

Article

Games as Political Actors in Digital Journalism

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to explore the role of digital games as political actors in digital journalism. The development of digital games designed to frame journalistic messages led to the emergence of newsgames. This trend impacts online mass media outlets' performance as political actors in democratic polities. In this article, we explore the current relationship between political communication and newsgames by answering the following research question: How do online mass media outlets use newsgames to report, interpret, and critically analyze democratic polities? In this study, an inductive grounded theory approach was used to analyze 29 political newsgames published in 25 mass-media digital outlets across 11 different countries. The findings reveal that mass media outlets employ political newsgames to perform four distinct functions when covering political events: analytical reportage, commentary, critical scrutiny, and representation.

Keywords

digital games; game studies; newsgames; politainment; political communication

Issue

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1. Introduction

The political culture of Western countries is facing two major challenges: threats to their welfare state and the proper functioning of their democratic systems. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) have warned of these dangers, claiming that the internal corrosion is caused, among other things, by populism, which triggers the distrust and alienation of citizens towards the political system and its institutions. The proliferation of soft news has fostered this distrust. This journalistic style combines information and entertainment, favored by the public's increasing disinterest in the so-called *hard news* (Postman, 2005).

Scholars suggest that new media are widely acknowledged as a significant tool for increasing the public's political information and participation in the democratic processes (e.g., Hadma & Anggoro, 2022; Kahne et al., 2009; Lee, 2019). The consolidation of the use of digital games in the media ecosystem, therefore,

allows us to question their contribution to contemporary political culture (de la Hera, 2019; Glas et al., 2019; Moreno Azqueta, 2022; Torres-Toukoumidis et al., 2023). Although connections between digital games and political information in the media have existed since their inception, the genre has evolved considerably (Meier, 2018). Previous research on political newsgames has been mainly focused on studying the link between digital games and political participation (Dalisay et al., 2015, 2021; Stokes & Williams, 2018). In this article, we approach the study of political newsgames from a new perspective by exploring how political newsgames are used by online mass media outlets in their role as political actors. We do so by answering the following research question: How do online mass media outlets use newsgames to report, interpret, and critically analyze democratic polities?

Following Dahl's (1989) discussion about "democratic polities," this study focuses on the analysis of political

newsgames that depict traits of the democratic systems, the key players involved, and their *modus operandi*. Therefore, this research does not analyze other digital games with clear inferences about fair or unfair state policies, such as in the case of asylum seekers or refugee crisis issues, a popular topic in newsgames (e.g., Plewe & Fürsich, 2017). We acknowledge the multifaceted nature of the term “political” and the fact that our understanding of the concept of political newsgames does not include the multifaceted nature of the concept. This is, however, a conscious decision that allows a clearer focus on the research question and a more in-depth analysis of the discourse within this specific type of game.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Political Games

It is possible to identify precedents of games about political issues since the inception of digital games. One of them is *Dennis Through the Drinking Glass* (1985), a commercial digital game with a political agenda in which the player takes the role of Margaret Thatcher’s husband, who wants to go to the *Gravedigger’s Arms* pub. Another relevant example is *Spitting Image* (1988), a fighting game featuring the characters of a famous British satirical television puppet show. A more ambitious geopolitical interpretation can be found in *Balance of Power* (Crawford, 1985), in which the player (in the role of the president of the US or the general secretary of the Soviet Union) tries to avoid a nuclear war and “take on a social challenge through gameplay proper” (Bogost, 2007, p. 126).

Since then, more games have addressed political issues, but Bogost (2006) contends that a significant break of games into the world of politics, advocacy, and activism occurred in 2004. That year, digital games were used for the first time to support several political campaigns (US presidential elections, US state legislative elections, and presidential elections in Uruguay). Bogost (2006) claims that this break led to games being more closely integrated into political discourse strategies and becoming a part of endorsed political speech. This “significant break,” in Bogost’s terms, intensified since the 2015 US presidential election when a wide range of newsgames appeared on mobile devices, “becoming an integral part of political discourse strategies” where “the boundaries between satire, humor, and primitive insult are blurred” (Meier, 2018, p. 431). This build-up of the political sphere in the mobile ecosystem has been developed in recent research about politicians (Quevedo-Redondo et al., 2021) and political processes (Gil-Torres et al., 2022).

Nowadays, the academic study of digital games that address political issues is approached from several angles. One perspective focuses on analyzing entertainment digital commercial games that address topics linked with contemporary politics. The dominant approach in this group of studies explores the permeability between the discourse of digital games and the polit-

ical context (e.g., Planells de la Maza, 2020). Previous research has analyzed abstract and broad processes of political systems, such as pressure groups, public opinion, or the threat of populism (Gómez-García et al., 2022; Planells de la Maza, 2015). Furthermore, there are readings of specific events, such as the impact of the Great Economic Recession of 2008 on the representations offered by commercial video games (Pérez-Latorre et al., 2019) or the use of games as tools of technonationalism (Moreno Cantano, 2022).

