the game much less entertaining.

But *Reloaded* players have found ways to subvert the game's intended mode of play. Rather than aiming for historical accuracy, some players play with the physical qualities of the characters in the motorcade. This game makes use of ragdoll physics, which refers to a simulated body's loss of bodily control after being killed so he or she resembles a ragdoll. In this mode of play, players fire shots to make characters' bodies behave in exaggerated, humorous ways, often hoping for dramatic car

crashes or bodies flung from vehicles. Players also add modifications to the game that work around *Reloaded*'s limited controls. These user-generated modifications can move the player from the Sixth floor of the Book Depository (to the grassy knoll, for example), they change the faces of Kennedy and Jackie to George W. Bush or Osama Bin Laden, and they add sunglasses to people standing in the crowd (this list, of course, is by no means exhaustive).

What is particularly important about players circumventing the intended mode of playing *Reloaded*? First, this limited interactivity may invite subversion in a way that a game that affords players more agency and control might not. Second, players share these moments of subversion through other media. Video recordings of gameplay are widely available online and usually highlight players' modifications, trumpeting their evasion of the game's more coercive structure and gameplay. Even as *Reloaded*'s intended mode of play hopes to impose a clear historical narrative of one of the contested moments in American history, players have found ways to "hack history" and to create new and defiant media forms.

Considering game studies as media studies thus also enables us to further examine how consumption of *other* media forms might enable audiences to similarly resist dominant narratives as represented through television and film, even when interactivity is limited. Furthermore, this paradigm invites us to consider how subversive moments are expressed both within games and through other media. Although games' interactivity naturally lends itself to players exercising some control, we should also consider how these other media can provide spaces for resistance in consumption, particularly as these media increasingly invite degrees of user participation and interactivity.