

Playing with The Virus: COVID-19 and 'Pandemic-Rhetoric' in Games

Introduction

In January of 2020, *Plague Inc.* suddenly moved to number one in the Google Play and Apple App stores (Leswing, 2020, par. 7). After initially being published in 2012 (Ndemic Creations), the game saw a resurgence in interest after increased media attention of COVID-19's spread throughout China (Brito). It became so popular, that the Chinese government began to ban it from the Apple and Google Play app stores (Peters, 2020, par. 1). A quick look through the various news articles published on this subject, and it becomes increasingly clear that "pandemic-rhetoric" weaves itself through the discussion, even before the pandemic was a threat to the nations in which these articles were published. The way in which the media discusses pandemics and global health crises has been the subject of much research in the fields of psychology, public health policy, rhetoric, and media studies. However, what happens when this rhetoric is not only laced throughout news coverage on games related to pandemics and infectious diseases, of which there are many, but also when games themselves rely on this rhetoric as part of the story and gameplay? In other words, how does the media's rhetoric surrounding pandemics influence the way in which games with central pandemic-related themes portray fictionalized versions of these global health crises?

This type of rhetorical analysis has not yet been done at length in both games and mains-stream media, though the latter has seen much more attention. With the increased popularity in gaming in general during the COVID-19 pandemic (Smith, 2020, par. 1), it is becoming increasingly important to understand how these pandemic-themed games impact players. Looking at *Plague, Inc.*, the game employs 'pandemic-rhetoric' as a motivating factor for players to design the deadliest disease possible, giving the player agency to become the virus and cause the complete eradication of humanity – a possible exaggeration of a very real possibility when it comes to battling world health crises. Conversely,

the PC version of the board game *Pandemic* relies on 'pandemic-rhetoric' to motivate players to do the exact opposite; work together to prevent the spread and ultimately destroy a deadly virus. With role-playing games (RPGs) like the *Resident Evil* series, 'pandemic-rhetoric' functions as a motivator for the player to move through the story. In this way, using games with these central pandemic-related themes becomes a vehicle for productive discourse relating to 'pandemic-rhetoric', as it allows for a deeper critique and understanding of its impact on players. This is particularly useful when taking into consideration that the lock downs during the height of the COVID-19 outbreaks saw a rapid increase in players of video games in general world-wide. This paper seeks to understand the impact of reflecting 'pandemic-rhetoric' as it is portrayed in media outlets on players of various types of games. The paper will first explore current research into global health crises rhetoric and apply it to news articles from mainly Canadian and American news and media outlets to identify the aspects of 'pandemic-rhetoric' in media. The paper will then apply these theories and conduct a textual analysis to trace similarities in 'pandemic-rhetoric' between news media and games, and use game theory to dissect the implications of this rhetoric.

'Pandemic-Rhetoric' in the Media

For the purposes of this paper, the term 'pandemic-rhetoric' will refer to the rhetorical patterns, motifs, and devices that are widespread through various media outlets and channels, in particular news outlets, in their reporting of information relating to COVID-19. It should be noted that most of the rhetorical research surrounding this topic are focused on crisis communication in general or on rhetoric in public health policy, though some research has been done on media portrayals of global health crises. Tess Laidlaw conducted ground-breaking research and wrote on "rhetorical motifs" that journalists employ when reporting on H1N1, which will be used as the basis of this overview, while also drawing

from other general crisis communication theories, psychological and cultural theories relating to the impact of mass communications, and traditional rhetorical and linguistics studies.

Laidlaw (2019) analyzed the ways in which journalists used “discursive actions in an outbreak context” created rhetorical motifs that are specifically found in the dissemination of biomedical risk information (p. 433). Due to the influence in which the media has over public perception, a media’s “emphasis on disease” can and often does create specific public perceptions of disease severity (p. 434). After analysing the journalists’ and media outlets’ coverage of information on H1N1, she concluded that rhetorical motifs in this type of coverage were found to fit one of three categories; the “public health motif”, the “concealment-of-information motif”, and the “pandemic motif”. The “public health motif” is described as a type of coverage in which “journalists align with the goals of public health officials in conveying protective information” (p. 439). The example Laidlaw uses is the attempts by journalists to disassociate the H1N1 virus from SARS, and avoid using the word “pandemic” entirely in favour of virtually any other term that equated it with the seasonal flu (p. 439). Coverage that uses this rhetorical motif tends to be less “journalistic” in nature, as it seeks to support public health officials in conveying their perspectives and statements relating to the virus. More specifically, “these reporters appear to have a sense of responsibility and a consciousness of accountability”, and therefore their coverage privileges the public health officials and gives the audience agency in their ability to protect themselves from H1N1, so long as they follow public health guidelines (p. 440).

