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JEWES & VIDEO GAMES:
JEWISH REPRESENTATION, HISTORY, & REACTIONS TO THE HOLOCAUST IN AAA
VIDEO GAME FRANCHISES

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Abstract: Video Games May be the Future of Experiential Education

Since the 1980s, video games have provided a unique medium for storytelling that allows for the person engaging with the medium to not only serve as a passive participant to the unfolding story, but as an active agent who is responsible for acting through the main character to participate in and drive the story forward.¹ As video games have developed and evolved over time, the stories contained within have also deepened, with a diverse landscape of Jewish characters and stories included in the cacophony of voices. *Wolfenstein*, *Call of Duty: World War II*, and *Bioshock* are three AAA video game franchises that effectively convey three different Jewish experiences in response to the Holocaust, while at the same time teaching Jewish American history through Jewish characters in both first and third-person storytelling.

Wolfenstein, through the eyes of William Joseph Blazkowitz, tells the story of Jewish resistance in an alternate-history World War II landscape through Jewish eyes and using Jewish hands to actively engage in a story wrapped up in American Valor² and Revenge Fantasy.³ *Call of Duty: World War II* depicts a fictional experience, based on real events, where Robert Zussman participates in the unfolding of Jewish American military history, displaying American Valor in war, but ultimately serving as a model of Jew as victim to the Holocaust, in order to tell the story. *Bioshock* is a different narrative altogether, using a host of Jewish characters who retreat from the world in a post-Holocaust fictional world, creating their own Eden/Promised Land, a place where Jews and other marginalized peoples can be welcomed, accepted, and free.

¹ Bogost, Ian. *How to Talk about Videogames*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

² Jenkins, K., Peabody, B. (2017). *Where Have All the Heroes Gone? The Changing Nature of American Valor*. United States: Oxford University Press.

³ *American Revenge Narratives: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (2018). Germany: Springer International Publishing.

Each of these video games were produced by Jewish and non-Jewish writers and developers without the explicit goal of telling deeply Jewish stories or conveying personal Jewish experiences, but they each effectively end up doing so. In order to gain deeper insight into the intentions and thought processes behind the creation of each game, I conducted in-depth interviews with creators and developers in order to create a qualitative thematic analysis of the phenomena of the expression of Jews, Jewish themes, Jewish American history, and Jewish responses to the Holocaust in AAA video game titles. To further explore how the material was received by casual players, I conducted an in-depth poll of a limited sample pool of players to ascertain if or how the experiences and the history of the Jewish characters were received and interpreted. The goal of this work, then, was to synthesize that data alongside the actual content of the games themselves to analyze the depiction of Jewish characters, themes, Jewish American history, and Jewish responses to the Holocaust, and whether these depictions have any educational value outside of the entertainment value for which they were created. In doing so, I hope to discern whether these games are able to serve as effective, immersive, and interactive teaching tools in Jewish educational settings.

Wolfenstein, as the creators of the games stated, wanted to make sure that Blazkowicz's Judaism was celebrated, to show the power of the resistance that the player actively takes part in.⁴ The writers and developers of *Call of Duty: World War II* did something that no title in the Call of Duty franchise did before, by addressing the Holocaust and the horrors of World War II in a meaningful way, using a Jewish American war hero to tell that story.⁵ *Bioshock*, according to writer and developer Ken Levine, ended up being much more inherently culturally Jewish than

⁴ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, September 8). Interview with Machine Games. personal.

⁵ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, October 13). Interview with Activision. personal.

he intended, since he used not only a host of Jewish ethical questions as a basis for the game, but he also modeled around 90% of the characters around memories of his own, Jewish, immigrant family members.⁶

Each of these games show a different Jewish response to the horrors of the Holocaust – resistance, victimhood, and retreat. In telling these different responsive reactions to the Holocaust, the writers, and developers of these games, whether intentionally or not, end up telling deeply Jewish stories and teaching essential elements of Jewish American history and experience. By telling these stories through the eyes of Jewish characters and allowing the player to be an active participant in the unfolding of the stories, the medium of video games provides a powerful opportunity for experiential Jewish and Holocaust education by immersing players/learners into a world that they may be far removed from by both time and space. That also means, however, that the writers and developers have an incredible responsibility when it comes to creating the content for these forms of consumable media.

⁶ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, September 3). Interview with Ken Levine. personal.

Chapter 1: Video Games & their Cultural Influence

a. Understanding the Role of Media

Since the Industrial Revolution, the world has seen an unprecedented level of technological advancement. As technology continued to improve, it began to be implemented into daily life in varying forms. In the modern period, everyday life is arguably consumed by media, with many people receiving their information, news, and interpersonal experiences through a myriad of apps, websites, and media platforms.⁷ Film and television, much like physical literature, allow for a viewer/reader to immerse themselves in a world that is provided for them by the creators of the work. Although the individual is immersed in the world, they are still passive onlookers to a story that unfolds in a predestined way. While platforms like Netflix have attempted to create space for the viewer to have some sway in the storyline by making choices for the direction of the story from time to time, the viewer doesn't have true autonomy to meaningfully interact with the characters, landscape, and storyline.⁸

Literature, television, and film have all been used in intentional and impactful ways to help teach about Jewish life, values, stories, individuals, and history, both within the Jewish community, as well as without the Jewish community.⁹ Television shows like *Shtisel*, *Fauda*, *Broad City*, *Schitts Creek*, and *The Marvelous Miss Maisel* have helped to portray Jewish culture and religiosity to wider audiences.¹⁰ Films like *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, and *Schindler's*

⁷ Ryan, M. E. (2018). *Lifestyle Media in American Culture: Gender, Class, and the Politics of Ordinarity*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.

⁸ Moore, T. (2022, April 22). *10 best interactive netflix specials that let you be a part of the action*. Collider. Retrieved August 7, 2022, from <https://collider.com/best-interactive-netflix-specials-that-let-you-be-a-part-of-the-action/>

⁹ Chazan, B. (2022). *Principles and Pedagogies in Jewish Education*. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.

¹⁰ American Jewish Year Book 2018: The Annual Record of the North American Jewish Communities Since 1899. (2019). Germany: Springer International Publishing.

List have won countless awards and been used to tell stories of and educate about the Holocaust.¹¹ While these modes of media are invaluable for their ability to stir emotion, educate, and to tell stories in immersive and deep ways, they don't allow for the viewer to participate in the stories unfolding, or for their learning and subsequent actions to have an impact on the story itself. Video games, however, provide a media-based medium where immersive stories can be told, but the viewer becomes an active participant in the story, in one way or another.¹²

b. Discussing Video Games

The concept and experience of video games have been around since the early 1950s, but it wasn't until the early 2000s that video games were able to *fully* immerse the player into a completely experiential world of their own.¹³ Early video games were side-to-side platformers that couldn't tell an intricate story, but they were still unique in the fact that the player, rather than a director or actors, was directly responsible for the unfolding of the action.¹⁴ Today, players are almost consumed by the games, taking on the identity of and having complete agency over the character they play, in the immersive world that is put before them. The player makes decisions for the character, engages in dialogue with other non-playable characters (NPCs), and progresses through a cinematic storyline through active participation in the character's life.

Video games are unique in the sense that they require active participation by the person

¹¹ Pearl, J., Pearl, J. (1999). *The Chosen Image: television's portrayal of Jewish themes and characters*. United Kingdom: McFarland.

¹² Bogost, Ian. *How to Talk about Videogames*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

¹³ Stanton, Rich. *A Brief History Of Video Games: From Atari to Virtual Reality*. United Kingdom: Little, Brown, (2020).

¹⁴ Ibid.

consuming this media, rather than experiencing the media through the eyes of an omniscient and passive observer.¹⁵

While other forms of media include storytelling elements, character development, expansive landscapes, can stir emotion, as well as serve as immersive educational tools, video games are unique in the sense that the person interacting with this form of media has a real, participatory stake in shaping the unfolding of the story. This work seeks to explore the Jewish characters, themes, representations, stories, and history in three AAA video game franchises: *Wolfenstein*, *Call of Duty: World War II*, and *Bioshock*. It was essential to this work that these three games be included in the study because they are all products of AAA studios, have each been sold in countries throughout the world, all have prominent Jewish characters, themes, and culture, all deal with the topic of the Holocaust in some way, and have all had a lasting impact on the overall culture of video gaming.¹⁶

In delving into the world of these games, it is essential to understand what a AAA video game studio is since the scope of the impact of these games relies so heavily on their wide distribution throughout the world. According to Scott Steinberg, a AAA video game studio is a video game studio that is classified as such because they are created by mid to major-sized development and publishing teams, generally with a very high production budget and value.¹⁷

¹⁵ Bogost, Ian. *How to Talk about Videogames*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

¹⁶ Hulick, K. (2016). *American Life and Video Games from Pong to Minecraft*. United States: Cavendish Square Publishing LLC.

¹⁷ Steinberg, Scott (2007). *The definitive Guide: Videogame Marketing and PR* (1st ed.). iUniverse.

c. Jewish Characters & Responses to the Holocaust

Video games provide a unique avenue for Jewish representation, especially as it relates to Jewish experiences and responses to the Holocaust. For example, the main playable character of the *Wolfenstein* video game series is William Joseph Blazkowitz, an American Jew who fights Nazis in an alternate-history post-WW2 constructed reality. Any person who plays this game, Jewish or not, is forced to see Blazkowitz's world through his Jewish eyes, something that other forms of media can't quite capture. To this point, there hasn't been a thoughtful, thorough examination of the American Jewish experience, American Jewish history, or Jewish representation in video games. Other forms of media, such as newspapers, books, television shows, movies, and music have all been explored through the Jewish academic lens.¹⁸ With the continued growth in the popularity of the video game industry, it seems only right that media as immersive as video games enter the conversation in a meaningful way.

