

This is Fine: #ResistJam and the 2016 Election in Gaming

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ABSTRACT

The 2016 US election brought with it a torrent of related media and responses, thanks to the combination of the intense political divide and the turmoil and upheaval of the nation following the surprising results. We will examine selected games from the months preceding and immediately following the historic outcome of November 8, 2016, focusing on the games created during the March event #ResistJam which called for contributors to create “games that resist oppressive authoritarianism in all its forms.” Joshua and Karen Tanenbaum proposed a theory of transformative play, which “supports a process of empathic identification with a new point-of-view or lived experience” [59]. Pre- and Post-Trump games, situated in the months leading up to and immediately following the election results, demonstrate not only transformative play but cathartic play, or the use of games as part of a process of emotional release and expression as part of sharing current struggles and challenges. We propose that combining these two types of play (transformative and cathartic) suggests new possibilities for how we understand personal games as providing new mechanisms for shared emotional experiences.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing**~Computer games

KEYWORDS

Empathy; Emotional design; Politics; Simulations; Election

ACM Reference format:

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1 INTRODUCTION

During the process of the US 2016 political election and its world-changing aftermath, US video games have taken on new contexts in media discourse. Looking at the state of mainstream commercial games, Andy Phelps reflected on this change in his post on January 31st, 2017: “It says something darkly profound that at this moment in our nation, this time of strife, of disagreement, of disparagement, of conflict, of insanity and chaos, that the best-selling interactive digital media product of the last year was *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare*. Just let the words ‘infinite warfare’ roll around in your head in this Trump filled era of hate and prejudice” [49]. His words are both a reminder of the contributions of games (and games culture, given the influence of GamerGate as part of the alt-right) to the current discourse, and a call-to-action for designers considering the future impact of their work. Even games with a far less explicitly political and military message can offer insight into political, social, and economic biases. In his examination of *Animal Crossing*, for example, Ian Bogost notes how the cute aesthetics of the chibi animal village enable us to accept an economic, capitalist model that fundamentally requires taking advantage of the villagers while working off one’s own inescapable debt in search of material wealth [8]. The game’s superficial qualities take on a darker meaning when viewed through this transactional lens, which is transformed again when we resituate this discussion to 2017 and the impact of an elected official on a community. Bogost notes that *Animal Crossing* “simplifies the real world in order to draw attention to relevant aspects of that world” [8]. Likewise, many games have already begun to try and simplify the systems of the election and its fallout, while others represent visceral emotional reactions that simplify and consolidate the post-election discourse into concentrated playable experiences.

However, the types of games that engage most directly with this type of political moment can be highly ephemeral and situated within communities far from the mainstream of commercial AAA gaming. While games like *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* and *Animal Crossing* gesture subtly at political import, current games from the fringes of personal and indie gaming are overtly confronting the election, offering new models for political engagement and emotional release through play. One of the greatest challenges facing media outlets in the United States

post-election is normalization, or the process by which extreme discourse and political proclamations become routine and thus go unremarked or, worse, unchallenged. Games offer a space for making use of political rhetoric to resist normalization, or, to return to Phelps' observation, for making something unusual become normal.

2 METHODS

Post-election gaming discourse is evolving rapidly, and will likely increase in numbers as the Trump presidency's impact on US cultural discourse grows. To start to chronicle and understand this impact, and the use of procedural rhetoric as part of processing and responding to the ongoing change, we began by establishing a baseline through reviewing early examples of Trump-engaged playable media. Given the emotional and mental impact of events recorded during their unfurling can often provide a very different viewpoint from those same events analyzed through the lens of time and historicity, it is important that these games and the messages they share be properly contextualized in the moment during which they occur.

We reviewed popular titles (based on search results and media coverage) from the period before and immediately after the election to review, and selected a sample for close play included here. Games were identified through a variety of sources, including Twitter, YouTube, indie game reviews, and itch.io and IFDB announcements, then examined through close play. This choice of time frame makes the emphasis on persuasion and emotional reaction particularly central: while Trump parody predates the electoral campaign, with examples in media such as *Doonesbury* comics [23] and *The Simpsons* [7], the type of parody central to immediate pre- and post-election discourse is far more targeted and purposeful.

However, this set is sufficient only to begin to contextualize Trump representations and reactions: for a broader dataset on post-election processing, we reviewed and tagged a randomly chosen subset of 100 games produced as part of #ResistJam, a game jam occurring from March 3-13, 2017, with an anti-authoritarian emphasis. Through tagging and selected close play, we will examine the use of procedural rhetoric in these two sets of games to address the post-Trump state of the country, and particularly the elements of transformative and our proposed category of "cathartic" play within the interwoven experiences of these games[57,64].