In the context of COVID-19, this type of rhetorical motif may function slightly differently. Because the World Health organization deemed COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020, par. 102), during the earlier stages of the pandemic’s spread in Canada, news outlets and journalists that sought to support public health officials through their coverage could not always avoid the word ‘pandemic’. However, there was an emphasis on giving the virus its full scientific

names such as COVID-19 or the Novel Coronavirus, and a consistent attempt to place the statements of public health officials above the statements of others. For instance, looking at an article in the *Toronto Star* from March 1, 2020, written by journalist Francine Kopun, the only statements that were explicitly written were those of Dr. Karim Kurji, York Region's medical officer, Dr. Isaac Bogoch, a specialist at Toronto General Hospital, Dr. Eileen de Villa, Toronto's medical officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, the Provincial health officer, and Dr. David Fisman, a University of Toronto epidemiologist. Though the article also discussed specific cases of individuals who had become infected with COVID-19, it does not include their perspectives on the situation.

The "concealment-of-information motif" emphasises the journalist's criticisms of public health officials (Laidlaw, 2019, p. 440). These articles will be written in such a way as to depict public health officials as gatekeepers of information, and use negative language in moments where officials "refuse to comment" (p. 440). This rhetoric places a high priority on accessing and disseminating as much information as possible, and takes a specific position in alliance with one party over another. In other words, journalists who employ this rhetoric may position two representatives of authority in the realm of infectious disease, but give credence to one over another (p. 441). The goal of this rhetoric is to challenge "traditional power structures" (p. 441), and in doing so it does not attempt to ensure the audience follows protective behaviours, but rather demands access to information (440). This can be problematic when public health officials don't have all of the information, as audiences may take that to mean that these officials are deliberately concealing information. At the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, a debunked and discredited former American scientific researcher Judy Mikovits appeared in a clip for the documentary *Plandemic*. In this clip, she claimed that she was "jailed without claims" for her previous research positions on HIV treatments (Enserink & Cohen, 2020). Mikovits makes several inaccurate statements, such as that masks "activate" a virus (Enserink & Cohen, 2020, par. 2), a claim

that has been debunked by CTV News journalist Brooklyn Neustaeter ("Truth Tracker", 2020, par. 14), and that a "'new influenza virus vaccine' made in dog cells trialed for the past few years is riddled with coronaviruses and that is how SARS-CoV2 entered humans", a claim debunked by Stuart J.D. Neil and Edward M. Campbell (2020, p.548), researchers in infectious diseases and microbiology, respectively. What is interesting about Neustaeter's article is that she employs the "public health motif" in various sections of the article to help dispel some of the information found in *Plandemic*.

This is not the first time that individuals with supposed authority such as these 'scientists' have made similar claims about other public health officials. In an article published in *The Economist*, it was noted that a diarist in the Middle Ages wrote similar claims after a bubonic plague outbreak: "Doctors need three qualifications: to be able to lie and not get caught; to pretend to be honest; and to cause death without guilt" ("Fake news is fooling more conservatives than liberals", 2020, par.1). When information is not presented, it gives way for these fake news outlets to spread false information. In Matthew Seeger and Timothy Sellnow's (2019) book *Communication in Times of Trouble* discuss the need for organizations to be as open and accessible as possible during a crisis, as it will allow for these organizations to ensure that the story that is reported is the most accurate:

When organizations fail to be open and accessible during a crisis, they also limit their ability to tell their own story and speak for themselves. This does not mean the story will go unreported. Reporters will still find other sources of information, but the organization's perspective will not be represented. During a crisis, there is an intense need for information, what we have called an "information vacuum." If the organization does not help fill that vacuum, another source of information will. Reporters will seek out employees, members of the community, emergency response officials, subject matter experts, and others for information. When this happens, the organization is usually forced to respond or react to the story. A reactive position is much less

effective than getting out ahead of the story of the crisis from a proactive position. In addition, once alternative sources of information have been identified, they will be used again and again. (p.76-78).