In readable or watchable media, the spectator does have the ability to enter the story, but they follow the story through the viewpoint of omniscient spectator or through the eyes of the character as the story unfolds in front of them. This passive viewing and experience of the story allows for the one engaging these forms of media to experience the story passively, but aside from their reading of the text or viewing of the scenes, they have no agency when it comes to the actual unfolding of the stories themselves. In video games, however, the player takes on the role of experiencing and interacting with the digital world in front of them by engaging in dialogue with other characters, physically exploring the world around them, altering the world around

¹⁸ Shandler, Jeffrey. *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America*. United States: NYU Press, 2009.

them in various ways, choosing the path of the main character, and through their actions and decisions in the game, driving the storyline forward.

As previously mentioned, in the *Wolfenstein* series the player sees the world through Blazkowicz's Jewish eyes and engages with it using his Jewish hands. By doing so, the player gets an, albeit limited, window into this expression of the Jewish experience in an alternate-history world. As a result, the experience of Blazkowicz becomes the experience of the player, if only for the span of the game itself. This means that instead of only reading about the experience of revenge fantasy, where a Jewish character pursues justice, generally through violence, for crimes committed against the Jewish People, the player gets to personally engage in that revenge fantasy, to personally drive the story forward.¹⁹

The theme of revenge fantasy, specifically Jewish revenge for the crime of the Holocaust against Nazis, isn't something new in media. The 2009 film *Inglorious Basterds* by Quentin Tarantino or the recent Amazon show *Hunters* are two shining examples of Jewish revenge fantasy in film and tv. Perhaps one of the most visceral depictions of revenge fantasy against Nazis from a Jewish perspective in film is portrayed by the character in *Inglorious Basterds* known as "The Bear Jew," who, in the film, is known for and can be seen beating Nazis to death with a baseball bat. *Inglorious Basterds* is set in an alternate-history World War II period, like the timeframe of the original *Wolfenstein* games. Through the medium of film, the viewer can view "The Bear Jew" exact revenge on individual Nazis through the course of the story. Through the medium of video games, however, the player personally drives the story forward by exacting

¹⁹ American Revenge Narratives: A Collection of Critical Essays. (2018). Germany: Springer International Publishing.

revenge on the Nazis, therefore actively participating in the unfolding of the revenge fantasy through Jewish eyes and using Jewish hands.²⁰

While the *Wolfenstein* series occurs in an alternate-history World War II and post-World War II period, the games *Bioshock* and *Call of Duty: World War II* inhabit slightly different roles. *Wolfenstein* very much fills the role of Jewish resistance and fighting back against Nazis and Nazism during and in the wake of World War II. *Bioshock*, on the other hand, takes the opposite approach. Andrew Ryan and Brigid Tenenbaum, two of the main characters of the storyline, attempt to create an underwater city called Rapture, which was to serve as a new Eden, or a safe haven for Jews and others who even American society deemed unworthy at the time.²¹ These two characters are explicitly Jewish in the story, with creator and writer Ken Levine stating, "...the game and all of the characters ended up being much more explicitly Jewish than I intended, but it ended up being essential to the backstory of the game..."²²

The character Andrew Ryan came from a Russian-Jewish family who escaped that part of the world just before World War II, with he and his family arriving in America on the eve of the war. Despite he and his family's best intentions and working hard, they were never fully accepted into their American community, causing Ryan to want to get away and create his own place, a place where he and others like him could be free to live the lives they wanted for themselves.²³ Brigid Tenenbaum, one of the other central figures of the game and co-founder of Rapture, learned medicine before World War II. Being Jewish, however, she was taken to

²⁰ American Revenge Narratives: A Collection of Critical Essays. (2018). Germany: Springer International Publishing.

²¹ Nirenberg, David. *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*. New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014.

²² Derrenbacher, M. (2022, September 3). Interview with Ken Levine. personal.

²³ BioShock and Philosophy: Irrational Game, Rational Book. (2015). United Kingdom: Wiley.

Auschwitz where it was discovered that she had not only medical knowledge, but she could be helpful when it came to some of the medical experiments that were being carried out in the camp.²⁴ After the war and she was liberated, she came to America where she met Andrew Ryan, and together they set out to create Rapture, with Tenenbaum hoping that the creation of the New Eden would serve as a path to redemption for things she regrets that she did in the camps to stay alive.²⁵

Wolfenstein and *Bioshock*, therefore, present two opposing reactions to the event of the Holocaust, in alternate-history timelines. Blazkowicz represents Jewish resistance in the face of impossible odds, while Ryan and Tenenbaum take the withdrawal approach, using their survival as an act of resistance to withdraw from the world and create their own safe space. *Call of Duty: World War II*, then, functions as the more historically accurate representation in the world of video games. Set during the events of World War II, the main character serves as an American soldier who goes overseas to fight in the war. Although the main character isn't Jewish, like in *Wolfenstein* and *Bioshock*, one of the best friends of the main character is a Jewish-American soldier named Robert Zussman, who fights alongside you until the end of the game. Toward the end of the campaign, however, Zussman is captured by the Nazis and is brought to the Berga Prisoner of War & Concentration Camp. The player, as the main character, goes on his last mission to save his friend. The very last part of the game is the player, through the eyes of the main character, walking through the recently abandoned camp, to find his friend. Although Zussman does end up surviving the camp and being flown home, he still falls squarely into the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, September 3). Interview with Ken Levine. personal.

role of Jew as victim, in need of being saved by a heroic outside force, in this case, the player/main character.²⁶

d. Teaching the Jewish American Experience

The American Jewish experience, American Jewish history, and the Holocaust are all essential elements of American Jewish education. Within the Jewish community, we are privy to experiential Jewish education simply by virtue of living our Jewish lives in community and participating in the ongoing, active unfolding of our history as a People. Outside of the Jewish community, however, experiential Jewish education is much harder, especially when it comes to the topic of the Holocaust. Even in 2022 there have been horror stories of children being asked to re-enact scenarios from the Holocaust in horrifically failed attempts at immersive, experiential education.²⁷ Video games, however, may provide a uniquely immersive educational window into the American Jewish experience, as well as impactful, respectful, immersive Holocaust education, by allowing the player to actively participate in some of these events in a fictional historical or alternate-history framework.

Both *Wolfenstein* and *Bioshock* do a great job of building complex and authentic Jewish characters to inhabit the worlds laid out by the creators. These dynamic and diverse Jewish characters help to speak to the depth and complexity of the American Jewish experience, especially as it relates to a post-holocaust world. Jewish culture, elements of religious belief, mysticism, and peoplehood are all explored through the course of these games. In this regard,

²⁶ Jewish Histories of the Holocaust: New Transnational Approaches. (2014). Germany: Berghahn Books.

²⁷ Asbury, Nicole. "D.C. Third-Graders Were Made to Reenact Episodes from the Holocaust." *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2021.

these games serve as vehicles to tell Jewish stories, as well as tools to help educate both Jewish and non-Jewish players of these games a little bit about Jews, Jewish history, Jewish culture, and elements of Jewish religiosity and ethics in a casual and engaging way, whether having been intended as teaching tools or not.

As previously mentioned, experiential education, particularly around the topic of the Holocaust, can be especially tricky. *Call of Duty: World War II* and *Wolfenstein*, however, dive right in, even as going as far as placing Jewish characters in POW/concentration camp settings.²⁸ At the very end of the campaign, *Call of Duty: World War II* places Zussman inside Berga, a place that serves as a combined POW and concentration camp. While the inclusion of Berga is a bit oversimplified and somewhat hurts the potential educational value of the game itself, the experiential element of its inclusion within the game serves as an incredibly visceral educational opportunity for the player, nonetheless.²⁹ Instead of simply making the player watch a cut-scene of the journey through the camp, the player is forced to walk through the camp in search of Zussman. If the player has been to visit a concentration camp or a Holocaust Museum, many of the images appear to be not only familiar, but eerily close to the player, since in the game, the camp had been very recently abandoned. If the player hasn't had the opportunity to experience these immersive forms of learning about the Holocaust, *Call of Duty: World War II* provides that potentially educational window into the experience of the Holocaust.³⁰

Wolfenstein, on the other hand, being in an alternate-history timeline, does something a little different. At one point in the storyline, Blazkowicz sneaks into a modern-day (1980s

²⁸ Asbury, Nicole. "D.C. Third-Graders Were Made to Reenact Episodes from the Holocaust." *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2021.

²⁹ Cowan, Paula, and Henry Maitles. *Understanding and Teaching Holocaust Education*. Los Angeles, California: Sage Publications, 2017.

³⁰ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, October 13). Interview with Activision. personal.

alternate history) concentration camp, with the hopes of rescuing Set Roth, a Jewish scientist and Kabbalist who is part of a secret Jewish society called the *Da-at Yichud*.³¹ While the scenario itself is loaded with layers of stereotypes and potential issues relating to the Jewish character, which will all be explored later, Blazkowitz sneaking into the camp to save another Jewish man in an act of resistance does serve some relevant educational purposes.

To begin, the story of an individual sneaking into a camp to gather intel and save others is based off of the historical Witold Pilecki, a Polish intelligence officer who snuck into Auschwitz to gather intel, ended up sneaking out, and later helped with the Warsaw Uprising.³² Upon entering the camp, Blazkowitz receives a tattoo of a number on his arm, something that is painfully and inextricably linked to the concentration camp experience for survivors. As Blazkowitz makes his way through the camp by meeting and working together with other prisoners, he discovers the power of banding together to face a common threat, something else that rings true for many survivors.