3 EXAMINING PRE- AND POST-ELECTION PLAY

Surveying the discourse of games released during the election cycle and immediately in the aftermath of November 8th's outcome led to a general categorization structure that allowed the games to be grouped and tagged per their narrative purpose:

- *Informative* – Informative games are focused on spreading knowledge and/or tactics, and thus typically place some emphasis on establishing ethos using citations or facts, loosely defined.

- *Satirical* – Satirical games typically engage in parody, and may be aggressive or hateful. Satirical games can reflect a range of political views, and may include stereotypes or outright violence against their target.
- *Reflective* – Reflective games are often intensely personal, and may be strongly grounded in either a real or imagined individual experience of injustice, prejudice, or discrimination.

Among these three categories, only "informative" games are clearly recognizable through the lens of educational games and simulations, with their emphasis on the transmission of knowledge (however biased that knowledge may be.) Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum's definition of transformative play encompasses both these games and the other categorizations to some extent, but satiric and reflective games often lack the empathic elements which are critical to the Tanenbaums' definition. In both categories, there is often a deliberate stance of distance between subject and player that is created to enhance the effect of actions within the game or to purposefully recreate an emotional disconnect between actions and thoughts.

3.1 Informative Games

Given the strong divides in perspective and cultural discourse surrounding the election, informative games tended to either try to represent a middle ground through simulation or to address an issue or conversation through a strong representative system. There are many existing educational games that drew attention during the election cycle that fall into this category: the election itself is so game-like that it has been the subject of various simulations for decades [10]. Current election simulators include *President Infinity* [1], *The Political Machine 2016* [58], and *Win the White House* [24]. This category of games rarely engages with the stakes of the election or issues, and instead focuses on the process of campaigning.

Given this interest in relative neutrality, many of the games about the election process are less interesting when viewed through the lens of transformative play. However, persuasive games in this category can contain strong messages in their mechanics. The most striking example of this type of game, *We Become What We Behold*, was released prior to the election and is particularly focused on the divisiveness of discourse itself.

3.1.1 *We Become What We Behold*. Nicky Case's short art game *We Become What We Behold* presents clickbait headlines through a simple set of interactions where the player is complicit in a social breakdown caused by highlighting, hashtagging, and amplifying the actions of members of the community[17]. It's a short and provocative way to think about what gets amplified. The game was released immediately prior to the election and opens with a quote: "We become what we behold." We shape our tools and then our tools shape us. Marshall McLuhan (Misattributed)." The game opens with a set of grayscale sprites with circle and square heads wandering around a field. The player controls the gaze of a camera, designated as point and click. One of the sprites stands out from the others: he is wearing a hat and monocle, and demonstrates unusual style for the

otherwise rather drab and repetitive world. The player can click anywhere and capture one of the “average” sprites, leading to a change in the TV-esque display screen at the center of the play field: the captured image appears, with the hashtag “just a normal peep.”

This same shot will continue until the player isolates the character with the hat in the frame, leading to a new hashtag, “#oooh nice hat.” Circle and square-heads alike watch the change in the screen and find inspiration, so that the field fills with people wearing hats, as well as a new addition: a square and a circle, smiling, with heart hats and red shirts as they proceed around the stage as a couple. Eventually, an angry character with wild hair and a square head emerges, yelling at different characters in the world. The player can again guide the gaze of social media: selecting the couple leads to the hashtag “gross, go get a room,” driving the embarrassed couple out of the field entirely. Catching the angry character will lead to placing the image on screen with the hashtag “crazed square attacks.” Catching a scared circle leads to the hashtag “circle fears squares,” a reminder of the immediate impact messages of fear can have on the viewer.

A happy encounter changes the feel of the world, as a heart-filled square emerges after a conversation with the square-circle couple from before. However, attempts by the player to put this character on the screen are resisted with the response: “who tunes in to watch people getting along?” The player can try to focus attention elsewhere, but capturing the anger of squares at circles escalates it further.

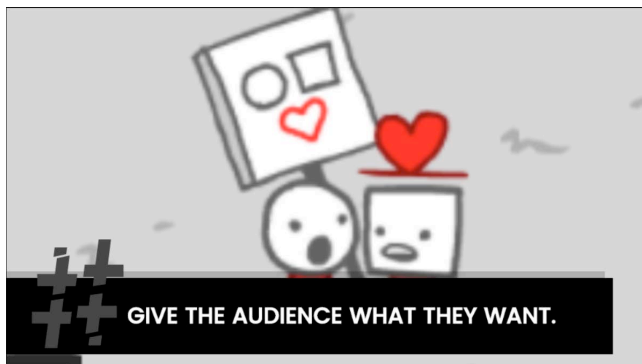


Figure 1: An example of a hashtagged image in-game

A love-centered protest erupts as the fights escalate: the square and circle pair arrive with a sign, a simple message of circle, square, heart. However, it can’t be brought to the attention of the other characters: no matter how much the player tries, only hate, not love, can go viral. Repeated attempts are met with the warning: “Give the audience what they want,” (see [figure 1](#)) until the player finally triggers the message “Everyone hates everyone!!!”