Though this may be easier for organizations dealing with internal or business-related crises, this is applicable to the COVID-19 response. However, the problem with the response for COVID-19, at least in the Canadian context, was that there was a lot of information that was unknown to even the experts for quite some time. This meant that *Plandemic* and Mikovits's claims had room to grow, and fake news began appearing everywhere (Sandu, 2020, p. 278). Rhetorically speaking, when journalists cast skepticism towards public health officials due to a lack of information, it breeds room for persuading people to believe in fake news, or at the very least to look at alternative media outlets.

One quick search through one of Canada's biggest alternative media outlets, *Rebel News*, and it becomes increasingly clear how the "concealment of information motif" can turn from a possibly persuasive rhetoric that simply casts skepticism to borderline dangerous rhetoric. An extreme example of this "concealment of information" rhetoric can be found in an article from *Rebel News* titled "PEI predicted up to 900 COVID-19 deaths. No one died. But they're still locked down", written by Ezra Levant and published on June 18, 2020. In this article, Levant writes the following in an attempt to portray public health officials and other members of authority with a heavy amount of skepticism and cast doubt on their protective measures, painting them as overreactions:

There's a ban on outsiders visiting the Island, by which they mean fellow Canadians from other provinces, but they're still banning indoor gatherings of 15 people or more.

Why?

Because some professor said so? Because some bureaucrat said so? Because some pundit said so?

The monster under the bed was never there, but now PEI has an army of bureaucrats checking how loud the music is in restaurants; bringing a tape measure to bars; going to churches to threaten people. (par. 1-4)

Another, less overt example can be found in a news article written by journalist Nicole Mortillaro of *CBC* that was published on May 15, 2020, which discusses the issues with having conflicting information. While this article does attempt to clear up some of the concerns surrounding mixed information by relying on experts and employing some instances of the “public health motif”, it also gives space for those outside of the field to illuminate on the mixed-information, which adds to some skepticism. For instance, it provides multiple sections that allow Timothy Caulfield, a Canada Research Chair in health and law policy, an opportunity to explain the data, what is known to be true, and the misconceptions, which allows for the “public health” rhetoric to shine. But the article also gives space to Risa Horowitz, a visual and media artist and associate professor at the University of Regina, and Gordon Pennycook, a psychologist and assistant professor at the same university, to explain why the mixed messages from experts and the rise of fake news is confusing, which gives space for that “concealment of information” rhetoric to flourish. This article is interesting in the sense that it seems to try to give the audience the correct information but also be somewhat skeptical of public health officials to explain the problems with false information in the media. This could be for a number of reasons, ranging from a more business-focus in attempting to convey the audience that the *CBC* should be their trusted media source, and therefore increase their revenue, or from an informative perspective that tries to educate the audience on what the correct information is, explaining why there was conflicting information while

also providing the audience with some reassurance in experts. It gives a somewhat neutral or mixed approach to 'pandemic-rhetoric'.

The last rhetorical motif that Laidlaw (2019) describes is the "pandemic motif", which focuses on the global health crisis as "a potent threat, as well as clusters describing vulnerability and impending social disorder" (p. 441). When comparing it to the H1N1 outbreak, Laidlaw notes that articles that use this rhetoric make claims that the H1N1 virus is far more detrimental, and equate it to a pandemic, even when experts were not classifying it as such (p. 441-442). However, in the context of COVID-19, this rhetoric looks somewhat different since the virus has been classified as a pandemic. The key takeaway with this motif is that it blows the accepted truth out of proportion. It will take the H1N1 virus and label it a pandemic, using stories that emphasize the virus' mutation and spread, and emphasize its potency (p. 442). More specifically, Laidlaw notes that "Reassurance is largely absent and avenues of protection do not exist: rather than offering the development of a vaccine as reassuring, journalists emphasize that currently there is no vaccine...The outbreak is portrayed as a threat to all of humanity" (p. 442). With COVID-19, this manifests in articles that emphasize the virus's dangers and leave out any details of protective action, articles that focus on the economic and societal collapse caused by the virus, and/or articles that signal this virus as the first indicator of the end of the world.