While the *Call of Duty: World War II* and *Wolfenstein* experiences and depictions of the camps are vastly different, the two do in fact hold some educational value because they give the player insight into the history, through the lived experiences of the characters they are navigating the digital world through. As this work continues to unpack the characters, settings, storylines, and themes of these different games, it will become evidently clear that video games, as an active form of engaging media, allows for a new form of experiential education as it pertains to exploring Jewish culture, themes, and stories as they relate to the American Jewish experience and the Holocaust. This means that the medium of video games could hold the potential new and

³¹ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, September 8). Interview with Machine Games. personal.

³² Pilecki, W. (2012). *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*. United States: Tradeselect Limited.

lasting impacts on the world of experiential Jewish education, both within the Jewish community, as well as outside the community.³³

³³ Toppo, G. (2015). *The Game Believes in You: How Digital Play Can Make Our Kids Smarter*. United States: St. Martin's Publishing Group.

Chapter 2: Wolfenstein

a. The Beginnings of the *Wolfenstein* Franchise

Wolfenstein is a series of World War II and post-World War II alternate-history video games that focus mostly on William “B.J.” Blazkowicz, a Jewish-American Army Captain whose main goal throughout the series is to stop the Nazis by personally killing as many as possible, while at the same time attempting to stop the Axis powers by taking down their leadership.³⁴ The first two games in the series were written, produced, and released between 1981 and 1984 by Silas Warner, Dale Gray, and George Varndell by Muse Software.³⁵ The first two games, *Castle Wolfenstein* and *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein* revolutionized the stealth-based gameplay model in early video games, allowing the player to act as an unnamed American Army Captain and began to lay the foundation for the premise of the overall franchise.³⁶

The initial concept for the game *Castle Wolfenstein* when Warner viewed the British-American war film, *The Guns of Navarone*, in which the protagonists attempt to infiltrate and destroy a Nazi fortress.³⁷ According to Warner, he was a fan of the shooter arcade game, *Berzerk*, an early shooter game where the player makes their way through a maze, shooting and defeating robots along the way. In an interview, Warner stated that he envisioned the original *Wolfenstein* to be a combination of the movie and the game he played, having the character, controlled by the player, make their way through a Nazi castle in order to sneak around and take out each Nazi soldier, officer, and boss along the way.³⁸ It should be note that while the player

³⁴ *Castle Wolfenstein* (1989)(MUSE Software). 1989. p. 10.

³⁵ Halter, Ed (2006). *From Sun Tzu to Xbox: War and Video Games*. PublicAffairs. p. 155. ISBN 978-1-56025-681-6.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ "The History of Wolfenstein". *SAPPHIRE Nation - Community blog by SAPPHIRE Technology*. 2017-09-27. Retrieved 2022-08-13.

³⁸ Dransfield, Ian (2018-04-29). "The history of Wolfenstein | PC Gamer". *PC Gamer*.

would play the game and experience the digital world as an unnamed American Army Captain, there was no developed or explicit understanding of who this person was at this point.³⁹

In 1991, John Carmack, John Romero, Tom Hall, and Adrian Carmack founded id Software, and after discovering that the *Wolfenstein* trademark was available, decided to begin work on a three-dimensional remake of *Castle Wolfenstein*, since so many of the founding members of id Software had been fans of the original.⁴⁰ After intense character, story, and genre development of the game, *Wolfenstein 3D* was released in 1992 by Apogee Software.⁴¹ This reimagining of the original *Castle Wolfenstein* game is credited with helping to create the first-person shooter genre of gaming, as well as establishing William “B.J.” Blazkowicz as the protagonist for the remainder of the ongoing lifespan of the *Wolfenstein* series.⁴² It should be noted that at this point in the *Wolfenstein* series, Blazkowicz is introduced as an American Army Captain and spy of Polish immigrant parents. His Jewishness is loosely implied throughout *Wolfenstein 3D* and the subsequent games in this part of the series, but it is never explicitly mentioned.

After the release of *Wolfenstein 3D* in 1992, Gray Matter Studios, Activision, and EA Mobile all published sequels and prequels, entitled, *Spear of Destiny* (1992), *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (2001), *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* (2003), and *Wolfenstein RPG* (2008). Each of these games followed the continuing story of Blazkowicz and his attempt to stop the Nazis on their endeavor to take over the world. As the storyline progressed, the writers and developers began to bring the story into the occult and other fantastic places, setting the stage for

³⁹ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, September 8). Interview with Machine Games. personal.

⁴⁰ *Matt Chat 52: Wolfenstein 3D with John Romero*.

⁴¹ "The Dawn of the FPS: inside the making of Wolfenstein 3D". *PCGamesN*.

⁴² Staff, Xbox Wire (2014-05-20). "30 Years of Butt-Kicking: The History of Wolfenstein". *Xbox Wire*.

Blazkowitz to encounter and engage with explicitly Jewish mysticism, technology, and magic in the later, 2009 adaptation of *Wolfenstein*.

b. The 2009 Revamp and the Jewishness of William “B.J.” Blazkowitz

In 2009, the *Wolfenstein* series continued to grow and change, bringing the storyline from an alternate history World War II to an alternate history post-World War II setting, pushing the timeline away from the 1940s and into the 1950s and beyond. With the introduction and development of Blazkowitz as a character in the previous *Wolfenstein* games, the stage was for the revelation of Blazkowitz’s Jewishness in a world where he fights against Nazis across Europe and the US beginning in the 1960s. After the 2009 installation of *Wolfenstein*, the sequel, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* dove head-first into highlighting and celebrating the Jewishness of Blazkowitz, by taking the implicit elements of his Jewish identity and bringing them to the forefront, using his Jewishness to move the story forward and adding to the personal and existential drive behind Blazkowitz’s fight against the growing, globalizing Nazi regime.

The game itself presents several revelations as they relate to Blazkowitz’s Jewishness right off the bat – the player is told through a series of flashbacks that his mother is Jewish and that she became even more passionate about her Jewishness after leaving her husband (Blazkowitz’s father) as he became more and more abusive and antisemitic as he grew older. The player is then presented with another flashback where Blazkowitz’s mother can be seen and heard reciting *Birkat HaGomeil* at his bedside while he is in a coma after experiencing extreme violence at the beginning of the war. Later in the story, Blazkowitz is forced to infiltrate a modern-day concentration camp in order to save Set Roth, a Jewish scientist, dissonant, and member of a secret Jewish society within the game called the *Da’at Yichud*. There is an

extremely visceral moment within this section of the story when Blazkowitz receives a tattoo of a number on his forearm during in processing, an all too familiar experience of prisoners and victims during the Holocaust.⁴³

Blazkowitz ends up being successful in infiltrating the camp and saving Set Roth, adding another Jewish voice and experience to the cast of characters. Before diving into the reason for Set's introduction into the storyline, it is essential to note that the side-by-side experience of Blazkowitz and Set portrays two different viewpoints and expressions of the Jewish experience – Blazkowitz representing the muscular, independent, American Jew who also fits into the mold of the Israeli New Jew,⁴⁴ while Set fits more squarely into the experience of the stereotypical yeshivish Jew who is smart, scientifically-minded, knows Hebrew and Jewish texts well, has an accent, and is an integral part and leader of a Jewish community. The difference between the two is emphasized by the dialogue included, with Set giving Blazkowitz the nickname “Shimshon” throughout the story, highlighting Blazkowitz's size and brute strength. It is this underground Jewish community that Set is a leader of that allows for his introduction into the story.

As the story progresses, the player discovers that the only reason that the only reason the Nazis end up winning World War II is because they discovered an ancient Jewish technology, developed by the *Da'at Yichud*, the group that Set is part of. Blazkowitz ends up rescuing Set so that they can go to the base of the *Da'at Yichud* together to gather the technology and supplies needed to stop the growing Nazi threat across the world. When Blazkowitz and Set reach the

⁴³ Dwork, D., Pelt, R. J., Pelt, R. J. v. (2003). *Holocaust a History*. United Kingdom: WW Norton.

⁴⁴ Almog, O. (2000). *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew*. United States: University of California Press.

underwater base of the organization, it is made clear that Blazkowitz had some level of Jewish education growing up, because he can read some of the Hebrew inscriptions.

Adding to the drama and the Jewishness of the characters and the storyline, Blazkowitz meets Anya and the two begin a long relationship, with Anya getting pregnant later in the storyline. With the introduction of a future generation of Jewish children, born to Jewish resistance fighters and heroes, Blazkowitz's passion for fighting back against the Nazis is only amplified. One of the strongest and most poignant moments in the storyline is when Blazkowitz is preparing for yet another seemingly impossible mission, but declaring, "I'll be damned if I'm going to let my kids grow up in a world run by these Nazi assholes!" The hope and fight for another generation of Jews in the face of impossible odds only helps to add to the Jewishness of the overall plot, emphasizing the story of Jewish survival.

c. Blazkowitz, American Valor, Revenge Fantasy, and American New Jew

Since the very beginning of the *Wolfenstein* franchise, Blazkowitz has been presented as the ideal representation of American Valor.⁴⁵ He is a large, muscular American man who isn't afraid to get his hands dirty and use physical violence to fight back against external oppressive forces. He is the son of immigrants who joined the American military during wartime to defend his ideals and the American way abroad. *Wolfenstein* adds a unique twist on the theme and representation of American Valor, by making the hero Jewish, rather than a non-Jewish man of European descent.⁴⁶ By adding and highlighting Blazkowitz's Jewishness in the story, the theme of American Valor is expanded – instead of the hero fighting only for the preservation of

⁴⁵ Jenkins, K., Peabody, B. (2017). *Where Have All the Heroes Gone? The Changing Nature of American Valor*. United States: Oxford University Press.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

freedom and the American way, Blazkiewicz is also fighting for survival in a brutal, alternate-history landscape. By situating a Jewish-American hero in an alternate-history landscape where he personally, brutally kills modern-day Nazis across Europe and the US, the character, and as a result the player, gets to engage in a first-person, active engagement in revenge fantasy where a strong American Jew kills those plotting to see him dead. In this way, the player actively engages in an experiential resistance movement, fighting on behalf of the marginalized against an oppressor, whether the player personally identifies with the marginalized groups being targeted or not.

