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Meet the Members of Congress Who Play Video Games

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Scott Peters had never played *Mario Kart* before, but he sure as hell wasn't going to lose to Darrell Issa.

Peters, a Democrat from San Diego who represents California's 52nd congressional district, battled Issa, a Republican from the neighboring 49th district, at last year's Comic-Con. Peters had been pretty good at *Pac-Man* back in the day, during law school in New York in the 1980s, to the point where, whenever he sees what he calls a "*Pac-Man* machine," he'll stop and give it his best shot, just for old time's sake. But *Mario Kart* — the new Nintendo Switch version, at least — was a whole different animal, and he wasn't confident his atrophying skills gobbling up Pac-Dots would transfer. So his chief of staff brought in a subject-matter expert: her 12-year-old son. Peters, who's 59, made himself comfortable in a bean-bag chair while the tween taught him the basics. "He was very patient with me," Peters says. "Throw the mushroom! Throw the mushroom!"

In the end, he crammed well enough to beat Issa, and the pair's exploits were well-received. For video game players, and even for national politics, this was a seismic event: Two lawmakers (virtually) rumbled on a San Diego rooftop, ostensibly proving to the assembled crowd that 1) Democrats and Republicans *can* get along, and 2) they're pretty cool dudes.

Since practically the days of *Pong*, video games have been a bipartisan political target. In 1993, former Sen. Joe Lieberman began his long-running crusade against violent ones, telling Congress in a seminal hearing that if it weren't for that pesky First Amendment, he'd like to ban them. In 2005, Hillary Clinton introduced legislation in the Senate to tighten restrictions on violent and sexually explicit games. And in March, President Donald Trump revived the discredited argument, first floated after the Columbine massacre, that playing violent video games contributes to mass shootings.

Yet at the same time, and for the first time, people at the highest levels of Washington power have begun to talk about their video-game habits unashamedly. What used to be a furtive secret is now out in the open. D.C. is typically late to the party—1962’s *Spacewar!*, arguably the first video game, will pretty soon be old enough to collect Social Security—and it’s not like Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer spend their weekends playing *Fortnite*: The Entertainment Software Association, the largest lobbying group for video games, estimates that about a dozen House members regularly play on consoles like a Switch, PlayStation or Xbox. Many more play games like *Candy Crush* and *Angry Birds* on their phone. Fewer play in the Senate, which skews much older than 35, the average age of a gamer.

More important, those who do play say that spending time with *Mario Kart*, *Zelda* and other virtual games has helped them excel in their jobs in politics and policy. “Gaming is good,” Rep. Jared Polis, a Democrat from Colorado, says. “It involves critical thinking skills. It involves tactical skills and strategic skills. And I absolutely think it’s helped me navigate Washington tactically.” And even if learning the ins and outs of say, Blizzard’s *Overwatch* doesn’t directly translate into knowing how to make a bill a law, Washington’s gamers say that their shared knowledge has enabled them to make connections with colleagues, reporters—and voters.

Polis will be at a town hall in Fort Collins, or maybe a meeting with marijuana advocates, and a constituent — usually, but not always, a dude, most often in his 20s or 30s — will bring it up. *I know you main Maokai!* they’ll say. It’s one of his favorite characters to play in one of his favorite video games, *League of Legends*, a multiplayer effort in which otherworldly creatures battle using fantastical magic. (Maokai is sort of like a mutant tree, with brambly hands and devastating magical powers.)

Often, they want to play with him. *League of Legends* is the kind of game you play together, but alone: You may be at home in Colorado, but you’re fighting off other teams with players in Korea and Belgium and Japan. So, once he’s vetted them a bit — talked with them on Reddit for a while, or maybe even met them in person — Polis might give them his handle. (I made the faux pas of asking if it’s close to his name, but he told me that a handle like that would be considered tacky.) “I think people in my district get kind of excited,” Polis, who’s 42, says. “I played against my congressman!”

When he finds out someone’s a gamer — or rather, they find him — “there’s five or 10 minutes of small talk you just have with somebody,” he says. Like baseball or *Game of Thrones*, it’s a way to connect with younger constituents. (It’s also landed him in hot water: In 2015, the House Ethics Committee investigated him for alleged improper endorsements of a video game, though the charges were eventually dismissed.)

And then there was the time Olivier Knox, then the chief Washington correspondent for Yahoo News (he’s now with Sirius XM), was at a stakeout in a Rayburn hallway and unexpectedly found a fellow gamer. While Knox and other reporters waited for a congressman, the spokeswoman for a House committee made a joke about “Vault-Tec,” a fictional, nefarious corporation from the game *Fallout 3*, which is set in a post-apocalyptic Washington. “I

remember having to explain it to a couple people in the group of reporters after she left,” Knox, 47, says. “They were embarrassed about not getting the reference.”