Another perspective is focused on analyzing serious political games, digital games that address a current political issue designed “to promote a more just, solidary and/or tolerant society” (Games for Change, 2022). Several studies have explored games designed with a persuasive, activist, or awareness-raising purpose around different political realities (Glas et al., 2019). Researchers have also explored the ability of serious political games to promote political awareness or engagement (Neys & Jansz, 2010), advocacy journalism (Dowling, 2021), or citizen empowerment (Banz, 2019; Lerner, 2014). The present study is framed in this group of studies insofar as it studies political newsgames: the use of serious political games in digital journalism.

2.2. Political Games in Digital Journalism

Newsgames is a label describing a game used for journalistic purposes (Bogost et al., 2010). The rise of newsgames started with the origins of digital journalism in the forms of interactive entertainment (e.g., Fojba, 2000) and multimedia infographics (e.g., *Can You Spot the Threats*, 2001). Their popularity arrived with their implementation in the digital edition of *The New York Times* in 2007. The success of some newsgames developed by established media outlets at that time, such as *Cutthroat Capitalism* (2009) or *Gauging Your Distraction* (2009), drew the attention of game researchers, who started exploring this phenomenon from an academic perspective (e.g., Bogost et al., 2010; Ferrer-Conill et al., 2020; Grace, 2020; Lin & Wu, 2020; Lopezosa et al., 2021).

Newsgames have been linked to political communication since their inception. Gonzalo Frasca coined the term when he released the well-known game *September 12th*, claiming “simulation meets political cartoons” (Treanor & Mateas, 2009). In other words, Frasca implies that newsgames are “the video game equivalent to political cartoons” (Treanor & Mateas, 2009, p. 1). Following Frasca’s argumentation about how digital games become playable political cartoons, Treanor and Mateas (2009) explain that they usually use a specific political news event to make a statement about a bigger issue. The authors claim that the primary function of political newsgames is to convey the author’s biased, editorial opinion and that they are hardly used to report information or the events of a real story.

The field of political newsgames has experienced significant advancement in recent years, with the ability to

convey increasingly complex and comprehensive political messages. This feature has been highlighted by Sou (2018) and her research on refugee games. The two key traits proposed by Sou can also be applied to other types of political games. Firstly, the technological form of video games enables the representation of sophisticated messages about political, social, economic, and historical factors. Secondly, video games possess a distinctive rhetorical power, as they can effectively communicate complex narratives while remaining accessible and understandable for those without prior knowledge of political issues. These traits demonstrate the growing significance of political newsgames in shaping public understanding of political issues and can be applied to a wider range of political games beyond just those focused on refugees.

Additionally, a recent study by Gómez-García and de la Hera (2022) analyzed 75 newsgames and identified not only opinion-based political newsgames but also informative and interpretative political newsgames, frequently reporting on real political events. Furthermore, previous academic studies that include political newsgames in their samples provide results reporting on newsgames in general instead of insights related to their political content (e.g., García-Ortega & García-Avilés, 2020; Wan & Shao, 2019). There is, therefore, room for further interpretative analysis, guided by political communication research, regarding the functions of newsgames as political actors (McNair, 2014). The academic study of political newsgames becomes particularly relevant, especially considering that most newsgames produced by mass media outlets are related to political news topics (Wan & Shao, 2019). In this study, we provide insights into the democratic role of political newsgames published by online mass media outlets in democratic societies.

3. Methodology and Sampling

In order to study the role of digital games as political actors in online journalism, this study adopts a qualitative methodology. Since our goal was to explore the emerging data, we have selected constructive grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as the data analysis method. This decision was taken because existing theoretical positions on political newsgames come from studies that approached the analysis of these games from a deductive perspective, in which existing theories from the field of game studies and other fields, such as journalism, were used to analyze political newsgames. In this study, we decided to start from an inductive approach to later move on to an abductive one, allowing us to explore the phenomenon of political newsgames from a ground-up perspective.

3.1. Sampling

A total of 29 political newsgames comprise the sample for this study (see the Supplementary Material). The political games that constitute the sample were pub-

lished on online mass media outlets between 2008 and 2019. The games were published in 25 different media outlets and 11 countries. The selection criteria were as follows: (a) digital games published on mass media outlets' websites; (b) not including advertising messages; (c) published in English, Spanish, Dutch, French, Portuguese, or using no written or oral language (taking into consideration the language proficiency of the researchers); and (d) addressing topics related to democratic polities. The Supplementary Material includes a list of analyzed games, along with their associated metadata, such as the year of publication, the publisher, the game genre, and the topic.