When the circle-head wearing a hat reemerges, the player might try to turn everyone’s attention back to trends, only to be met with the reminder that hats aren’t cool anymore—a reminder followed by the hat-wearer shooting the heart-marked square,

leading to a horrific descent into violence that zooms out to show the simulation unfolding on a laptop.

The game’s credits are followed by a horrific memorial: the sign-carrying protest couple sits alongside a mass grave. The message is further contextualized by its place in Nick Case’s portfolio, as his work regularly engages with techniques of procedural rhetoric. The player leaving this game will have experienced a strongly designed argument regarding the influence of social media.

3.2 Satirical Games

Highly divisive figures and issues often inspire game design that it intensely violent, aggressive, and disturbing: such games are too-easily dismissed and categorized as satire, particularly where public and political figures are concerned. One widely-discussed example is the *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian* game, released as a response to her campaign to fund an examination of sexist and misogynist tropes in video games [21]. Games focused on Hillary Clinton during the election campaign frequently resemble this genre: notable examples on Newgrounds include *Wack a Hillary*, *Street Fight, Flappy Hillary “Killary”*, and *Blood Ballot* [2,20,47,52]. Others choose moments for ridicule, such as *Hillary is ill!*, released at the height of the press campaign questioning Clinton’s health [62]. Given the results of the election, Hillary-centric media has nearly disappeared in the aftermath, so in this examination of games Trump-centric satire is more significant.

Trump is a more visible target on Newgrounds (with 43 results to Hillary’s 19 on a name search), and similarly is frequently the subject of hate and violent games: *Punch the Trump* and *Voodoo Trump*, both released during the election, both lack subtlety and focus on violence [11,48]. There are many variants, demonstrating perhaps a need to fill an imagined void or the goal of achieving notoriety with a particularly successful variant on the meme: *Beat up Trump*, *Slap the Trump*, *Trump Punch*, and *Whack the Trump* [3,9,26,54].

As these games are very shallow, and usually focus on violent release against a badly photoshopped or sprite-converted target, there is very little rhetoric to assess through close play in most of these examples beyond the obvious wish-fulfillment of the violent act. However, a few of the games engage in more issue-focused satire. The following selection demonstrates the typical range and rhetoric of the games examined.

The *Trumptendo* games engage in a now very familiar type of metagaming: the rewriting of classic mechanics with new imagery for rhetorical impact [37]. For instance, *The Original! Donkey Trump* simply replaces the sprites of the original game, otherwise preserving the Nintendo emulated experience. “Donald Trump Knockout” takes the rhetoric to a more violent extreme, with a blonde-haired, orange-tinted sprite awaiting the player’s challenge—however, first the player must overcome minor characters, including Joe Biden. The motto of the site—“Make Nintendo Great Again”—intensifies the parody.

This type of emulator-centric humor is of course relatively easy to produce, as it builds of existing code and mechanics. However, its effectiveness also stems from this lineage, as the familiar gameplay motifs link Trump to classic video game

villainy in a manner that encourages mockery. The gameplay is not the focus in any of the featured variants: instead, it's the metaphorical mockery that engages the player, and enhances the satirical framing.

Released a month before the US election, *Mr. President!* allows the player to act as Dwayne "Rock Hard" Johnson a bodyguard responsible for protecting the hated President Rump from assassination attempts by the Democratic party and liberal media [27]. Through a variety of levels Johnson battles an uncooperative physics system to fling his invulnerable body between the president and the enemies' laser sight before the bullet is fired. The additional wrestling mode allows the player to challenge their skills in creating memorable and eye-catching takedowns using the same ragdoll physics system as the main game. The actual gameplay is quickly boring but the variety and political commentary hidden in the design of the levels helps to make the game engaging enough to continue playing. From a political rally, to fundraising events and wall-based speeches, each win and loss is met with news banner style commentary about Dump's history of failure, gaudy gold decoration, and death by giant taco.

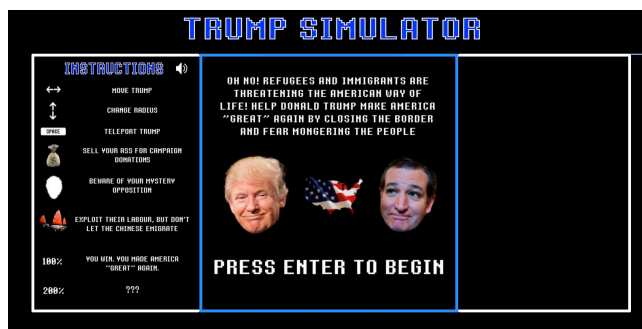


Figure 2: The instruction screen on The Trump Simulator

The Trump Simulator, by contrast, opens with a detailed instructional page (see [figure 1](#)) although the game itself is very simple[35]. The mechanics are like others in the tower defense genre, with objective of catching immigrants to stop them from reaching the US. The player may make choices about when to deploy certain bonuses and how to most effectively block newcomers. Based on the player's success rate, Trump's approval rating is displayed at the end.