Maybe Washington could benefit from having fewer smooth-talking, charismatic politicians, says Frank Lantz, the director of the game design program at New York University, and more of the kind of people who are drawn to video games. And what kinds of people are those, exactly? At first, Lantz struggled to articulate it. “There is an association between people who love games and people who, maybe ... OK,” he said. “There is a certain overlap — how can I put this? — people who are maybe less naturally socially adept. Less naturally charismatic and articulate, but are more analytical...” Then Lantz gave up the stonewalling. “Nerds! Nerds.” Politics, he says, “needs more of that personality type.”

“If games are your hobby, then you have a hobby that involves solving problems,” he went on to say. “You are faced with challenges, and you have to figure it out.” It’s sometimes hard for people who don’t play video games, he says, to see past the dragons or dark elves or supernatural monster hunters. “People look at *Fallout*, and what they see is, ‘This is a weird game about a post-apocalyptic landscape, and it’s about guns and getting head shots on mutants. ‘Is that what you’re into? Is that the kind of person you are?’ What they don’t see is that it’s a game about creative problem-solving with limited resources in a context of uncertainty.”

Other gamers say the benefits are less abstract. In legislating on internet policy, for example, it helps to be well-versed in video games, says Dante Atkins, 35, the communications director for Rep. John Garamendi, a Democrat from northern California. Gamers understood the debates waged over the anti-piracy bills SOPA and PIPA, Atkins says. They appreciated the complexities of repealing net neutrality, rules that prevented broadband providers from slowing sites or charging more for faster access. They got GamerGate, the coordinated harassment campaign against women in the industry. “Having an understanding of gamer communities, both the good sides and the dark sides,” he says, “is very useful.”

Others have caught on to the industry’s economic benefits in their districts, like in Washington state, where Microsoft and Nintendo’s U.S. headquarters are based, or in Georgia, where the industry now generates more than \$160 million a year. “It’s excellent for Georgia,” Rep. Doug Collins, a Republican from Gainesville, Ga., says of video games in his state. Collins played games like *Madden NFL* and *MLB The Show* with his two sons when they were growing up. “It was really a big deal if I beat one of them, because they wouldn’t let each other live it down until they beat me again,” he says with a laugh. Now, he’ll sometimes play *Candy Crush* chess on his iPhone “just to keep my mind occupied.”

Rep. Suzan DelBene, a Democrat from Washington state, says she’s played a myriad of games over the years with her 25-year-old son. “I’d say I’ve *attempted* to play some games,” she says. “I’m not very good.” Last fall, to mark Teach a Girl to Tech Day, she *attempted* to play *Mario Kart* with elementary and middle school girls. DelBene talked to them about her own experience working in tech — she worked in business software and was at Microsoft for more than a decade — and encouraged them to pursue careers in STEM. Then they creamed her.

Still, although many of the people I interviewed insisted that there wasn't anything shameful about gaming, some used language that suggested they thought otherwise. The legacy of Lieberman, Clinton and GamerGate — along with Trump's revival of the widely disproven idea that violent video games lead to school shootings — is hard to shake. One journalist, when I asked about other people who play, declined to name names for fear of "outing" acquaintances. And a Republican staffer told me that while he was sure members of Congress played, "it wouldn't be something to advertise, I imagine."

Jon Lovett, a former speechwriter for President Obama turned podcast celebrity who loves *Shadow of the Colossus* and *Super Mario Odyssey*, says gamers in Washington are definitely judged for playing. "It's a reasonable thing to tell somebody, 'I've watched 70 hours of *Game of Thrones*.' That's a totally normal, boring thing to say about yourself," says Lovett, who's 35. "But if you were like, 'I just spent 100 hours playing *Skryim*' — a game that sends players on a circuitous quest to defeat a world-eating dragon — "people think you're a weirdo."

"I'm certainly a little bit self-conscious of being nearly 48," Knox told me, "and playing a game in which I race around a post-nuclear wasteland Boston building improbable settlements and shooting ghouls and raiders." (That would be *Fallout 4*.) Washington, he says, "is definitely a place where if you do war games at the Pentagon, it's pretty cool. If you do war games in your basement, maybe it's less cool."

Not everyone feels that way, of course. Julian Sanchez, 39, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute who last year dressed up as the protagonist from the game *Witcher 3* for Halloween — complete with yellow-tinted cat-eye contacts — says he's never felt embarrassed about playing. "It's not some weird under-the-sheets-with-a-flashlight thing," he says.

More than the collective cringe the word can still induce, says Lovett, a lot of Washington types care about only one thing. "Politics is both their job and their hobby," he says. "They don't have a lot of interests outside of it." It's what they read about, talk about, think about. "It's a lot of people who are like, 'How are video games gonna help me get my next job?'"

Maybe that's primed to change. As more people who grew up playing video games take on powerful jobs in Washington, could networking mean playing *Super Smash Bros.* instead of going for happy hour? Could *Madden* supplant golf as a way to hobnob with donors? Could there one day be a *League of Legends* caucus? I floated the latter by Polis, and he swiftly shot me down.

"If anything," he said, "it's actually a little awkward to have somebody that you're in a committee with who is also playing, because what if they're terrible? What if they screw up your game?"