There are a number of different angles to look at when analysing this motif. For starters, a look at highly religious alternative media outlets shows an example of pandemic motif signalling the apocalypse. In *America Magazine*, an online Christian magazine, David Dark published the article titled "We are living in an apocalypse" on April 30, 2020. There is the repetition of the word "apocalypse" and constant references to various passages in the Bible that are used as evidence to prove this theory. There is also a repeating of the word "pandemic" to heighten the threat of COVID-19. For the non-religious view, there are articles such as *Reuters* journalist Lisa Shumaker's article titled "U.S.

coronavirus deaths surpass 140,000 as outbreak worsens". These moments of repetition reflect a rhetorical device known as "conduplication", also known as "ploké" (Etigson,n.d.). The use of this type of repetition functions to emphasize the importance of the claim, but in an incremental way, so that the more often the word is repeated, the more emphatic it becomes. In this article, the main focus is on the detrimental impact to live in the United States, with a heavy emphasis on the sheer number of deaths, and a consistently repeated claim that the situation with the virus is getting worse. One tactic that is used in this article is the amount of different quantitative statistics to emphasize the negative impacts such as "cases continued to rise in 42 out of 50 states over the past two weeks", and "America is losing about 5,000 people to the virus every week", and "Arizona's Maricopa County, home to the state's largest city, Phoenix, is bringing in 14 coolers to hold up to 280 bodies and more than double morgue capacity ahead of an expected surge in coronavirus fatalities, officials said on Thursday." What is interesting, however, is the use of "officials" in that last statement, as it is almost getting into the "public health motif" territory, however with a much different focus. Rather than relying on public health officials and using a hierarchical and specific appeal to authority, this article uses the vague notion of "officials" to give more credit to their claims.

Lastly, the other types of articles that use this type of rhetorical motif emphasize the economic impacts of COVID-19, often using language along the same lines as those articles that emphasize the apocalypse, though to a somewhat lesser degree. Annie Lowrey, a journalist for *The Atlantic* wrote an article titled "The Terrifying Next Phase of the Coronavirus Recession" published on July 15, 2020. In this article, Lowrey repeatedly uses words like "terrifying", "disaster", "failed", "spread", and other similar language. As discussed earlier, Lowrey is using "conduplication" to incrementally build on her emphasis of the damages caused by COVID-19. It emphasizes that the economy and American lives are being destroyed by COVID-19, and paints a bleak image for the near future, both economically and from a

public-health perspective. This article indicates an apparent societal and economic collapse that is likely to happen, particularly with the last section:

The United States can still contain the spread of COVID-19 and save lives, epidemiologists argue. The country can still flatten the curve and lower the death toll. Simple, low-cost measures like requiring masks in public would preserve as much as 5 percent of GDP, economists have estimated, as well as preventing thousands from getting sick. The supposed trade-off between public health and the economy doesn't exist. And right now, the country is choosing not to save either. (par. 10)

It should be noted that this rhetoric seemed more likely to appear in American news outlets, particularly alternative media outlets, rather than Canadian media outlets. That is not to say that it does not appear in the Canadian media at all, as it most certainly has, but rather that it seems to have a stronger hold in the American media outlets, potentially caused by the differences in the ways each country has handled the pandemic, the goals of their media outlets, or other unknown factors. However, that analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

Games and 'pandemic-rhetoric'

The subject of global pandemics has been a common subject in a number of games, and 'pandemic-rhetoric' has played a significant role in a number of successful game series. *Plague, Inc.*, *Pandemic*, and the *Resident Evil* series exemplify the 'pandemic-rhetoric' seen in the media through their subject matter, plot or writing, and game mechanics. For the purpose of this paper, the *Resident Evil* series will only focus on the first three games in the series, and will not include the prequel *Resident Evil Zero*, or any other future installments, though further analysis on those games may be conducted in the near future. *Resident Evil* is an RPG that offers a lot of various points for analysis, as there is an

actual story with fleshed out characters as well as game mechanics. However, both *Plague, Inc.* and *Pandemic* place the player in unique gaming experiences that allow for a deep analysis of 'pandemic-rhetoric' as it is reflected in similar games. What is also interesting about the latter two games is the ways in which COVID-19 increased player interest in both *Plague, Inc.* (Katz, 2020, par. 1) and *Pandemic* (Woo & Roland, 2020, par. 1-2). To analyse these games for their reflection of 'pandemic-rhetoric', it is important to focus on the rhetorical power of each games construction of the player experience; this means that the analysis will focus on story or writing, game mechanics, and the role of the player in each game.

Plague, Inc.