The Trump Simulator is tagged as a "shameless reskin" of *The Abbott Simulator*, a mockery of Australia's anti-refugee program. The reskin demonstrates the ease with which the mechanics of this type of parody are redefined: for instance, buffs in this iteration "increase defense budget. Also Cigars." [36]

The Twine game *Make Trump Great Again* casts the player in the roll of a last-minute fill in for the campaign manager, tasked with helping Trump through a pivotal interview[6]. What follows is a rhetorical mish-mash, as the player feeds Trump fragments of answers for questions Trump is asked on topics ranging from ISIS to global warming. Based on the player's

selections, Trump's appeal with the voters is evaluated through purposefully vague metrics.[6].

Unlike their more violent counterpart these examples require the creators and audience to engage in detail with what makes Trump's political decisions and process bad. They each highlight particular aspects of the president [elect]'s engagement with political discourse, social media, international outreach to require the player to make considerations about how to best beat the game on its own rhetorical terms.

3.3. Reflective Games

Unlike the strongly outward focused nature of satirical games, reflective games tend towards more internally focused processing of the strong emotional responses. Many of these take either a personal viewpoint, allowing the author to reach out and share their own feelings about the political matter at hand and how those events are important to their lives. Or they attempt to humanize the discourse by providing alternative viewpoints from those that are not the most commonly seen in the popular media and political sphere. They also show how changes in the external cultural sphere recontextualize personal feelings and actions.

Nick Kaman's *this is fine* [43] is inspired by the now-ubiquitous webcomic by kcgreen featuring a dog surrounded by fire [31]. It's an art game with minimal interactivity that the designer describes It's a short experience that works best for thinking about perception and community action (or inaction.)

The game opens with the sound of crackling flame, and the memetic words "this is fine" with the familiar picture of the pixelated dog sitting in a chair. As it zooms out to show the surrounding smoke and fire filling the room, more words type out: "well, maybe it's a bit claustrophobic..." before the frame zooms out further, "there! now this is fine. oh. is there a problem? well you're never going to fix it sitting down."

The player can move around the room but the space for exploration is tiny. The sarcastic narration continues despite the player's futile attempts to interact with the environment: "something is still bothering you?" followed by "so you're telling me everything is on fire....I believe you."

Along with the words "try this [spacebar]" a fire extinguisher drops from the sky. When the player picks it up and starts pressing the spacebar at the flames, calming music along with hearts emit, gradually dissipating the targets until the player gets to one last flame that won't extinguish. "Well, at least it's manageable." the game's narrator remarks, "consider it 'fine'."



Figure 4: Bonding with friends in this is fine

When the player's friends, a set of chibi animals (see figure) themselves reminiscent of *Animal Crossing*'s anthropomorphic citizens, arrive, they come bearing marshmallows, a pipe of ambiguous content--to which the narrator comments "everyone copes in their own way." Bird is on fire, wearing a purple shirt that suggests a connection to the LGBTQ community, and it takes the fire extinguisher of love to bring Bird into the circle. However, the momentary joy is overwhelmed by the continued pan out by the camera, that shows the four characters sitting inside the wreck of a house with only one standing wall. As the narrator comments "there we go! now everything is fine," we see a range of animals all trying to enjoy themselves in the snowy, post-apocalyptic landscape.

The game makes no explicit mention of Trump or politics: the only contextualization is provided by Nick Kaman in the text accompanying the game, which states that the game is "an attempt to capture how I felt and how those around me felt after the results of the 2016 election." The bleak metaphors of the landscape and community are intensely realized through the limited procedural rhetoric, and the game's timing--and use of the now-infamous meme for design inspiration--cements the message.

Unlike the other categories, the reflective games do not often offer the player a clear conclusion. Breaking with the practice of providing a delineated end goal allows these games to more closely resemble the emotions of the creators as they capture a moment in a sequence of events. The very open-ended nature of these games and the unease the lack of resolve generates helps to add a personal touch to media that are often distributed acontextually.

4 #RESISTJAM

While indie games are released regularly, with new takes on political issues and the current discourse among them, it can be difficult to locate these games and confirm their designer's intentional engagement with these themes. However, community responses are inspiring collective action among

game designers, which has already (in the early months of Trump's presidency) led to new sets of focused and targeted bundles. These collections offer a starting point for categorizing and understanding games as a responsive, political media.