The sampling strategy employed for this study was *comprehensive sampling* (Gray, 2004), meaning that we analyzed every case we could find that met the sampling criteria. The units of analysis were retrieved from the three most complete databases of newsgames available to date: a database of 160 newsgames produced between 2000 and 2018, published by García-Ortega and García-Avilés (2020); the Journalism Games project (<https://www.journalismgames.org>), developed by Lindsay Grace and Katy Huang; and a database composed of 75 newsgames produced by media outlets between 2000 and 2019, published by Gómez-García and de la Hera (2022). These were complemented with a systematic online Google search. The following keywords and combinations were used: "political newsgame," "political game journalism," "political interactive," "political video game," and "political game," which were combined with boolean operators in the native language of each media outlet.

All games that met the sampling criteria became part of the preliminary sample of this study. This preliminary sample consisted of 93 newsgames from 48 media outlets from 17 countries published between January 2000 and June 2022. The final sample was refined following our decision to only focus on games involving democratic polities (including politics, policies, and politicians). This yielded a final sample of 29 newsgames developed by 25 media outlets from 11 countries.

We acknowledge that the sample of this study is not an exhaustive list of political newsgames developed by mass media outlets. In addition, the list of games examined is constrained by the researchers' language skills. We recognize that this limitation implies that this study only offers a western interpretation of this phenomenon. However, we tried to balance these limitations by broadening the search strategy. Considering that the use of newsgames in political journalism is a sporadic practice, the commitment to include all games that meet the sampling criteria, 29 games in total, supports the *validity* of this study (Silverman, 2011, pp. 219–314).

3.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

The 29 games of the sample were analyzed between August and November 2022. All were played several

times by the researchers, exploring multiple options (paths) in the game. The gameplay was recorded and screenshots of relevant moments were taken. All recordings and screenshots were stored and analyzed using Atlas.ti, following the grounded theory analytical method, explained in detail below.

We used a constructivist grounded theory approach proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Following this approach, grounded theory focuses on building useful analytical categories from the analysis of data. This means that categories must not be forced on the data; instead, they should emerge from the ongoing data analysis process. This process is divided into three coding stages: open, axial, and selective coding. Any development of categories during the selective coding stage, however, requires the researcher to employ theoretical sensitivity, meaning that the researcher must be open to seeing and reflecting upon empirical data material with the help of theoretical terms. We, therefore, started our analysis without using any theoretical framework for the open and axial coding phases, and we employed *theoretical sensitivity* during the selective sampling stage (utilizing McNair, 2014).

The use of grounded theory began with an initial exploratory phase; the two researchers analyzed the games independently in three stages (open, axial, and selective coding). In the first stage, all types of open codes were used to analyze the sample so as not to limit the analytical approach. When coding, the researchers paid attention to any aspects of the game that were relevant to the research question, including the game genre, the political topic discussed, and the persuasive and communicative strategies used to address the political topic. It was not until the selective coding phase that we attempted to establish connections to the existing literature by employing *theoretical sensitivity*, as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967). During this phase, the two researchers, together, analyzed the results of the exploratory phase and compared their views. Considering the inductive nature of the process, the researchers did not expect to find identical codes but either complementary and consistent codes able to enrich the discussion and conclusions of this study and ensure *reliability* (Silverman, 2011). When deciding on the best approach for proposing selective codes, it was concluded that using the analytical lens of political media roles was useful for discussing and interpreting the analysis results. McNair (2014) summarizes the roles of the political media in four statements: *informing* citizens with objectivity and authority (in the form of reportage or analysis); *educating* citizens with commentaries about the meaning of the facts (and developing a subjective point of view about politics); *giving publicity and critical scrutiny* to governmental and political institutions; and, finally, *servicing* democracy as a conduit for the presentation of different political viewpoints and *advocacy*. Once the researchers had a clear idea of how to proceed with the analysis, the sample was analyzed again in an iter-

ative manner; namely, open, axial, and selective codes assigned to the games were revised several times until theoretical saturation was reached.

4. Results

The analysis resulted in 13 open codes, five axial codes, and four selective codes (see Tables 1–4). The political issues these games cover and the game genres used are all reflected in the open codes. Five axial codes relating to the five main political themes covered in the games were chosen from these open codes. The four primary selective codes linked to the four political media roles (McNair, 2014) were finally Analytical Reportage, Political Commentary, Critical Scrutiny, and Representation. The axial codes for these four selective codes and pertinent examples from the sample are discussed below.

