
Playing with Power

We discussed it for a very long time, but we came to the conclusion that women can't handle that amount of stress." This was the explanation offered by an *Escape from Tarkov* developer in 2016 in response to a question about the lack of playable women in Battlestate Games' hardcore military shooter. The statement garnered renewed attention in recent weeks as *Escape from Tarkov* emerged as a wildly popular title on Twitch. Given a second chance at making a positive impression, Battlestate clarified that playable female characters not only clashed with the game's lore, but would also require too much work to implement.

Needless to say, this statement drew criticism in the gaming press and kicked off the latest round in the evergreen debate about politics, video games, and whether the former should have anything to do with the latter. Well, I have unfortunate news for those clutching their controllers and noisily insisting that politics has no place in games: there's no such thing as an apolitical game.

I'm far from the first person to make this claim; in fact, researcher Holly Nielsen recently did so in these very pages, writing in response to Ubisoft's attempts to depoliticise *The Division 2*. Yet, the simple assertion that games – like all art – are inherently political maintains its dubious status as a litmus test in gaming culture to separate 'social justice warriors' from 'real gamers'.

Of course, some games are explicitly *about* politics. *SimCity* is a game about city management. *Civilization* is about empire-building. *Call of Duty* – white phosphorus and all – is about war, famously described by Clausewitz as the continuation of politics by other means. That said, video games don't need to be 'about' politics or advance a certain agenda in order to be political. In fact, they can't help but be.



JESS MORRISSETTE

Jess Morrisette is a professor of Political Science at Marshall University, where he studies the politics of popular culture.

As Miguel Sicart once observed, "Games can be political. (Dishwashers can be political too: how much electricity does yours use?)." Politics, at least as we understand it in the field of political science, is about relationships of power and authority. It's who gets what, when, and how. This encompasses everything from formal political processes that unfold in the halls of power to the informal politics of the workplace or family. In turn, games are embedded with values that replicate or challenge, explicitly or implicitly, existing structures of power in society.

Moreover, a range of political forces shape the circumstances under which games are created and ultimately consumed. The emergence of *Tetris* as a global phenomenon is inextricably linked to the Soviet economic and legal systems that produced it – to say nothing of the space race imagery that appears in many ports. When CD Projekt Red releases *Cyberpunk 2077* later this year, any consideration of its merits as an RPG will coexist alongside the economic reality of the crunch necessary to push it out the door. Similarly, when we play *Cyberpunk 2077*, we will bring to the table all our own experiences as individuals living within the power structures that shape the quasi-dystopian world of 2020.

At the centre of the *Escape from Tarkov* controversy is a question of representation. What kinds of characters are considered the default, and why? Whether Battlestate's decisions resulted from retrograde prejudices about women in combat, the unassailable lore of a fictional military conflict, or the very real, practical demands of game development, *Tarkov* – and the storm surrounding it – is inescapably political. For video games to truly flourish as an art form, it's time we stopped thinking of politics as a dirty word and started thinking about it as the beginning of a conversation about power and how it shapes the medium. ☹

#32