Global Game Jam was held the weekend of the inauguration, and several of the games make explicit mention of Trump: seventeen games include Trump outright in the title, from *Trumps Against Humanity*, which invites the player to act as Trump at a press conference [39], to several variants of Trump tower defense games involving defending either the wall or Trump tower itself from "waves of Mexicans"[28]. However, it's Trump's less clearly labeled influence that is felt throughout the jam, from parody game *@realHairDrumpf* [29] to games such as *Wave of Freedom*, which features a future dystopia where US citizens must break down the border walls that keep it from the rest of the world[25], and *Wave of Democracy*, a game where a presidential candidate needs to convert voters in a country "about to fall into chaos"[4].

4.1 Contextualizing #ResistJam

While the inclusion of Trump-themes in the Global Game Jam entries was an unsurprising emergent choice on the part of designers, the March 2017 #ResistJam is a more targeted campaign to draw together like-minded designers to engage in political discourse. The call on itch.io reinforces the theme: "#ResistJam is an online game jam about creating games that resist oppressive authoritarianism in all its forms, in partnership with IndieCade. It differs from most game jams in that we're providing mentorship and workshops from experienced members of the game industry to make sure that as many people as possible can participate, no matter their skill level. Our objective is to empower jammers to make amazing and powerful games by focusing on diversity and inclusion" [53]. This theme is further elaborated upon in the competition's diversifiers, which are a game jam strategy of encouraging particular types of work and conversation during the process:

- I <3 Diversity
- This is how it Feels
- Hardware Accessibility
- Nevertheless, She Persisted
- Everyone Can Play
- Other Shoes
- Don't Censor Me, Bro!
- Localized
- Freedom of Press
- Folk
- Migration Power

Of these diversifiers, several are intensely political, with "freedom of press" calling for showcases of the importance of a free press even as Trump employed greater restrictions on the White House newsroom; "Migration Power" suggesting the value of migrants to society; and "Nevertheless, She Persisted" directly referencing Elizabeth Warren as well as the experiences of women as marginalized within the Trump administration and its policies as of the game jam.

Likewise, several of the diversifiers place an emphasis on diversity and inclusion through accessibility, language, and the construction of the team. This amplifies the necessity of games for resistance that practice the same principles represented within the game, while the jam's commitment to provide support to creative teams also suggested an interest in supporting creators without a background or training within the games industry.

The organizers of #ResistJam included directions on how to participate anonymously as well as links to advice for those targeted by harassment or doxxing because of their participation in the event. However, they've also spoken about getting attention from the alt-right in positive terms: organizer Coleman said in an interview "We've actually been getting a decent amount of attention from the 'alt-right'...It's very gratifying. The more the 'alt-right' cares about you, the more good you're doing in the world" [34]. However, the organizers also refrained from mentioning Trump explicitly, they desire to make the range of topics covered by jammers broader than that which Trump exemplifies since no one issue is the root cause of the many topics raised as diversifiers.

4.2 Tagging #ResistJam Games

Given the diversifiers and the scale of the jam, an extension to the original tagging system was required to classify the works under discussion. While the original categories -- informative, satirical, and reflective -- still reflect the bulk of the thematic content, four other tags were required to indicate works with structural or thematic choices outside the game jam's emphasis.

- *International* – Games which primarily focus on politics and dictatorships beyond the US, taking a global stance on resisting authoritarianism. While these games warrant attention for their response to these topics on a broad scale, they were not centered in this study due to the focus on US election discourse.
- *Relevant?* – The "relevant?" tag denotes works that are questionably relevant to the game jam's themes, potentially submitted as either distractions or to amplify an existing game's profile.
- *Trolling* – While the game jam's requirement of interactive works makes it less appealing as a target of trolling than something requiring less commitment, some of the entries clearly were submitted to troll participants and organizers.
- *Incomplete* – Incomplete works demonstrate thematic attention to the game jam, and potentially a commitment of resources or even a limited prototype, but were not realized within the jam's time limit.

The final deadline for the jam was extended until March 13th with 208 games being submitted by that deadline. Randomly selected games submitted for the game jam (whether as informative stubs or complete prototypes) were tagged and documented upon the completion of the jam on March 13, 2017. The games included in the following case study analysis, however, focus only on the three original categories:

informative, satirical, and reflective. While the international games are independently interesting and certainly in dialogue with the rest of the jam, the scope of this study was an analysis of US video game designers looking at the country's current political climate. Incomplete and irrelevant games add no value to this analysis. Games submitted for the purposes of trolling do reflect some of the engagement of the jam with alt-right discourse, and will be analyzed separately from the central works.

5 #RESISTJAM GAME CASE STUDIES

One hundred games were randomly selected for tagging from among the complete set of games submitted to the jam. To be included within that set, the game must have been entered by the designer in the category on itch.io dedicated to game jam entries. Those 100 games were tagged and analyzed in the categories that follow. The jam remained open for submissions, so more games were added to the collection following the close that are not considered as part of this case study. This omission reflects the desire to focus on a targeted data set from designers clearly self-identifying as working within the framework and thus the time frame of the #ResistJam, with the corresponding rhetorical implications.