4.1. Analytical Reportage

Political newsgames fulfilling the role of Analytical Reportage not only report on political events but also analyze and interpret them. Through ludic content, these newsgames strive to help citizens understand the intricacies of the political landscape. In democratic societies, the media's role in providing citizens with comprehensive information about the various interpretations and meanings associated with political events is considered crucial for democracy to be meaningful (McNair, 2014).

Eight of the 29 political newsgames analyzed in this study play the role of reporting on events from an analytical perspective. In this case, the games take the form of political *newsgames as interpretative reportage*, a genre “commonly used to cover sensitive or complex topics” (Gómez-García & de la Hera, 2022, p. 9). These games typically employ a linear structure and simple rules to focus on a singular issue in a short period of time. The political newsgames from the sample that fulfill this function cover four different types of political issues: policies on economic affairs (four), policies on data privacy (one), the role of the parliamentary system on democracy (one), and campaigning in political elections (two; see Table 1).

Political newsgames fulfilling the role of Analytical Reportage emphasize fostering players' reflection rather than focusing on strict objectivity. We identified two different approaches when using games to fulfill this role. The choice of game genre plays a crucial role in applying the intended perspective to be fulfilled by the game. In the first approach, political newsgames foster reflection by letting players become aware of their own knowledge on specific political topics. An example of this is the game *Could You Be a Speaker?* (2019) in which players assess their knowledge of the functioning of the parliamentary system. Game genres that require prior knowledge for optimal performance, such as trivia, are used in this approach.

Table 1. Analytical reportage.

| Political topic | | Games | Game genre |
|-----------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Policies | Economic affairs | Objectif Budget (2017) | Role playing, text-based |
| | | ¿Cómo Cambió el Rumbo...? (2017) | Trivia |
| | You Draw It (2017) | | |
| | The Federator (2013) | Real-time strategy game | |
| | Data privacy | Der Metadaensauger (2015) | Action game |
| Democracy | Parliamentary system | Could You Be a Speaker? (2019) | Trivia |
| Elections | Campaigning | The Waffler (2014) | Real-time strategy game |
| | | Campaign Rush (2008) | Real-time strategy game |

The second approach identified within this category is the use of political newsgames to foster reflection through experiencing the consequences of real-time decisions. The games in this group confront the player with a game experience that presents a specific standpoint, including obvious bias. This approach involves real-time strategy games in which players take the role of a politician and need to make decisions in real-time to see the consequences of these decisions later. A notable example of the application of this strategy is *The Waffler* (2014). In this game, players assume the role of a politician replying to questions about controversial issues. The popularity meter, shown in Figure 1a, changes depending on the public’s reaction to the player’s answers. Players may also face similar questions while trying to pander to public opinion, and consistency is key to avoid being labeled as a “waffler.” At the end of the game (Figure 1b), players can compare their answers to those of the 2014 Pennsylvania gubernatorial candidates and see how they changed their viewpoints to gain support. This approach usually invites players to reflect on the moral and ethical dilemmas that politicians face and the complexity of the decision-making process.

4.2. Political Commentary

In this role, political newsgames fulfill the subjective function of providing commentary on key political events, processes, and topics. This role is relevant insofar as performing democracy must be founded on the informed discussions of those participating (McNair, 2014). Political newsgames that fulfill this function are both editorial and educational. In this sense, these games contribute to informed political discussions by presenting facts and data in a way that is accessible to the general public through a cartoonish style, caricatures, and satire similar to traditional political cartoons.

Six of the 29 political newsgames analyzed in this study were identified as Political Commentary. The political newsgames from the sample that fulfill this function cover three different types of political topics: government policies on foreign affairs (one), political public relations (three), and campaigning during political elections (two; see Table 2).

The most prominent feature of games in this category is that they perform Political Commentary from a cynical perspective through visual and written rhetoric in combination with simple game mechanics. The six games