Song, written literature, television, and movies have all engaged with the themes of American Valor⁴⁷ and revenge fantasy before,⁴⁸ including highlighting stories of Jews,^{49,50} but none of these forms of media have allowed the viewer to actively participate in the unfolding of the story, giving them agency in the story itself. Through the medium of video games, then, the player has the opportunity to participate in the unfolding of the revenge fantasy, killing the oppressor in a digital world through the eyes of the oppressed, using the hands and the technology of the oppressed.⁵¹ This experience is inherently unique to the world of video games because the player not only views the story unfolding in front of them as it relates to the character, but the player actually takes on the agency of the character, living out the experiences

⁴⁷ Jenkins, K., Peabody, B. (2017). *Where Have All the Heroes Gone? The Changing Nature of American Valor*. United States: Oxford University Press.

⁴⁸ *American Revenge Narratives: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (2018). Germany: Springer International Publishing.

⁴⁹ Abrams, N. (2012). *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema*. United States: Rutgers University Press.

⁵⁰ *American Revenge Narratives: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (2018). Germany: Springer International Publishing.

⁵¹ Bogost, Ian. *How to Talk about Videogames*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

of American Valor and revenge fantasy in the digital world.⁵² As a result, even if the player isn't Jewish or American, they can still get an, albeit limited, window into the experience of the revenge fantasy from a Jewish perspective.

Blazkowitz not only fills the role of the American hero, but he also occupies an interesting space that could be called the American New Jew. During the birth of the modern State of Israel, there was a push in culture and society to change the stereotype of what it meant to be a Jew, putting forth the image of the Jew who was strong, could work the land, could farm on a *kibbutz*, and was physical, rather than strictly intellectual. This new version of the Jew was aptly called The New Jew in Israeli society.⁵³ It is clear through the way the creators of the game portray Blazkowitz that he is meant to occupy this physically powerful, New Jew space, but with an American twist. This theme of Blazkowitz as the New American Jew is only amplified with the introduction of Set Roth, who is portrayed as the scientific, intellectual, resourceful, and smaller-statured Jew – a stark contrast from the protagonist in the story.

d. BJ & the New Jew, Set Roth & the Stereotypical Jew

Literature, film, and television have all engaged in varying forms of depictions of the Jewish experience, with some wonderfully authentic portrayals of Jews and the Jewish experience,⁵⁴ with others unfortunately falling into the trap of relying on stereotypes to communicate to the audience that the subject in the story is Jewish.⁵⁵ As previously mentioned,

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Almog, O. (2000). *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew*. United States: University of California Press.

⁵⁴ Katz, M. B. (2020). *Intersections Between Jews and Media*. Netherlands: Brill.

⁵⁵ Lester, P. M., Ross, S. D. (2011). *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*. United States: Praeger.

Set Roth is a rather stereotypical depiction of a European Jew – he is a scientist by trade, speaks with an accent, sprinkles Yiddish words into some of his sentences, is smaller in stature, and possess many of the other stereotypical physical attributes of an older European Jewish man.

In a vacuum, this portrayal of Set could have been viewed as antisemitic in some regards, since he fills so many of the different stereotypical boxes of what it means to be Jewish. However, with Set's character juxtaposed with that of Blazkowicz's character for the duration of their time together, the developers and writers of the game were able to carefully craft a diverse portrayal of the Jewish experience, using some stereotypes in the character of Set, including the sprinkling of stereotypically dry Jewish humor into conversations, while at the same time celebrating this character alongside Blazkowicz's Jewishness. In fact, it is the introduction of Set Roth in the story that helps Blazkowicz begin to celebrate his Jewishness more readily and openly.

e. Exploration of Antisemitism & Reversal of Tropes

With the Jewishness of two of the main characters on full display in the storyline, embedded in an alternate history in which the Nazis in World War II, it is impossible to skate around the topic of antisemitism and Jewish hatred. To make the setting of the games as believable as possible, many of the classic antisemitic tropes that were present during the Holocaust are present in the game, for better or worse. Since the player begins to wreak havoc against the Nazi regime with the hands of a Jewish resistance fighter, the regime begins to put out propaganda about Jews and power, while at the same time pedaling the idea that Jews and

other minority groups are genetically inferior to them, two major elements of the messaging during the Holocaust.⁵⁶

At one point in the game, the player, through the eyes of Bazkowicz himself, encounter and old, demented, dying Hitler. At this point in his life, Hitler has become so engulfed with paranoia that he creates an entire media group to come up with propaganda to help capture “Terror Billy,” the nickname that he gave to Blazkowicz to label him as a dangerous terrorist who, although inferior, is using his Jewish influence and power to cause problems for the regime. This interesting tension between perceived genetic inferiority and secret, consuming power, is something that was prevalent in the antisemitic propaganda leading up to and during the Holocaust,⁵⁷ as well as a motivation for many antisemitic and neo-Nazi groups today.⁵⁸

Engaging with the topic of antisemitism, particularly when dealing with the topic of the Holocaust and the associated history, tropes, and propaganda, can be difficult to navigate, particularly in an experiential way. Other forms of media are able to tell a story and get the reader/viewer to engage with the story, the tropes, and the themes in an immersive way, but video games provide for the player to take on the identity of the character, giving them agency. In this way, video games allow the player to, albeit in a limited way, engage with the necessity to fight back against these tropes, in order for them to survive and progress the storyline forward.

In engaging with the topic of Jewish power, a familiar and painful antisemitic stereotype that has historically been asserted is the power of Jews. These conspiracies fueled much of the

⁵⁶ Luckert, S., Bachrach, S. D. (2009). State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda. United States: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁵⁷ Luckert, S., Bachrach, S. D. (2009). State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda. United States: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁵⁸ Atkins, S. E. (2011). Encyclopedia of Right-Wing Extremism In Modern American History. United States: ABC-CLIO.

fear and hatred toward Europe's Jews during World War II and continue to be talking points of antisemitic groups across the world. One of the sticky points in the storyline is the inclusion of a secret Jewish society with advanced technology, referred to as the *Da'at Yichud*. One of the reasons Set Roth is included in the story is because he happens to be a member of this society, so by saving him, Blazkowicz is working to get the right technology to defeat the Nazis. It turns out, however, that the Nazis were only able to win the war and create this alternate history because they were able to steal this technology to win.

In discussing the game, the creators stated that the emphasis on Blazkowicz and Set Roth's Jewishness, as well as the inclusion and reversal of several antisemitic tropes, was purposeful.⁵⁹ The revamp of the *Wolfenstein* series, particularly *The New Colossus* and *The New Order*, came out during a time of rising antisemitism in American and European society.⁶⁰ When a group who calls themselves "the Proud Boys" staged a rally in Charlottesville where they carried tiki torches and chanted, "Jews will not replace us,"⁶¹ the creators of the game decided to create an advertising campaign as a social commentary against this rising antisemitism.⁶² By highlighting Blazkowicz's Jewishness and using the advertising campaign for the game to speak to real world antisemitism and hatred, the creators of the games recognized that video games,

⁵⁹ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, September 8). Interview with Machine Games. personal.

⁶⁰ Kohen, A. (2021). *Antisemitism on the Rise: The 1930s and Today*. United Kingdom: University of Nebraska Press.

⁶¹ Lipstadt, D. E. (2019). *Antisemitism: Here and Now*. United Kingdom: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

⁶² Staff, M. C. V. (2017, October 17). *Wolfenstein 2's 'Punch a Nazi' marketing campaign is 'A Healthy Avenue to vent frustration' says Bethesda*. MCV/DEVELOP. Retrieved October 7, 2022, from <https://www.mcvuk.com/business-news/media-pr/wolfenstein-2s-punch-a-nazi-Marketing-campaign-is-a-healthy-avenue-to-vent-frustration-says-bethesda/>

just like other forms of media, can serve as powerful commentaries on issues facing contemporary society.⁶³

f. Immersive Educational Experience

While the *Wolfenstein* series is based in an alternate-history landscape, deals with futuristic warfare, and ventures into the occult through a Jewish lens, it does provide an educational look into the Jewish resistance during World War II and the Holocaust. If a player has even just a baseline knowledge of the Jewish American experience during World War II and the Holocaust, then the storyline can reinforce some of those teachings by unpacking the experience of Jewish resistance through the lens of revenge fantasy, exploring underground resistance movements during the Holocaust, discovering the power of Jewish pride in relationship to resistance and survival, as well as depicting the horrors and brutality of the concentration camp experience. By exploring all of these themes throughout the series, the writers and developers are able to paint Blazkowicz as the face of Jewish resistance, strength, and pride in the face of the Holocaust.

On the other hand, however, by exploring these themes in an alternate-history landscape, the writers and developers create an opening for a misunderstanding of the struggle that so many victims of the Holocaust faced, by requiring a baseline understanding of the Holocaust. Without an educational introduction to the topic of the Holocaust or World War II, the player may miss the nuance and educational opportunity that the series provides, convoluting the historical timeline for them and causing them to miss out on the power of Jewish resistance. With this in mind, it is also important to note that without a basic understanding of harmful Jewish

⁶³ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, September 8). Interview with Machine Games. personal.

stereotypes, the inclusion of the *Da'at Yichud* could lead some players to think that some of the ideas of Jewish power and mysticism are in fact true, despite being in a fictional, alternate-history setting.

