

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: ERGODIC ONTOGENY: INFLUENCES OF INTERACTIVE MEDIA ON IDENTITY.

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Video games represent the future of storytelling, changing the impact of cultural narratives in important ways through a process of learning and internalization of game content that alters players' perceptions of self and reality. Continued rigorous research of interactive media is necessary because of the speed at which technology changes its capabilities and the dominant nature of its format - it is how many people will tell, hear, and experience stories, culture, and values in the coming years. This dissertation argues that a deeper understanding of how people play video games and what these play experiences mean must rely on interdisciplinary lenses of analysis that value player reports, programming choices, and cultural narratives equally. I establish a theoretical and methodological approach that defines elements of what it means to play video games, and study the qualitative influence of game-play on thought and behavior through pragmatic analysis of interview data. Samples of masculine discourses of game play in the United States provide a starting point for this exploration of video game impact through discussions of play theory, narratology, game programming and interaction with interactive media hardware.

Common social concerns regarding increased violence, aggression, or de-socialization as a result of this medium were not represented in the population presented in this dissertation. Players recognized the allure of the so-called negative aspects of video games, but ultimately expressed a decided disconnect between the real world and virtual experiences of play, describing cathartic and therapeutic reasons for their enjoyment of those elements. An interdisciplinary approach to video game research must be embraced, despite a constant call for quick, universal answers to their most common critiques. Foundational themes for understanding the influence of interactive digital play experiences on personal identity and ideology construction are demonstrated through thematic and socio-linguistic analyses of in-depth interview data. These include play theory, narratology, human-computer interaction theory, and player report data. I draw on the established theoretical backgrounds of these disciplines to suggest a new term, ergodic ontogeny, to describe this complex process of personal development resulting from influences of interactive digital media gaming that reach beyond play experiences.