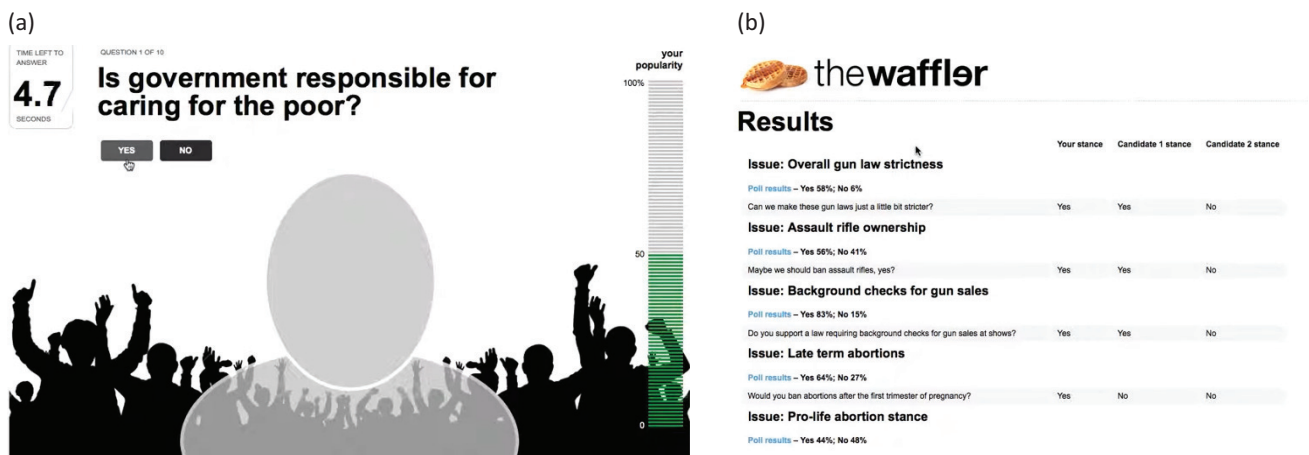


Figure 1. Screenshots from *The Waffler*. Source: *The Waffler* (2014).

Table 2. Commentary.

| Political topic | Games | Game genre |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Policies: Foreign affairs | Brexit Bus (2017) | Real-time strategy game |
| | Retoricum (2016) | Trivia |
| Politicians: Public relations | President Evil (2017) | Real-time strategy game |
| | The Betsy DeVos Board Game (2018) | Board game |
| Elections: Campaigning | Presidential Pong (2008) | Real-time strategy game |
| | Tortura Electoral (2008) | Trivia |

labeled as Political Commentary borrow game mechanics from well-known games such as Pong (1972), framing a political message using visual and written rhetoric, as discussed in the examples below.

Five of the six games in this category contain recognizable portrayals of current politicians. They portray politicians as unreliable, troublesome, incompetent, or pragmatic individuals who adjust to shifting circumstances. This is the case with The Betsy DeVos Board Game (2018), in which the player navigates through a 24-square board game in the style of the classic goose board game. This simple and well-known game mechanic combines written and visual rhetoric to convey a critical editorial viewpoint on Betsy DeVos. On the one hand, the simple game mechanic in which the player is allowed to endlessly roll the dice until reaching the final square emphasizes that a successful political career depends more on perseverance than aptitude. On the other hand, in each square of

the game, written rhetoric is used in instructions given to players to convey a critical editorial viewpoint on DeVos. Each square represents a key issue faced by DeVos during her tenure as US Secretary of Education under President Donald Trump. For example, one of the instructions says: “You call historically black colleges and universities *pioneers of school choice*. Public outcry ensues. Move back two spaces” (see Figure 2). Furthermore, drawings of DeVos and the use of the red and blue colors are used to frame and reinforce the political message.

Of note, Brexit Bus differs from the rest of the games in this category as it does not directly depict a politician. Instead, it challenges the player to drive the iconic Brexit Bus along a road represented as a timeline from May 2016 to September 2017. Inspired by the game mechanics of Hill Climb Racing (2012), the goal is to keep the bus running without crashing, symbolizing the challenge and pressure of navigating a complex and unpredictable