Chapter 3: Call of Duty: World War II

a. History of the Franchise and other WW2 Call of Duty Games

The Call of Duty franchise is hands-down one of the most recognizable gaming franchises that has only continued to grow in popularity as the popularity of online gaming has grown over the past two decades.⁶⁴ The Call of Duty franchise is unique in the fact that it was one of the first games to engage in an annual release cycle that included a new campaign/single player story mode, a co-op online or split-screen experience, as well as an expansive online gaming experience that would receive free updates (maps, weapons, game modes, etc.) throughout the year-long lifecycle of the game. The first Call of Duty came out in October 2003, the second Call of Duty game came out in 2005, and from 2005 until 2022, there has been a new Call of Duty game released every year.

In releasing a new Call of Duty game every year, the campaign and the online gameplay has been able to remain innovative and engaging, allowing players to experience different eras of warfighting and battles across the world.⁶⁵ Since the very beginning, the many creators, writers, and studios behind the expansive series have done their best to create historically accurate depictions and experiences of different battles throughout modern history. By striving to be historically accurate, many of the different Call of Duty campaign modes have been able to tell heroic stories of soldiers of different nations in a powerfully experiential way that teaches military and world history in an immersive way that other forms of media can't quite capture.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Responding to Call of Duty: Critical Essays on the Game Franchise. (2017). United States: McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers.D

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Toppo, G. (2015). The Game Believes in You: How Digital Play Can Make Our Kids Smarter. United States: St. Martin's Publishing Group.

There are a total of 28 Call of Duty games, including expansions, all of which deal with different military conflicts spanning from World War II to future warfare and conflict that could happen in the future. In total, six of the 28 Call of Duty games deal with the topic of World War II, each allowing the player to immersivity experience and engage with historically accurate battles and settings throughout the campaign. Five of the six Call of Duty games that deal with the topic of World War II do an amazing job of telling the military history of the conflict, but they avoid the topic of the Holocaust completely. It wasn't until the release of *Call of Duty, World War II* in 2017 that the topic of the Holocaust was broached.

The Holocaust and experiences of individuals during the Holocaust have been told through literary sources, film, and television.⁶⁷ Some of these interactive and immersive windows into the experience have been used in educational settings, to teach the history and many of the experiences, with the goal of making sure it never happens again.⁶⁸ Due to the fact that the Holocaust was such a traumatic historical period, particularly for Jews and other minority groups who were targeted by the Nazis, there is a fine line when it comes to what is effective and acceptable when it comes to experiential learning. Before *Call of Duty: World War II* came out in 2017, the writers and the producers behind the other World War II-themed Call of Duty games were nervous to broach the subject of the Holocaust because that would mean that the player would be forced to deal with the topic in a way that could potentially be viewed as disrespectful to those who experienced it or their surviving family members.⁶⁹ The writers and

⁶⁷ Neiger, M., Zandberg, E., Meyers, O. (2014). *Communicating Awe: Media Memory and Holocaust Commemoration*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

⁶⁸ Cowan, Paula, and Henry Maitles. *Understanding and Teaching Holocaust Education*. Los Angeles, California: Sage Publications, 2017.

⁶⁹ Shandler, J. (2017). *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age: Survivors' Stories and New Media Practices*. United States: Stanford University Press.

producers of *Call of Duty: World War II*, however, felt they would be doing a disservice if they didn't include the topic of the Holocaust in the game, but they wanted to do it in a way that was respectful, educational, and moving, so the player could get the most out of the experience.⁷⁰

b. Depiction of American Jewish History & Valor in the Military

In dealing with the topic of the Holocaust from an American perspective, the creators of *Call of Duty: World War II* needed to approach the broader topic of antisemitism with a wide lens. At the outset of the game, the player takes on the identity of Corporal Ronald “Red” Daniels, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed American fighting in the American Army during World War II. Although the game is played in the first-person mode, meaning that the player experiences the world through his eyes, it is made clear that he is the stereotypical image of American Valor during this era.⁷¹ It should also be noted that unlike Blazkowicz in *Wolfenstein* and Jack in *Bioshock*, in this game the player is not playing the game through the eyes and with the agency of a Jewish character. Rather, the player views the Jewish character and his interactions through the eyes of Red, serving as a spectator to the dialogue and the actions surrounding him, rather than initiating them.

Private First-Class Robert Zussman is one of the main non-playable characters (NPCs) in *Call of Duty: World War II*. He is described as a Jewish American military man and the best friend of Red. Throughout the storyline, Zussman's Jewish identity is explored by way of subtly antisemitic remarks, through his complicated relationship to his Jewish identity from his point of view, and through his living out and reclaiming of his Jewish values through the course of the

⁷⁰ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, October 13). Interview with Activision. personal.

⁷¹ Jenkins, K., Peabody, B. (2017). *Where Have All the Heroes Gone? The Changing Nature of American Valor*. United States: Oxford University Press.

game, as he navigates the trauma of wartime. With Zussman serving as an NPC in the story, there are moments of meaningful dialogue in which the tension between his Jewish and American identities are highlighted, but because the player doesn't actually get to play as Zussman or interact with him much outside of the main storyline (flashbacks, backstory, etc.), there are elements of his identity that get lost in the story, that could've helped to really serve as an educational window into the American Jewish experience at this time.

The introduction of the American Jewish experience during World War II isn't new to the social consciousness of other forms of media that center around this period of particularly American Jewish history. Literature, film, and television have all previously introduced American Jewish stories into the realm of American Valor, showing beautiful examples of Jews serving as heroes during a time when many forms of consumable media tend to focus on Jews as the victims of this era. Jewish stories of resistance during World War II are plentiful in varying forms of media, but many of them focus on the European Jewish experience, particularly when it comes to the topic of the Holocaust or the ghettos. That leaves plenty of room, then, for a deeper dive into the particularities of the American Jewish experience during this period, especially as it relates to the war effort.

One strikingly notable example of a complex story in media that displays the presence of antisemitism within the ranks of the American military, displays Jewish American military valor during World War II, and addresses the horrors of the Holocaust in an educational, respectful, and moving way, is the HBO historical miniseries, *Band of Brothers*. In Episode 9 of show, entitled, *Why We Fight*, Easy Company, the American Army company on which the series is based, discovers, and helps to liberate the Dachau satellite concentration camp in Bavaria. Leading up to this point, the viewers are introduced to a couple of explicitly Jewish-American

soldiers who either are a part of Easy Company or interact with Easy Company at varying points of the storyline. The show does a good job of highlighting the subtle and sometimes not so subtle antisemitism that unfortunately and inevitably found its way into the ranks of the American military during World War II. In one scene during the beginning, we are introduced to both a Jewish and Catholic soldier, who get into a physical altercation on account of their religious and cultural differences, with the Catholic soldier using the term, “son of Abraham” to derogatorily refer to the Jewish soldier.⁷²

As the war continues and the viewer gets to Episode 9, much of the differences that once separated the soldiers, things like religion, culture, customs, etc., all seem to take a backseat as they are all faced with the horrors of war. Through the shared experience of the trauma of war, the soldiers are able to not only put aside their differences, but they are more ready to accept one another and care for one another in new and meaningful ways. The differences that separated them in Episode 1, ended up bringing them together to support one another in Episode 9. As Easy Company makes its way to and through Dachau, the Americans begin to discover the horrors of the Holocaust first-hand, with many of the non-Jewish soldiers learning the extreme consequences of hate when they realize that the prisoners and victims of the concentration camp were primarily Jewish.⁷³ In this historical drama, the Jewish characters participate in American valor on the American side, as well as victim in need of saving in the concentration camps.

⁷² Band of Brothers Episode 1 Ambrose, S. E. (2016). *Band Of Brothers*. Simon & Schuster.

⁷³ Ibid.

c. *Band of Brothers* and *Call of Duty: World War II*: Participating in the Story

Episode 9 of *Band of Brothers* has been hailed as an incredibly moving and well-depicted educational media source depicting the complexities of the Jewish experience of World War II, highlighting experiences from both the American and the European perspectives. One of the advantages of this media being produced as a miniseries on HBO is that an incredibly thought-out and extended storyline could be effectively communicated, through the careful development of characters and relationships. This form of media, however, leaves the viewer in the role of spectator, allowing for connection with the characters and investment in their stories, but it is limiting because the viewer can't actually participate in the unfolding of the story, as they could in video games.

Call of Duty: World War II is the first Call of Duty game to introduce the topic of the Holocaust, and one of the first video games of all time to take a deep dive into the topic.⁷⁴ Prior to this game, some critics described the gaming industry as being in denial of the Holocaust, since many game developers explicitly chose to avoid the topic altogether in their World War II-themed games.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, because the game only introduced the topic at the very end of the game and didn't spend as much time on the topic as it could have, the inclusion ended up receiving mixed reviews.⁷⁶ Unlike *Band of Brothers* and other forms of strictly viewable media, *Call of Duty: World War II* gives the player agency, so they are actively participating in the unfolding of the storyline. With so much responsibility placed on the player to guide the story in

⁷⁴ Digital Holocaust Memory, Education and Research. (2021). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Rosenberg, A. (2021, October 29). '*call of duty: WWII*' takes one step forward, many steps back in its handling of the Holocaust. Mashable. Retrieved February 7, 2023, from <https://mashable.com/article/call-of-duty-wwii-review-holocaust-critique>

an immersive world, broaching the topic of the Holocaust can be tricky, since there have been countless instances of experiential Holocaust education going horribly wrong, even in the modern era.⁷⁷

To mitigate this, the writers, and developers of *Call of Duty: World War II* decided to use *Band of Brothers* as a source for inspiration, both for exploring the American Jewish experience in the military, as well as in broaching and educating about the Holocaust.⁷⁸ In doing so, their goal was to create an immersive and educational experience on the horrors of the Holocaust in a meaningful way.⁷⁹ Unlike *Band of Brothers*, which has a total run time of about 12 hours between all the episodes, *Call of Duty: World War II* has a storyline that can be completed by a casual gamer in about six to seven hours. This means that the writers of *Call of Duty: World War II* had significantly less story time to create a meaningful, educational, and immersive experience for the player.