5.1 Informative Games

After analyzing the 100 selected submissions, 24 were categorized as informative games, the second largest category based on the sample. Unlike the informative game category of pre-election games, most of the games in this section had a clear intention to educate with an agenda related to resisting one or more of Trump's pending policies as of the jam (during March 2017, this meant a major focus on migrant rights, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and healthcare concerns.)

Several games take on hotly debated issues with an informative approach: *Astire Games' Termination* puts the player into the shoes of a set of characters contemplating the decision to get an abortion [5]. As of the end of the jam, the game had already attracted its first troll making the comment "You know video games are supposed to be fun, right?" This ignorant response is a reminder that the rhetoric of games for pleasure frequently gets wielded against games in this category.

Other games rely more on metaphor to represent strategies of resistance. For example, *Paint the Sky Golden*, a collaboration between Marina de Bustos, Yolanda Mojena, Eric Oliver, Pablo Rincón, and Rubén Rincón. The designers described their goal as demonstrating through the mechanic of transforming the environment to support different types of citizens "how our actions as individuals may have an impact on others and, in the context of authoritarianism, as part of a privileged majority"[16].

Zambini's *SOMEONE_IS_LISTENING* uses direct simulation rather than metaphor, allowing the player to take the role of a user of a fake command interface for monitoring social interactions of domestic groups. The player is encouraged to make arrests (carefully) based on perceived threats [65].

5.2 Satirical Games

Of the 100 selected submissions, only 18 were satirical, making it the smallest category of the three. This is a much smaller proportion than the surveyed games from prior to the election, which perhaps reflects a shift in tone following the inauguration.

Unlike games released prior to the election, which typically focused strongly on the presidential candidates, relatively few of the games in #ResistJam represent Trump himself. Those that do present him primarily as an object for mockery: one, *Trump Stamp* by Pixel Spark, opens with false empathy: “He is misunderstood. He is a victim of fake news. But now you can slip into his shoes, take control of his great, manly hands” [50]. The game itself primarily situates the player in the oval office stamping executive orders, with penalties to “Trumpiness” for skipping those that fit his agenda or passing “liberal” orders as they come by. Options like “Don’t react sulkily via Twitter and instead give a well worded and sensible statement” are of course to be avoided, while orders like “Demand the execution of parking violators from Mexico” award significant Trumpiness.

Similarly, Laughing14’s *President Man Baby* is overt in its messaging, inviting the player to “Fight the facts with tweets! Blow kisses to Russian oligarchs! And of course, Grab that cash!” [45]. The mechanics are very simple—shoot down rapidly falling symbols representing these three actions to avoid over-exposure to facts.

Several of the games reflect the more violent and aggressive response that was found in non-jam games. *Bash the Fash* by destroyfascism allows the player to take on the role of an (apparent) blackbloc protestor attacking the “waves of police thugs and white supremacist goons to reach the Commander-in-Thief.” The game offers few deeper comments on why these actions are needed, instead offering the release of pixelated blood spray [22].

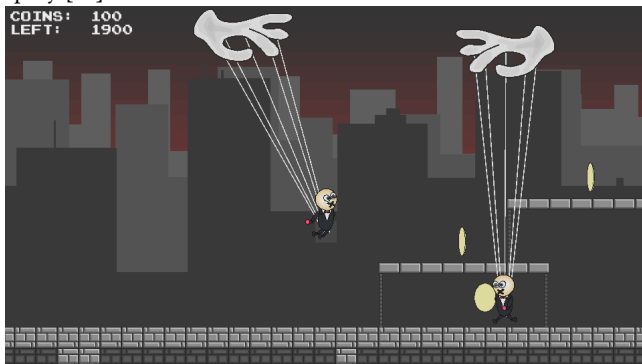


Figure 5: Puppetmasters and their suited puppets

Other satirical games invite the player to take the role of a Trump stand-ins: LunaCore Games’ *Puppet* uses platformer mechanics with a bald, suit-clad man attached to strings, controlled by giant overseeing hands (see [figure 5](#)) [46]. The metaphor is appropriate for a gaming context. Similarly themed, xPretz’s *Bribe\$man* casts the player in the role of a puppetmaster

trying to control the senate in order to increase his personal wealth through optimized choice of bills [63].

5.3 Reflective Games

From among the 100 games selected for study, 37 were tagged as reflective, by far the largest category. These games use a variety of approaches, from fantastical metaphor to real-life individual narration, to build an emotional experience around the game jam’s themes. Heather Robertson’s *ROAR*, a “short game about stress,” is an RPG set in a primarily text-driven world reflecting post-election tweets. The game is very minimalist, and invites the player to “have a panic attack because the world is terrible” [56]. However, this same type of theme can be taken in a completely different rhetorical direction, as the far more hopeful *Sonder* by Gritfish demonstrates with a retro, pixel puzzle game where the player is charged to find their friends and “share their strength” [33].