Plague, Inc. places the player in a more unique position compared to the other two games. The player is not assuming the role of a character trying to prevent the world from an impending destruction caused by a pandemic like in the *Resident Evil* series, nor is the player working on a team with other players to try to stop the spread of a new virus like in *Pandemic*. Rather, the player *is* the virus, and it is the player's job to spread the virus, evolve its symptoms, and manage its abilities to prevent it from being curable until all of humanity is infected, and eventually is eradicated. Upon first starting the game, the player has the choice between choosing their type of disease, though for new players only "Fungal" is available, as they must unlock the other types (viral, bacterial, etc.). Each type of disease comes with certain properties, with some being able to mutate symptoms on their own, which can be both a positive and a negative for the player. The player then selects a country of origin for the virus and begins to put in the work to start the spread. Because the goal is to try to wipe out humanity, the player needs to strategically develop their virus, so having random mutations can sometimes be a detriment. The player develops their virus by spending "DNA" points that they earn through infecting others. One strategy could be that a player will choose to transmit the disease through air and will try to control the

symptoms using DNA points and keep them mostly harmless during the early stages of the game to prevent scientists from trying to cure the disease earlier on. As time passes in the game, the player can see the statistics of their disease such as how many people are infected, how many have died, the severity of the disease, which countries have closed down their airports and shipping ports, etc.

What is interesting about this game is that, every so often, the player will receive updates, as well as see news headlines from various parts of the world that give them hints for next steps. These headlines will range from statements such as "New rural livestock legislation", which tells the player that rural areas are "less vulnerable to disease", to "Water shortages causing conflict", which gives the player a hint towards using water transmission, to "CDC warns of drug resistant 'nightmare' bacteria", which indicates to the player that their drug resistant ability is working, but that when a cure begins to develop, researchers are aware of this ability (Ndemic Creations, 2012). The language used in the writing of these news headlines reflect the motifs described by Laidlaw. More specifically, the game relies on the gradual increase in severity in the headlines, beginning with ones that are more in line with the "public health motif", with headlines that focus on public health professionals and their perspectives on the virus such as "WHO – 'threat level increased'" or "Scientists increase understanding of Diarrhoea" (Ndemic Creations, 2012), which signals to the player that said symptom will be easier to cure. Towards the end of the game, the rhetoric begins reflecting the "pandemic motif" through headlines such as "Australia begins to break down", or "Canada in anarchy", or "Central Asian's government has fallen", or "Sudan's government has collapsed" (Ndemic Creations, 2012).

The impact on the player comes from the emotional response the player may gain from playing the game. However, in the context of *Plague, Inc.*, the emotional response is a bit harder to gauge, especially considering the game seems to subvert an actual reaction most players would most likely have if the world was in fact ending due to a virus. Instead, the player enters what is called "the magic

circle”, which Mary Flanagan (2009) describes as “an open environment focused on experimentation and subversion” (p. 61). Therefore, the emotional response through the experience of this rhetoric is less likely to evoke the same emotional response an audience member may have when reading contemporary news employing the same rhetoric. Instead, the ‘pandemic-rhetoric’ functions as a tool for the subversion of reality.

That being said, it should be important to note that the developers are well aware of their rhetoric functioning in a subversive manner, as they had to release a statement addressing growing concerns with the game’s popularity during COVID-19. In their statement released on January 23, 2020, they implored players to look at the game as an educational tool rather than “sensationalising serious real-world issues” and goes as far as citing their ties with the CDC (NDemic Creations, 2020). Their statement took advantage of the “public health motif”, as they tried to align themselves with the experts, yet their game’s rhetoric creates many instances of subversive tactics that directly contradict this statement.

The headlines are often a direct cause by the player’s choices through the mechanics of the game. These mechanics give the player themselves agency to begin to become entities for ‘pandemic-rhetoric’ to flow through, as players will need to fixate on the statistics and the numbers of infected or dead people all over the world, focus on the cure completion rate, and do their ‘research’ (which can be conducted simply by playing the game often enough) to understand which symptoms and abilities work best for particular scenarios. Depending on a player’s strategy, the game could be reflecting one particular type of rhetoric or all three. If the player chooses the approach mentioned earlier, in which they try to keep the disease a little less obvious with minor symptoms until most or the whole world is infected, and then suddenly increase the disease’s potency, the player is employing all three types of rhetoric: the news headlines will most likely classify the disease as minor and official news reports from

scientists will focus on specific symptoms or abilities of the disease, and therefore efforts for a cure may be slowed; the player would be “concealing information”, and therefore news headlines that highlight a lack of information available to the public may occur, such as “Mystery still surrounds the decision to postpone the Rio Olympics. Organisers promise it will happen soon but no reason has been given for the change” (Ndemic Creations, 2012); towards the end of the game, if the player is successful and the world erupts into chaos, all of the headlines will describe the threat of the virus in catastrophic terms.