By introducing Zussman as the best friend of the protagonist, from whose viewpoint the player experiences the game, the writers can more readily focus on the emotional connection to Zussman, making the depiction of his experience in the Army similar to that of the characters in *Band of Brothers*. Although the experience of Zussman is depicted the same, there is a striking difference in the dialogue because the player gets to defend Zussman from antisemitic microaggressions through their eyes in the first-person, rather than watching the conversation unfold as a third-person, omniscient spectator. The deep relationship between the protagonist and Zussman is developed to the point that the player has a deep level of investment in their

⁷⁷ Asbury, Nicole. "D.C. Third-Graders Were Made to Reenact Episodes from the Holocaust." *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2021.

⁷⁸ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, October 13). Interview with Activision. personal.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

relationship, so when Zussman is captured and brought to a concentration/POW camp, the player feels a responsibility to not only progress the storyline to see what happens next, but to continue to play to save their friend.

d. Analysis of Selection Scene & the Berga Camp

Toward the end of the storyline, the player, Zussman, and the rest of the company are captured by a German group, leading to a cutscene, which is a non-playable section that the player watches to transition from one point of gameplay to another. In this cutscene, all the soldiers are lined up in a row in front of train cars. Zussman, who knows German because some of his family members moved from Germany in the previous generation, hears the Nazi guards talking about selecting the Jews from the group of prisoners of war (POWs) to send them to a separate work camp. Zussman whispers, “loose the tags, they’re looking for Jews,” as he and a couple of the other soldiers take off their dog tags and hide them in the snow below their feet.

From here, the Nazi guard in charge pulls out his revolver and asks one of the American soldiers to identify the Jews of the company. When he refuses, the Nazi shoots the American soldier in the head. Zussman, still standing in line, has a back-and-forth conversation with the guard in German. When the guard once again asks for the Jews, Zussman responds in English, “We’re Americans. Period.” At that moment, Zussman and a couple of the other soldiers are beaten and put into railcars. As the story continues, it is revealed that Zussman and a few of the other Jewish American soldiers have been taken to Berga concentration camp, which was a combination POW and concentration work subcamp of Buchenwald.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Felton, M. (2019). Operation Swallow: American Soldiers' Remarkable Escape from Berga Concentration Camp. United Kingdom: Center Street.

The main character, controlled by the player, as well as the rest of the company make their way to Berga, in hopes of finding Zussman. Before the player regains control of the main character, however, there is an un-skippable cutscene that the player must watch in its entirety before continuing with the gameplay. In the cutscene, the main character narrates the discovery of the horrors of the Holocaust, with digitally rendered images of prisoners wearing yellow stars in concentration camps. As the player regains control of the main character, the first image is that of the entrance to Berga, with embers still burning in the recently abandoned camp. The player is then guided through the entire camp, walking through barracks, by recently killed soldiers, and through the destruction. It is then revealed that the camp had recently been abandoned, with all the surviving prisoners having been sent on a death march, a historically accurate retelling of the actual events at Berga during the end of the war.⁸¹

After making their way through the entire camp, the player then ventures into the woods to find Zussman, with bodies of those who didn't make it strewn throughout the path. Eventually, the player reaches Zussman, who has collapsed with a Nazi guard standing over him. The order is given for the main character to take the shot, so the player pulls out a gun and is responsible for killing the guard in order to save Zussman's life. As the player approaches Zussman, he is depicted as completely emaciated and near death, so some of the other soldiers must help him up, while another takes pictures of him to document the horrors of the Holocaust and of the war. Thankfully, the player is told that Zussman survives at the end of the game, with the player getting a final look at a healthy, recovered Zussman.

⁸¹ Ibid.

e. Immersive Educational Experience

Although a text description of the events in *Call of Duty: World War II* don't accurately convey the development of the character of Zussman, his experiences at the Berga camp and the death march, or the main character's exploration of the recently abandoned camp, it does convey the intensity of the immersive experience of the player. While other forms of media, like literature, film, and television, can all invoke similar emotional responses, convey a similar narrative, and teach the history of the events contained within, there is something unique about the immersive nature of the participatory nature of the video game experience. Even though *Call of Duty: World War II* focuses around fictional characters, it does tell a historically accurate narrative around the American soldier's experience of World War II and the Holocaust. In assessing the expression of American Jewish identity, antisemitism, World War II history, and Holocaust history in an immersive video game experience, the question then becomes whether this video game holds any educational value for teaching about these topics.

On one hand, the game has an incredible amount of educational value because it tackles major historical topics and experiences in a way that can't be captured by other forms of media. Movies and television can depict, in great detail, the setting of a battlefield, portray relationships, and give insight to what the inside of a POW/concentration camp looked like. The major benefit of the video game experience is the inclusion of all of these elements, with the addition of the agency of the player. By allowing the player to be an active participant, rather than a passive viewer, the medium of video games provides an incredible experiential educational experience, as well as an opportunity for entertainment.⁸² The responsibility for creating a historically

⁸² Squire, K. (2011). *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age*. United Kingdom: Teachers College Press.

accurate storyline that is respectful to those who actually experienced the events or their descendants, then, lies entirely on the developers.

On the other hand, because such a heavy responsibility is placed on the writers and the developers, there is a wide margin for error in depicting such an emotionally stirring, historical experience. Because the section of the story that included the camp and Zussman's experience came at the very end of the game, it lacked some of the depth that it could've otherwise had.⁸³ As a result, rather than displaying the complexity of Zussman's experience, he was used more as a prop in the storyline, pigeonholing him into the category of Jew as victim during the Holocaust, in need of rescue by the non-Jewish hero.⁸⁴ Conversely, the inclusion of Zussman as a complex Jewish American hero through the majority of the story does help to paint a vibrantly full portrait of the Jewish American experience, particularly as it pertains to the military experience of Jewish Americans.

f. Nazi Zombies

One of the long-running game modes in the Call of Duty franchise is the Nazi Zombies game mode. This cooperative game mode follows the story of an alternate-history fictional world in which the Nazis engage in a combination of science and dark magic to create an undead army, in hopes of winning the war as the tide turns against them. Unlike other elements of the Call of Duty franchise, which gets revamped each year with each new release, the Nazi Zombies game

⁸³ Rosenberg, A. (2021, October 29). *'call of duty: WWII' takes one step forward, many steps back in its handling of the Holocaust*. Mashable. Retrieved February 7, 2023, from <https://mashable.com/article/call-of-duty-wwii-review-holocaust-critique>

⁸⁴ Horn, Dara. *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present*. New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2021.

mode is the one constant between each of them. If the scope of this work were expanded to include the depiction of the Nazis in video games, in contrast with the depiction of Jewish characters as they relate to the Holocaust and World War II, an in-depth exploration of this game mode and the incredibly intricate storyline would be essential to the discussion.

Chapter 4: Bioshock

a. Introduction of the Franchise, Introduction of Characters, & Story Summary

Bioshock is a game that was written and produced by Ken Levine in partnership with Irrational Games, 2k Boston and other major video game studios, officially releasing in North America in August of 2007. Like the *Wolfenstein* series, *Bioshock* was revolutionary upon release because of its intense storytelling, its audio and visual quality, and the smooth action mechanics. In an interview, creator Ken Levine stated that his goal for *Bioshock* was to create a, “...genetically enhanced action-adventure horror game...[with the story] inspired by themes in *Atlas Shrugged* another Ayn Rand novels...[and characters] based on personality traits of Jewish family members, friends, and community members whom [he] had grown up with...”⁸⁵

The game takes place in the year 1960, when Jack, the sole survivor of a plane crash in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, swims toward what appears to be a lighthouse. Upon entering the lighthouse, the player, controlling Jack, enters the underwater city of Rapture, which has just experienced a genetically enhanced civil war. It is at this time that the player encounters Atlas, an individual with an Irish accent who communicates with Jack via radio, helping the player navigate the beginning of the game and beyond. As Andrew Ryan, the founder of Rapture, discovers that Jack has entered the city, he is convinced that Jack is an agent of a surface nation who has come to see the final destruction of Rapture, which is already all but destroyed.

In an attempt to protect Rapture, Andrew Ryan uses a host of automated systems around Rapture and pheromone-controlled, genetically altered beings called Splicers to try to kill Jack. In response, Atlas instructs Jack to inject himself with things in the game called Plamids, to gain special abilities to fight back against the genetically altered, faster and stronger Splicers. By

⁸⁵ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, September 3). Interview with Ken Levine. personal.

using the different Plasmids to gain special abilities, player is told that they need to harvest ADAM, a special essence that is contained within beings that are referred to as the Little Sisters. The Little Sisters live throughout Rapture and are guarded by what are called Big Daddies, which are massive, incredibly strong, boss-like characters. In encountering the first Little Sister, Jack is introduced to Dr. Brigid Tenenbaum, who urges him, and subsequently the player, to save the Little Sisters, instead of killing them. Here, the player has a choice – kill the Little Sisters and gain as much ADAM, and therefore abilities as possible, or save the Little Sisters and gather less ADAM.