Joglepecheur’s *An Employee* dives deeper into the theme of post-election depression, opening with a simple choice—play a man or a woman—which can end the game in failure simply by choosing a woman. Even the decision to choose a man, gradually worn-down by the day to day stress, eventually leads to the player character walking into traffic [41]. Games of this kind reach out to the player to empathize and connect, and to validate a shared experience that has been referred to in popular psychology as “Post-Trump Stress Disorder” [30]. There is no pretense that this type of game can offer a solution, only that the catharsis of play and shared connection with the designer through the procedural mechanism of the game might offer some form of reassurance or solidarity.

Other games pull from before the election to share the experience of being an outsider in conservative US spaces: *Love, Thy Neighbor*, a collaboration between Rachel Burton and Klew Williams, is built using Inform 7, a natural-language tool for writing parser-based interactive fiction. It chronicles the experience of a woman growing up “queer in small town America” and the difficulty of fitting into a conservative school and community [12]. This type of personal narrative (increasingly common in interactive fiction) is far from Trump-centric, and may seem at first removed from the prompt of anti-authoritarianism: however, it is a chronicle of an individual’s motivation to resist, and thus a way to connect with the lived experience of others marginalized by current policies.

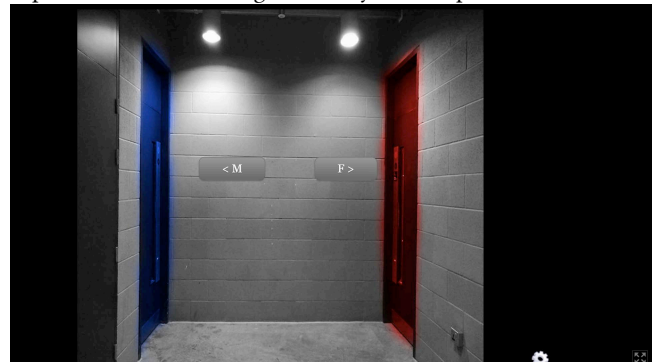


Figure 6: Choosing a restroom door in a binary world

A similarly intimate game, *this Strange, B1NArY w0rld* opens with a simple choice of going through one of two doors to use the restroom (see [figure 6](#)). It uses a nonlinear game structure to hammer home the impossibility of fitting in these binary spaces for someone who is transgender, and the potentially serious, traumatizing, and violent consequences of making this choice [40]. The game is certainly a call to action, particularly as protections for such basic human rights as using the bathroom of one's identity were under attack as of the March 2017 game jam at both the local and national level [55].

5.4 Trolling

Of the games included in this subset, only two were tagged as trolling. One such game presented as a critique of the jam itself. Chequered Ink's *Be the Change* mocks the premise of the jam with the description: "Star as a despondent anti-fascism activist who gets a dressing down from a magical fairy [18]. 'You wanna see change, BE THE CHANGE!' is the rallying cry of this game, as you travel around a rundown city performing good deeds for the community." The designer noted in a postmortem that while he agrees with the premise of opposing authoritarianism, he wanted to shift the discourse to the community. This engagement suggests less of an intention to troll, although the content and mockery in the game's central figure remains inherently offensive to the jam's purpose.

Others are more blatant in their intention to troll the community, with the notable example from this random subset being *abrams resist: the game of diversity and inclusion* (see [figure 7](#)) [66].

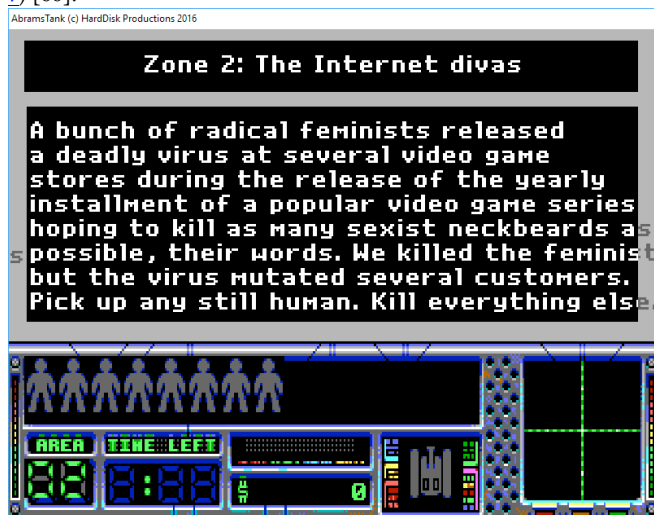


Figure 7: When feminist gamers have had enough

The game engages in many levels of trolling, including attaching a purchase price of \$4.99, presumably with the hope of attracting buyers based on title and context within the jam. They were clearly successful in attracting attention, as the game was pulled within a few days of release, leaving nothing but a 404 error in

its wake. This documentation captures the essence of the information provided by the creator prior to this removal, which may have been the decision of the creator but was more likely requested by participants or organizers of the jam itself given the content and intention.