Pandemic

Pandemic differs from *Plague, Inc.* in that it requires multiple players working together to eradicate a virus before it becomes a pandemic. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be placed on the PC version of the game. Each player takes on a societal role such as “quarantine specialist” or “scientist”, with each role having a particular ability that will help defeat the virus. The game will give the players virtual cards, and also draw virtual cards at the beginning that indicate where the virus will be located, with each having the ability to spread to nearby locations. The cards that are given to players will indicate locations or events. The players will then make a decision to move their pawn to any particular location, and, depending on their role, may choose to move to areas with large populations and/or current infections. They also have the option of conducting other actions like researching for a cure or treating infected people. There is also a chance that players will get an “epidemic” card that increases the outbreaks in certain locations, which increases the infection rate and will infect neighbouring cities.

The game will give news-like statements at the bottom of the screen that tell the player what is happening such as “The situation is critical in Sydney, Karachi, Johannesburg!”, or “Serious cases also appeared in Tehran, Khartoum, Baghdad” (Asmodee Digital, 2018). These news-type of statements that

vaguely resemble headlines are in line with the “pandemic motif” rhetoric, as they create a sense of ominous despair and fear, which entices the player to strategize in fighting the virus. In this game, the rhetoric appears in the mechanics more than the writing. By having the players take on specific roles and having them race against a ‘clock’ (when the cards run out), the players begin to embody the rhetoric through their choices and actions. By building research centres, treating cities, and preventing “epidemics” from occurring, or reacting when they do, the players begin to reflect both the “public health motifs” and the “pandemic motifs”. The event cards also add to this motif, as they give players more options to enhance their abilities in their respective roles, such as the “government grant” card, which lets the player build a research station in any city, or the “airlift” card, which allows the player to move to any city (Asmodee Digital, 2018). With the game’s emphasis on treatment and eradication of the pandemic, there is a much bigger focus on the “public health motif”, as the players become the experts. Further, during the “training” mode, the game will give the player tips that further emphasize the “public health motif” rhetoric.

Pandemic’s focus on teamwork gives way for a different kind of emotional response than a single-player game may give the player, as players now have an added layer of social experiences to add to the game. Though the PC version of *Pandemic* can be played solo, the game was initially designed to be played with others, and the PC version allows for players to virtually play together online. The emotional response from players, in this case, comes from what Katherine Isbister (2013) calls “coordinated action”, in which the player is emotionally ‘moved’ by the act of working together with their teammates and beating the game (p. 45). Further, by adopting a specific role, the player is also emotionally moved upon working with their teammates because of the layers of Role-play and social engagement combining (p. 62). The rhetoric through this game is therefore enhanced when the player is

not only playing with others, but fully assumes the role they have been assigned, as it entices the player to, for those few moments, take their tasks very seriously.

Resident Evil

The *Resident Evil* series is vastly different from the first two games discussed, as it is an RPG game with the premise that a deadly disease that turns people into infectious zombies has broken out in the fictional town of "Raccoon City". The story in the first game (*Resident Evil 1*) follows one of two characters, Chris Redfield or Jill Valentine, members of the Special Tactics and rescue Service (STARS) team for the Raccoon Police Department, who discover a bio-weapon known as the Tyrant through the creation of a T-virus (Capcom, 1996). The players uncover these deadly secrets while trapped in a mansion and attempt to stop the events that eventually lead to *Resident Evil 2* and *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis*. Between fighting off the zombie-like creatures and attempting to escape the mansion, the player discovers horrifying details about the T-virus through various environmental objects, and eventually an underground laboratory containing illegal experiments in *Resident Evil 1*. In *Resident Evil 2*, which takes place two months after the first game, the player will play as either Leon S. Kennedy, a police officer for the city, or Claire Redfield, Chris Redfield's sister. Regardless of who the player chooses to play as, the player will again be tasked with discovering the secrets of the T-virus through a mixture of cut scenes and environmental storytelling methods, – that being, that the game environment "provides resources for emergent narratives" (Jenkins, 2004, p.123) – however in this game, the player discovers that there is a new bioweapon in development known as the G-virus. The player is then tasked with stopping this virus from creating another outbreak, and must also assist in creating a vaccine for the G-virus (Capcom, 1998). *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis* begins 24 hours before the start of *Resident Evil 2*, however ends sometime after the events of *Resident Evil 2*. The third installment in the series focuses on Jill Valentine's escape from Raccoon City, though not before she discovers more details about a bio-