Through the remainder of the storyline, the player gets closer to learning more about the history of Rapture, who Andrew Ryan is, and why Dr. Brigid Tenenbaum cares so much about the Little Sisters. After fighting a host of different genetically enhanced individuals throughout the course of the game, the player finally goes and confronts Andrew Ryan in his office. Through the discovery of audio diaries and conversations with Ryan over the radio, Ryan figures out that Jack is his son, who was born in Rapture four years prior, but was genetically enhanced to mature at an extremely rapid pace, which allowed him to survive the genetic mutations that occurred using the Plasmids throughout the game. This revelation means that the player has been playing the game through the eyes of Ryan's Jewish son the entire time, but something that the player doesn't find out until near the end of the first game.

As the game concludes, there are three possible endings, depending on what moral choices the player makes throughout. If the player saved all the Little Sisters, then Dr. Tenenbaum would help five of them come to the surface with Jack, where he raises them as his own daughters. If the player saved some of them and killed some of them, or if the player killed all of them, then Jack dies in Rapture and the ending is narrated by a sad, angry, and betrayed

Tenenbaum. By giving the player the option to influence the outcome of the game depending on their choices, the player is given an incredible amount of moral agency in interacting with other characters in the game, being rewarded or punished for their actions.

b. Escape, Promised Land, & Eden

While the storyline contained within *Bioshock* is immensely rich and full of philosophical questions, much of the Jewish experience is contained within the backstory of the characters leading up to the events that unfold in the game. It should be noted that much of the lore related to the individuals within the game comes from audio files and diaries that can be discovered in game, as well as from other canonical sources, such as interviews with the creator and books/guides written about the game series, itself. This means that if this game were to be used to discuss Jewish philosophy or be in conversation with the other games mentioned in this study, then much of the discussion would rely on the reported experiences of the characters prior to the creation of Rapture and the unfolding of the events in the game.

Although around 90% of the characters in *Bioshock* are explicitly culturally Jewish, the idea for and execution of Rapture surrounds the two main non-playable characters, Andrew Ryan and Dr. Brigid Tenenbaum. Andrew Ryan, having moved to America from a town outside Minsk and having been raised Jewish, experienced a lot of antisemitism in his lifetime, so he never really felt as though he belonged anywhere. Dr. Brigid Tenenbaum, having survived the horrors of Auschwitz, also moved to America in hopes of starting over. She also never truly felt welcomed into American society and was hoping for a chance at redemption for the things she experienced in the camp, so she teamed up with Ryan to create Rapture, or a “new Eden,” as they described it.

The ideology behind the idea for Rapture is very Zionist in nature – there needs to be a place for Jews and other marginalized peoples to go where they can be safe, live the lives they want to live, and not be limited by what society tells them they should do.⁸⁶ Andrew Ryan, Brigid Tenenbaum, and all of the other characters set out to make Rapture an escape from the world, since each of them had been wronged by the world in some way or another before their time in Rapture. During and after the civil war that tears Rapture apart, Andrew Ryan becomes exceedingly paranoid that external forces, i.e., in the form of Jack, have come to finally destroy Rapture, so that no Jew or no marginalized person could be safe. This paranoia around the destruction of what Ryan believes to be the last safe place on earth for Jews and other marginalized peoples, speaks to the deep mistrust and pain many Jews felt, particularly after World War II and the Holocaust.

The inclusion of Rapture as a new Eden speaks to the heart of the original Zionist idea, the idea that Jews needed a safe place to have self-determination and agency over their own lives, escaping the endless cycles of antisemitism and violence that the rest of the world had exhibited through time. In the original Zionist Congress and surrounding meetings, Israel wasn't actually the first or only choice for a Jewish state.⁸⁷ Other lands were suggested as possibilities, and it wasn't until later in the conversation that Israel became the clear choice.⁸⁸ The lore around the foundation of Rapture in the game *Bioshock*, then, serves as a reflection of the Jewish need for a homeland. Of course, in the game, Rapture goes through a civil war and falls apart, but the clear need for a homeland for Jews and other marginalized peoples remains.

⁸⁶ Laqueur, W. (2009). *A History of Zionism: From the French Revolution to the Establishment of the State of Israel*. United Kingdom: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

⁸⁷ *The First Zionist Congress: An Annotated Translation of the Proceedings*. (2019). United States: State University of New York Press.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

c. Celebration of Cultural Judaism

The underwater city of Rapture has a deep and rich backstory, but that is only because of the complex backstory of each of the characters housed squarely within the establishment of Rapture in the game. In describing the creation of each of the characters, Ken Levine mentioned that just culturally/ethnically Jewish names was only the beginning – Brigid Tenenbaum, Sander Cohen, J.S. Steinman, and a host of others, embodied the core of post-Holocaust Jewish identity: trauma, displacement, betrayal, and the search for a place where they could finally be free of the antisemitism of the outside world that so deeply affected each of them.⁸⁹ The blending of Jewish social consciousness after the Holocaust and the cultural Jewish experience of New York City after the war were major influences on Levine’s creation of the characters, since he ended up basing each of them on elements of his own family members and community.⁹⁰

In talking about the creation of the game with Levine, he stated that he identifies as culturally Jewish, rather than religiously, so it was important to him to get the cultural and philosophical aspects of each of the Jewish characters right, since religion wouldn’t be a part of the foundational elements behind Rapture.⁹¹ One of the reactions to the Holocaust was the rejection of the religious Jewish experience, since many had felt abandoned by God during a time of extreme need for the Jewish People.⁹² Philosophy, then, was the main driver behind Andrew Ryan’s in game vision for Rapture, so Levine drew heavily on Ayn Rand’s life story, Jewish identity, and philosophy to create the world.

⁸⁹ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, September 3). Interview with Ken Levine. personal.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Elie Wiesel's Night. (2014). United Kingdom: Infobase Holdings, Incorporated.

After recognizing just how culturally Jewish the game ended up becoming, Levine recalled some of his experiences going up in New York City, being surrounded by Jewish food, life, culture, accents, and family. He recalled that during the time he was growing up, the New York that he knew was a cultural hub of Jewish life, composed of Jewish doctors, scientists, artists, performers, bakers, cooks, and so much more. It was this experience of the post-Holocaust Jewish cultural revitalization in a safe hub that influenced his creation of Rapture in the game.

d. The Jewish Educational Experience

Bioshock is a game that is packed full of cultural Jewish experiences and expressions, Jewish philosophical questions, and Zionist ideals. While much of the rich history and story does come out in the game, through the discovery of audio tapes and interacting with each of the characters, much of the foundational Jewish experiences of the characters can be missed if the player isn't paying attention. The game itself does have an incredible amount of cultural Jewish ideals and philosophy to teach the players, along with the Zionist, withdrawal reaction to the Holocaust, but it must be done in an intentional way. Because the game itself was so mechanically revolutionary and exhibits such action-packed and immersive gameplay, it takes a couple of intentional playthroughs of the game in order to get the full scope of the potential educational value housed within.

Chapter 5: Conclusion of Findings

a. Diverse Landscape of Jewish Characters in Video Games

Like many forms of media, video games allow for the deep exploration and expression of a multitude of cultural, religious, historical, and personal experiences through meaningful character development. Unlike other forms of media, however, video games provide a unique medium for experiencing these characters and settings by allowing the player to have an active role in exploring the environment and developing those relationships throughout the story. The participatory and experiential elements of the video game experience allow for an additional layer of meaning and educational value to be added into the experience, inviting greater opportunities for a host of stories and experiences to be communicated in immersive new ways.

Wolfenstein, *Call of Duty: World War II*, and *Bioshock* are three AAA video game titles that explore a diverse range of Jewish characters, identity, history, and experience. The characters themselves are written with complex and diverse backgrounds, express their Jewishness in unique ways, and each participate in the unfolding of their Jewish story in relation to the world around them in authentic ways. Each character is able to express themselves in ways that show the complexity of American Jewish life during the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, holding in tension the experience of embracing and celebrating one's identity, while at the same time trying to find a safe place to settle into the wider society.

Across all three game franchises, each of these characters are searching for a place to belong, where they can be wholly themselves and feel safe. In the case of *Wolfenstein*, Blazkowicz is a proud American Jew who is the son of immigrants from Poland. His entire goal for the game is to rid the world of the Nazis so his Jewish children can have a safe place to live and to grow. In *Call of Duty: World War II*, Zussman is the example of the American Jew who doesn't shy away

from his Jewishness, but he is also conscious of his desire to situate himself in American culture, society, and military life as an American first. At the opposite end of the spectrum lie the characters in *Bioshock*, who after the Holocaust and the war, decide to not only retreat away from their world, but also from their explicit Jewishness. Although each of the characters readily expresses and interacts with Jewish philosophy and ideals throughout the game and the backstory leading up to the game, their goal is to create an assimilated society where all human beings are truly equal, since Andrew Ryan specifically felt there was no place for him on the surface world.

All three of these games take place in different settings – *Wolfenstein* and *Bioshock* are situated in two alternate-history landscapes that require the Jewish characters housed within to react to the aftermath, or in the case of *Wolfenstein*, the continuation, of the Holocaust in different ways. In *Wolfenstein*, Blazkowicz is the face of Jewish resistance in response to the Holocaust, allowing the player to engage in his Revenge Fantasy against the Nazis through the players choices and actions in the game. In *Call of Duty: World War II*, Zussman fills the role of passive Jewish victim to the experience of the Holocaust. While he remains a major character throughout the course of the story, he is a non-playable character who, despite standing up to the Nazis, needs the non-Jewish American hero to come and save him. Finally, in *Bioshock*, Andrew Ryan and Brigid Tenenbaum come together to altogether reject the surface world, feeling abandoned by other peoples and governments for allowing the Holocaust to happen and for continuing to allow antisemitism to push them out of assimilated society. In portraying each of these characters and events in this way, these three games, whether intentionally or not, can be used to teach about Jewish life, culture, and reactions to the Holocaust in a meaningfully immersive way.

b. Wolfenstein: Jewish Resistance

Perhaps one of the best expressions of Jewish American character development comes in the form of Blazkowitz in *Wolfenstein*. Throughout the course of the series, Blazkowitz not only responds to the ongoing war and Holocaust with physical violence in an alternate-history landscape, but he also leans more heavily into his Jewish identity, allowing his very existence to serve as an act of resistance. This continued embrace of Jewish identity comes from a little help from Set Roth, another Jewish character in the story, who fills more of the stereotypical portrayal of the European Jewish experience. Although not physically strong, Set Roth leans into his intellect, using his intelligence, his wit, and his Jewish identity to fight back against the Nazis in ways that Blazkowitz can't. By juxtaposing these two Jewish characters at the heart of the story, a complete and complex portrait of Jewish identity and resistance is painted.