Other trolling games emerged but were similarly eliminated from the jam collection and itch.io, often possessing aggressive "anti-SJW" themes reflecting most likely the attention that the jam had received on sites such as Kotaku in Action [67]. The rhetoric of these games recalls GamerGate terminology and tactics, with a continued focus on gamers as the victims fighting back against the perceived authoritarian oppression of social justice warriors, feminists, etc [19].

Of the remaining games, seven were tagged as questionably relevant to the game's themes, and may have been submitted with the intention of trolling or at least making it more difficult to find the more politically-oriented games within the set. Four of the other games were primarily engaged with dictatorships outside the US, and seven were incomplete (and unplayable) as of the end of the jam and thus could not be further analyzed.

6 DISCUSSION

Throughout the jam, some designers self-tagged their works with thematic and stylistic indicators. These (shown in [figure 8](#)) were not universally applied and thus represent inconsistent choices that are not easily collated, but a few words do emerge prominently. Many of the games within the studied set use pixel art or other nostalgic elements, and of the thematic tags, "dystopian" and "LGBT" emerge as some of the most prominent and recurring.



Figure 8: Word cloud of tags from the selected games

Game design such as that demonstrated in Kaman's *this is fine* demonstrates the potential for cathartic play: unlike games released prior to the election, which at least gesture towards persuasive play, *this is fine* invites the player to wallow in the aftermath of the election.

However, the games released prior to the election can also be better understood through the lens of cathartic play: games such as *Trumptendo* do not hope to convert a Trump-supporter to their point of view. They engage in mockery, not acts of outreach or persuasion. These games demonstrate the potential of political games to serve as rallying points for communities and shared objects for discourse.

Categorizing these games as persuasive games shortchanges their goals and potentials: the types of transformation they seek are not ones of conversion, but of rallying or sharing experiences with the like-minded, solidarity formation. The polarizing and divisive 2016 election, with its world-changing impact and harrowing results, draws our attention to the need of cathartic play both for designers and players.

Previous discussions of catharsis, or the release of strong emotions, in games have typically centered on violent video games: these games are viewed as outlets for aggression, which is discharged through games in a socially acceptable way and doesn't necessarily suggest any correlation with violent behavior more broadly [32]. These studies are often used as ammunition for critique of video games, following in the long-standing tradition of suspicion with which "new" media are viewed. Correlations have been drawn between anger and a desire to play violent video games [15], suggesting the potential of games as an outlet.

However, the emotional range of gameplay experiences, particularly in AAA titles, has not lent itself to studies of this kind relating to depression and anxiety. Studies in other genres suggest that cathartic narrative can serve many purposes, but is particularly valued for "clarification," or the gaining of insight, rather than just purging or experiencing empathy [44]. Films offer a parallel to games, as they are similarly often associated with fulfillment of fantasy and "pleasure," a generalization akin to the ongoing specter of games as "fun" [51]. In an examination of the construction of movie emotions, Norbert Wiley suggests that movie emotions can serve as a "modeling clay that can symbolize all sorts of human troubles," a concept that we might translate to the realm of game mechanics [61]. Juul suggests that in games, catharsis is part of the "compensation" explanation for the enjoyment of pain [42]. He suggests that catharsis must be considered alongside a range of explanations for why failure in games can be pleasurable even as it is frustrating. Juul's commentary offers one lens for examining serious games of the type frequently represented in #ResistJam and other post-Trump reactionary media: these games invite the player to accept a moment of political and social defeat, and indeed to in some cases relive associated failures repeatedly through simulation.

Examinations of US media, broadly construed, during the timeframe immediately following the results of the 2016 election and subsequent inauguration will likely note repeated moments of depression and anxiety expressed in everything from Kate McKinnon's *Saturday Night Live* performance of "Hallelujah" to John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* 2016 season finale featuring the literal explosion of the numbers of the year's date. Games—particularly from personal and indie developers working with the expectation of rapid digital distribution for immediate

consumption—are no exception to these trends. However, these games must break with expectations of the media and, as Juul suggests, motivate a more "serious understanding" through deliberate engagement with repeated failure [42].

7 CONCLUSION

Following the findings of other work, US political games surrounding the 2016 US election combine these forms of play in a method that allows for the expression of identity and selfhood within a system that appears to ignore and devalue participation by younger audiences [13,14,38,60]. Given the alienating discourse surrounding the election, these games act as both an outlet for strong emotions and a point of connective identity, allowing geographically distant creators to feel like they are not alone. Although not exclusively youth creators, the games of #ResistJam represent a collection of viewpoints outside those of traditional media, created at a pivotal moment of elevated social tension and political discourse within the US. These forms of creation offer important political and personal tools for individuals attempting to situate themselves, their emotions, and their lives within a world of unexpected change.

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