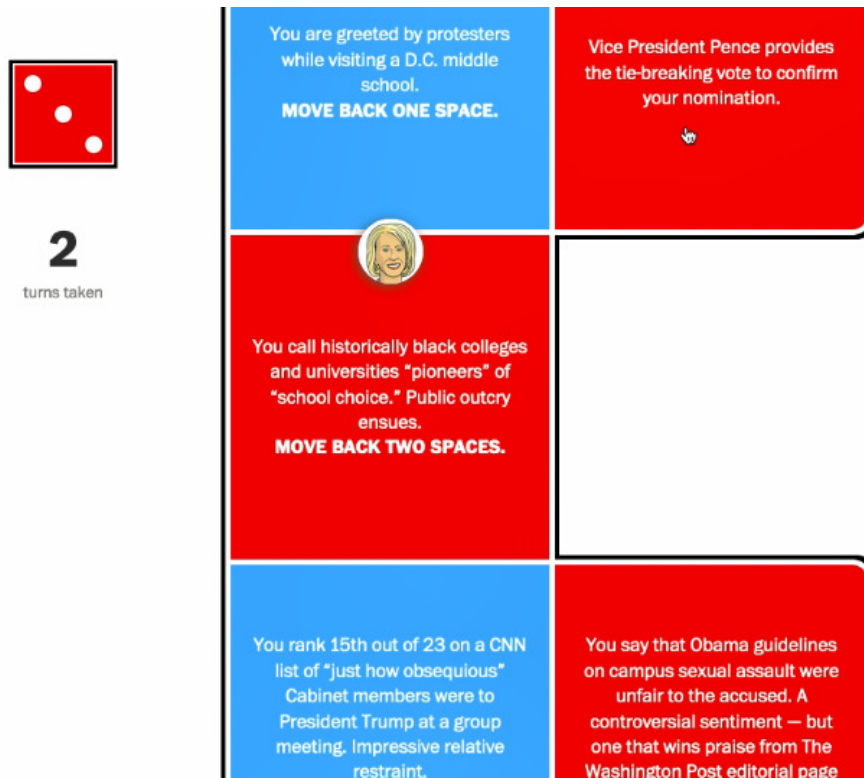


Figure 2. Screenshots from The Betsy DeVos Board Game. Source: The Betsy DeVos Board Game (2018).

political situation during the Brexit campaign. These game mechanics become particularly meaningful in combination with visual rhetoric. In the game, an analogy is established between the changes in the level of the ground and the changes in the pound–euro exchange rate from May 2016 to September 2017. This is achieved by incorporating a coordinate axis into the visual design that connects the exchange rate with the months of the year (see Figure 3). In this way, the game integrates information into the gameplay and makes it relatable for the player, allowing the kind of thought-provoking experience that Political Commentary games seek.

4.3. Critical Scrutiny

In the role of Critical Scrutiny, political newsgames subject political and governmental actions to rigorous examination. Critical Scrutiny of political actions is considered a key role of the media in democratic societies (McNair, 2014). In the games fulfilling this role, the jour-

nalistic point of view is built upon different sources with background information that allow one to present antecedents and reflect on the consequences of the topic addressed for the democratic system. The games usually adopt a political point of view to explain choices the political class make in a pragmatic way to ensure their election. In these games, politicians are portrayed as strategic players who try to maximize their chances in an electoral process.

Seven of the 29 games analyzed were designed for Critical Scrutiny; all use the text-based role-playing genre, employing a narrative approach to emphasize the motives and significance of an issue covered in the game. The political newsgames from the sample that fulfill this function cover six different types of political topics: policies on foreign affairs (one), local policies (one), policies on economic affairs (one), tax evasion (one), influence peddling (two), and the functioning of the electoral system (two; see Table 3). All these games cover political topics that create concern and controversy in