Through the intentional creation of these two characters and their acts of resistance in the unfolding of the storyline, *Wolfenstein* has the opportunity to serve as an educational tool to teach about Jewish identity and the response of resistance in the face of the Holocaust. Because the game is fictional and is housed within an alternate-history landscape, some basic background knowledge about the Holocaust and the history of World War II is necessary, so some of the nuance that the storyline holds in referencing elements of the actual history can be effectively understood by the player. Also, due the fact that the game itself is meant mainly for entertainment reasons, there are large sections of playable missions that break up the coherent overall storyline, so a condensed, focused presentation of elements within the game and particular story moments would need to be pulled out in order to be used in an educational setting.

In interviewing individuals who had played the game, it was interesting to note who picked up on the elements of Jewish identity, Jewish resistance, and Jewish history contained within the game. Over the limited number of participants in a short survey, it was clear that individuals with baseline Holocaust education and some relation to the Jewish community, whether they were personally Jewish or not, had a deeper understanding of the impact of the story and how the writers and developers were using the story to speak to not only past instances of hatred and antisemitism, but also to the modern American experience.⁹³ It should also be noted that because of the limited scope of this project, the participant pool was limited to American college students and young adults who had actually played the game for themselves. If the scope of this project were to be expanded, it would be interesting to poll a larger pool and to set up a study for people of different demographics playing the game for the first time.

c. Call of Duty: World War II: Jewish Victim

One of the greatest strengths of *Call of Duty: World War II* is the thought, care, and intention that went into the exploration of the topic of the Holocaust in such an immersive medium. Previously, there had been other games in the Call of Duty franchise and other video games that had taken a dive into exploring World War II through immersive battleground environments, but the topic of the Holocaust was never broached, out of fear that in doing so, the writers and developers might wander into the realm of cheapening the experience or the history, unintentionally being disrespectful to the victims and their descendants, or running the risk of inaccurately portraying the history itself.

⁹³ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, September – December). Interview with players. personal.

By including a walkthrough scene where the main character, controlled by the player, has to walk through a recently abandoned camp, the player gets an incredibly unique and visceral experience, an experience that, when done well, has borderline unlimited educational benefits. Perhaps one of the reasons that the camp scene works so well in the storyline is the fact that it has recently been abandoned. The player gets to walk through and see the pain, the depravity, and the death that took place there, without including gratuitous depictions of suffering and death, something that would've drastically taken away from the emotional impact of the scene and the inherent educational value.

Since *Call of Duty: World War II* takes place in a fictional setting, but is based on real events with real places, there is an educational advantage of using this game over *Wolfenstein* or other games that may be set in an entirely fictional or alternate-history time and space. In appealing to the historicity of the event and developing the characters in a meaningful way, the player creates almost an emotional attachment to the characters, creating a level of buy-in and experience that can't be replicated through the mediums of literature, television, or film. While experiential learning around the topic of the Holocaust has been iffy, particularly in public or non-Jewish school settings, games like *Call of Duty: World War II* open up a world of possibility as it relates to the exploration of the topic of the Holocaust in a new way.

One of the drawbacks of the game, however, is the depiction of the character of Zussman as the Jewish victim of the events that unfold in the game. While it is true that Zussman does end up surviving the camp and the death march, he unfortunately is still presented in the one-dimensional role of Jewish victim in the face of the Holocaust, needing to be rescued by the non-Jewish American hero. On one hand, the player gets to spend some meaningful in-game time with Zussman and watch him grow as a character. There are great elements of addressing

antisemitism in the American military at this time period and Zussman gets powerful heroic moments throughout the campaign, but the writers and creators could've done a better job of bringing the complexity of his character into the camp and post-camp scenes, rather than just making him a passive victim to the circumstances.

Overall, *Call of Duty: World War II* provides an experiential window into a richly crafted landscape to provide an interactive educational experience for the player in an immersive, interactive way. By blending elements of the American Jewish military experience with that of the Holocaust, the game provides for a rich opportunity for educational experiences that players may not have been able to receive otherwise. Also, by putting the character of Zussman into the victim role, the game provides for the opportunity for critique and the further exploration of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust, if broached in an educational setting.

d. Bioshock: Jewish Retreat from the World

In terms of storyline, Bioshock is perhaps the most philosophical of the three games explored in this study. While the game itself takes place after the Holocaust, the creation of Rapture comes as a direct response to the Holocaust and from Andrew Ryan and Brigid Tenenbaum feeling as though they couldn't find a safe place to settle in society. While *Wolfenstein* provides the model of Jewish resistance to the Holocaust and *Call of Duty: World War II* provides the model for Jewish victimhood in response to the Holocaust, *Bioshock* presents the third model, Jewish retreat from the world.

Andrew Ryan was born in a small village near Minsk and witnessed the Russian Revolution and the beginnings of World War I. Eventually, he moved to America to start a new life, anglicizing his name to Andrew Ryan to assimilate. In a speech in the game, Ryan states that

leaving Minsk was his first exodus, and later in life, meeting Tenenbaum and establishing Rapture would be his second exodus. In this way, the goal of Rapture was to be a promised land, or a “new Eden” as he called it throughout the game. This new promised land was a hope for a place where Ryan could finally feel accepted and a part of the society, something that he longed for but never found in America.

The second most influential and essential character to the story is Dr. Brigid Tenenbaum, who personally survived the Holocaust. During the Holocaust she was sent to Auschwitz where her medical background was discovered. Upon discovery of her medical knowledge, she was tasked with assisting with some of the medical experiments, which she did in order to survive. After being liberated and moving to America, she meets Andrew Ryan, who offers her a chance at redemption in the new city of Rapture, a place where she could use her medical knowledge to positively advance the future of humanity in the new Eden, the promised land.

In discussing the creation of the game with the creator, Ken Levine, he stated that the game ended up being, “...way more Jewish than I intended. With each of the characters created with personality traits based off of family and friends growing up in New York and hearing of some of their experiences with assimilation and antisemitism, that sort of bled into this game...”⁹⁴ Deeply Jewish characters and explicit elements of Jewish philosophy allow for *Bioshock* to be one of the most inherently culturally Jewish games to come out of a AAA game studio. While the main storyline and the gameplay itself is not overtly Jewish, the game itself is able to serve as a window into elements of Jewish philosophy, morality, and culture when intentionally viewed through the right educational lens.

⁹⁴ Derrenbacher, M. (2022, September 3). Interview with Ken Levine. personal.

e. Video Games as Teaching Tools

Wolfenstein, *Call of Duty: World War II*, and *Bioshock* all present Jewish characters, themes, philosophy, history, and reactions to the Holocaust in authentic, researched, and lived ways in an incredibly immersive and participatory medium, allowing for the player to gain educational insight into the Jewish experience that the writers and creators of the games produce. While other video game titles and franchises have utilized Jewish characters, explored Jewish themes, and waded into the topic of the Holocaust, they have generally been produced by smaller, independent studios, or if they were produced by larger studios, they didn't quite dive into the Jewish experience or the experience of the Holocaust in such deep, immersive, and expansive ways.

Since these three games developed the Jewish characters, themes, and their reactions to the Holocaust with such intention, they can be used in educational settings to unpack Jewish culture, philosophy, themes, assimilation, and reactions to the Holocaust through three distinct lenses.

Call of Duty: World War II has the unique benefit of allowing the player to experience a recently abandoned camp, so if the player has been able to visit a concentration camp or Holocaust Museum themselves, then this game provides an invaluable opportunity for them to have a digital version of that experience. In contrast, *Wolfenstein* allows the player to experience the concentration camp in the modern, alternate-history timeline. By breaking down that experience with Blazkowicz and Set Roth, juxtaposed with the experience of the main character in *Call of Duty: World War II*, meaningful, experiential educational opportunities become readily available, with the right educational guidance.

While these games were initially created to tell stories as a form of immersive entertainment, they also can be used educationally, if brought into the classroom or study hall for guided play

and discussion. The average player may not initially approach these games with the intent of learning about Jewish characters, culture, or the Holocaust, by immersing them in these worlds, surrounded by these characters, the player can engage in an educational experience by virtue of actively participating in the unfolding of the story. *Wolfenstein* and *Bioshock* both have the added benefit of allowing the player to see the world through Jewish eyes and interact with the world with Jewish hands.

f. Are Video Games the Future of Jewish Education?

Now, the final question that must be asked is, can video games be the future for Jewish education and Holocaust education? Based on the limited scope of this research, the answer is a resounding, yes. Thanks to the unique medium that video games provide, effective, intentional, immersive, and experiential educational experiences can be had by the players individually or in a group, depending on the educational experience being sought. By dropping the players into an immersive world, surrounding them with a diverse cast of characters, and providing them with agency to explore and interact with the world and characters around them, the opportunity for deeper educational experiences become readily available.

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