organic weapon, a creature by the name of Nemesis. The player also controls Jill as she discovers more details on spies and other members from the initial developers of the T-virus, the pharmaceutical company Umbrella, attempts to find the cure, and eventually witnesses an air strike that completely destroys Raccoon City (Capcom, 1999).

'pandemic-rhetoric' in this game is mainly found within the environmental storytelling techniques, as the player will come across letters or memos written by citizens, as well as dialogue between characters, that help the player put the pieces together. For instance, in *Resident Evil 3*, the player may read on a computer monitor that the lead scientist is planning to commit suicide. The player may then come across this scientist's dead body, which helps the player put the pieces together. The rhetoric in this game, while not always as overt as the other games in terms of its closeness to newspaper headlines, will consistently focus on the "pandemic motif", though there are some instances of "concealment-of-information motif" that also appear. For instance, *Resident Evil 3* allows the player to discover a room with several dead scientists and a memo that indicates that the lower-tiered employees wanted to "go public" with the information of Umbrella company's true intentions. Upon further discovery, the player learns that the company locked these scientists in this room, and let creatures with the T-virus into the room to kill them (Capcom, 1999). Other instances across all three games include the player discovering other company memos from employees complaining about not knowing what is happening at the company, casting doubt on their superiors, and therefore on the 'experts' within that company. In fact, the entire premise of the game can be said to reflect both the "pandemic motif" and the "concealment-of-information motif" simultaneously, as the theme of complete and total annihilation of a city, which is representative of society, combined with the desire to expose an evil pharmaceutical company, is similar to the ways in which media outlets will call COVID-19 the start of the end of society as we know it *and* their distrust in experts.

Since the *Resident Evil* games are all single-player RPGs, the emotional response from the players comes from a few different places. For starters, it is a horror game, and is specifically designed to terrify the player, hence why it employs so much of the “pandemic motif” rhetoric. But beyond that, the game functions on a deeper, more mechanical level, as a way for emotionally motivating players. Aubrey Anable discusses the ways in which games can harness emotional responses by exploring this concept from a systematic perspective:

Video games are affective systems... Video games ask us to understand, on a cognitive level, the underlying logic of their systems. They also engage and entangle us in a circuit of feeling between their computational systems and the broader systems with which they interface: ideology, narrative, aesthetics, and flesh. In this way, video games as pervasive and popular media are uniquely suited to giving expression to ways of being in the world and ways of feeling in the present that can tell us something about contemporary digitally mediated and distributed subjectivity (p. xii).

Resident Evil, in its environmental storytelling method, asks players to accept a specific ideology, one of mistrust in a large pharmaceutical company and one that prefers the destruction of infected creatures for the sake of the rest of humanity, and asks them to piece together a complex narrative by putting in the detective work. This entices the player into the story, and therefore makes it easier to accept the “concealment-of-information motifs” and the “pandemic motifs” without skepticism. Of course, this is less detrimental than if a player had been reading a current piece of news, however the impact is that the player sees the game as holding all of the information, and therefore the player’s power comes in the form of discovering it and either proving the rhetoric correct or dismantling it. In the case of *Resident Evil*, the hidden meanings as hinted at through the two types of rhetoric previously mentioned are always proven correct.

Conclusion

'Pandemic-rhetoric' has found its way in contemporary media, yet its reflection in games has yet to have as much attention. The importance of understanding how pandemic-rhetoric functions in both mainstream media and in games allows for the reflection upon ethical journalistic practices and ethical game design, as the emotional responses players experience are directly related to the similar types of rhetoric found in news articles. If games are a space in which contemporary culture can be reflected (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014, p.4), it is illuminating to discover how many similarities, particularly those that create more of an emotional response rather than an informative one, can be seen between the two mediums. Perhaps this is telling of the issues surrounding persuasive writing and traditional journalism, with "fake news" being so prominent and emotionally written pieces garnering a lot of attention during this lockdown.

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