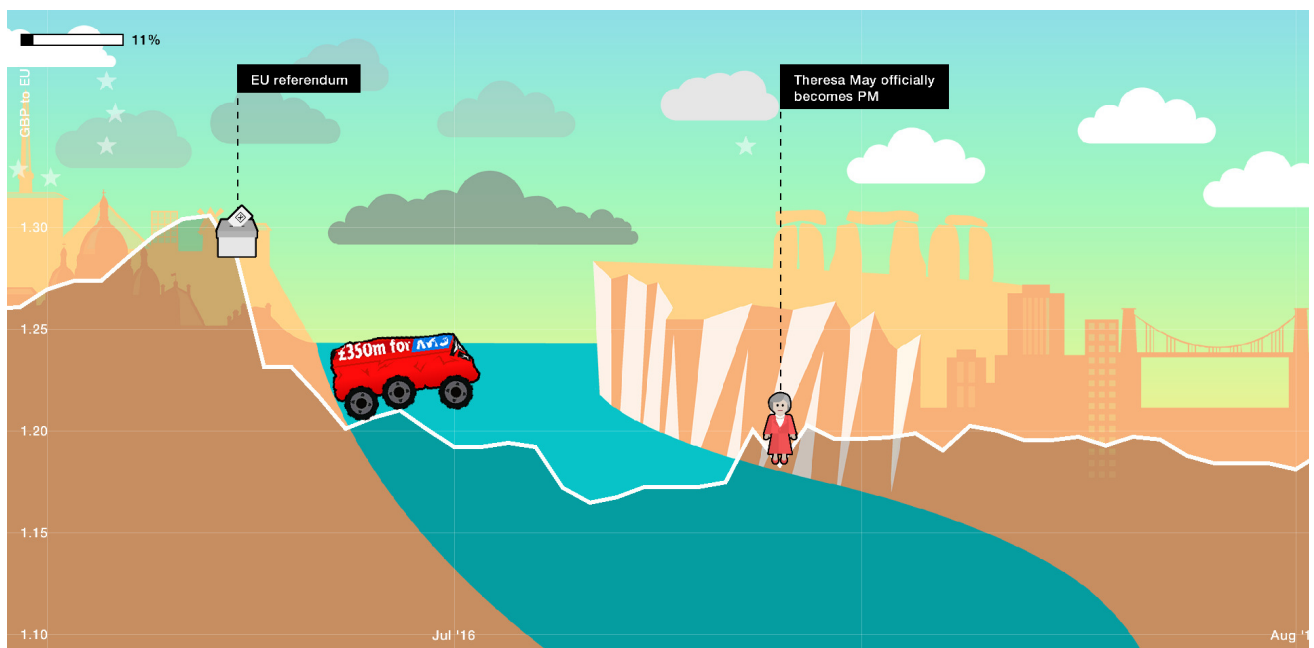


Figure 3. Screenshots from Brexit Bus. Source: Brexit Bus (2017).

Table 3. Critical scrutiny.

| Political topic | Games | Game genre |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Policies | Local policies | Dans la Peau d’un Bourgmestre (2018) |
| | Economic affairs | Dodging Trump’s Tariffs (2018) |
| | Foreign affairs | Pick Your Own Brexit (2018) |
| Political corruption | Tax evasion | Stairway to Tax Heaven (2017) |
| | Influence peddling | El Bueno, el Malo y el Tesorero (2017) |
| | | Tallanasty (2013) |
| Elections: Electoral System | The Voter Suppression Trail (2016) | Role playing—Text-based |

society. The Critical Scrutiny approach is useful to critically compare different viewpoints related to the topics they cover.

An insightful example of a political newsgame that serves the purpose of Critical Scrutiny is *The Voter Suppression Trail* (2016), a sharp analysis of the experience of voting from different points of view. In the game, the player can choose between three profiles: a white programmer from California, a Latina nurse from Texas, or a black salesman from Wisconsin, and users experience the different challenges they face while voting. The white programmer votes in less than a minute (Figures 4a and 4c), while the other two profiles face long queues, inclement weather, work and family pressures to leave the queue, malfunctioning machines, and attempts at intimidation by “election observers.” In these cases, the character will usually not be able to vote (Figures 4b and 4d), or if the player manages to do so, it will be after several hours and with great frustration (which works as a life meter). The cunning use of different experiences reflects inequalities in the exercise of the democratic right to vote by US citizens. The game’s point of view is supported by a proposal to help the user find the best place to vote in the elections at the end of the game.

The game genre selected for the seven political newsgames serving the purpose of Critical Scrutiny is text-based role-playing. This genre allows the design of unique gaming experiences strongly supported by a game narrative used to convey complex messages

through the combination of multiple persuasive dimensions, including visual, textual, and procedural persuasion. In this category of political games, players have more agency, being able to explore different gaming paths and experience the consequences of their own decisions.

4.4. Representation

Finally, among the 29 analyzed games, eight serve the purpose of Political Representation (McNair, 2014) by showcasing various political perspectives and viewpoints. These games are developed by the media as a means of presenting the different policies of political parties and politicians, sometimes to highlight the differences between them. The eight political newsgames labeled under this category cover the topic of campaigning during elections (see Table 4).

Political newsgames playing a Representation role on the topic of election campaigns distinguish two types of coverage. The first group employs humor and irony to highlight an expressive feature of the election campaign. This group uses the genre of sports games to address the competitive and confrontational nature of election campaigning. This is done by using visual and textual persuasion to frame the political message resulting in a game that equates election campaigning to sporting competitions such as athletics or table tennis. They play a Representation role as usually candidates of different political parties, and some basic information about

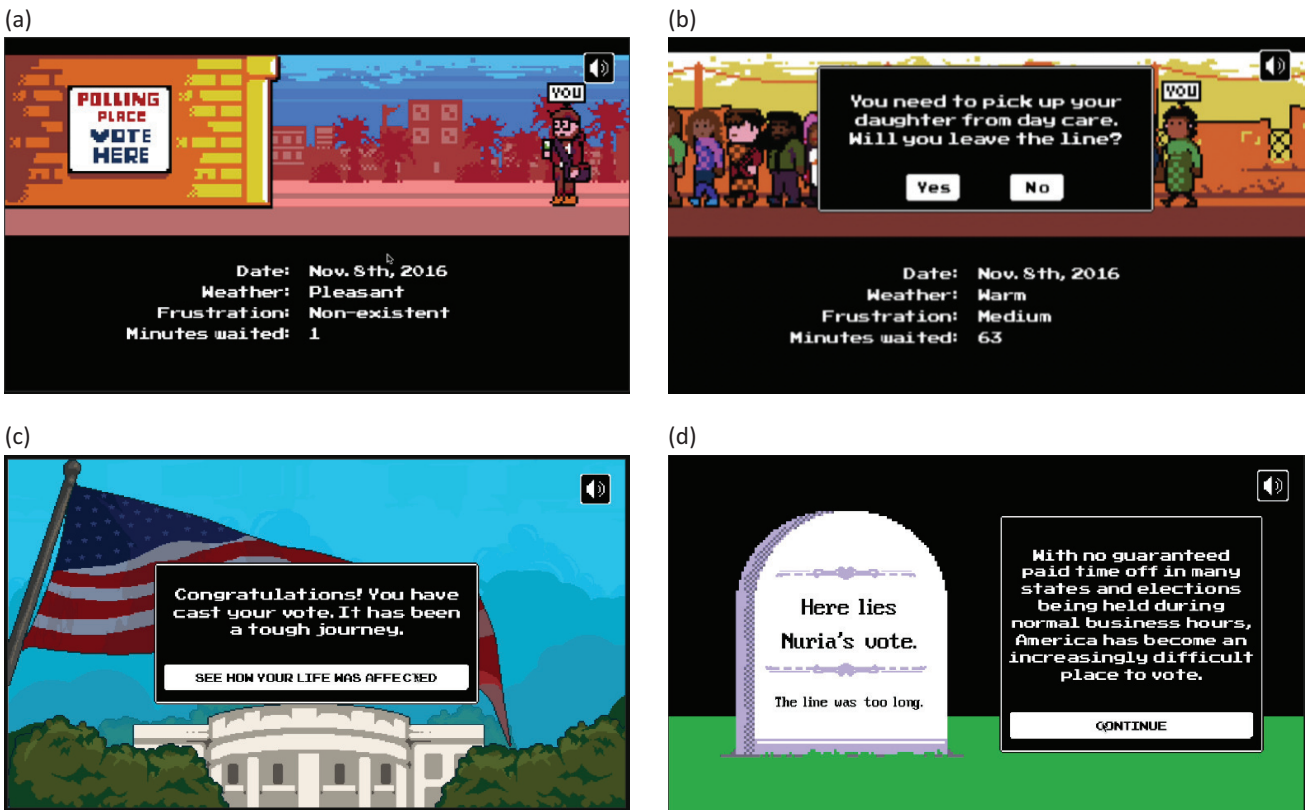


Figure 4. Screenshots from *The Voter Suppression Trail*. Source: *The Voter Suppression Trail* (2016).

Table 4. Representation.

| Political topic | Games | Game genre | |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------|-------------|
| Elections: Campaigning | Predict the President (2016) | Trivia | |
| | Predict the President 2020 (2020) | | |
| | Votematch (2015) | | |
| | Moral Kombat (2012) | | |
| | Candidate Match Game II (2012) | | |
| | Reto Carondelet (2017) | | |
| | Jogo Eleitoral (2018) | | Sport games |
| | Corrida Eleitoral (2010) | | |

their campaign programs are presented. However, they only present shallow information through cartoon-style images of the politicians and their scramble for votes. In this sense, these games do not attempt to explain complicated political events. Instead, they try to “buy a cheap smile from its player” (Treanor & Mateas, 2009). Nonetheless, from a media perspective, they serve as attention-engagement tools for media, as they provide popular content that increases the time spent on the media site and enhances its content popularity.

An example of this first group of games is *Corrida Eleitoral* (2010), a game inspired by the popular Nintendo franchise *Mario Kart* and featuring the nine presidential candidates in the 2010 Brazilian elections (Figure 5). When players choose the candidate they will play with in the game, they receive basic information about the politician (party, wealth, campaign spending, profession, and a brief biography), which can be expanded through links to the media site. According to the game, this is “a crazy race with the presidential candidates of the 2010 elections. The speed of the cars is proportional to the politicians’ position in the electoral polls and the campaign money is used to boost their candidate.” The game mechanics make it very difficult to win for players unless they choose one of the two main candidates of the elections (Dilma Roussef and José Serra), those with the greatest popular support.

The second group of games under this category involves simulating or predicting upcoming election

results, often in the form of trivia or quizzes. The informative dimension of these games covers several topics, from political personalization to mathematical simulations of different election results. Some of these games use basic mechanics to help the reader identify the political party more suitable for them by comparing their personal preferences to the political agendas of different parties (e.g., *Reto Carondelet*, 2019). In these cases, there is a higher level of interactivity which allows the exploration of different outcomes in the forthcoming electoral process.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the different roles digital games can perform as political actors in digital journalism, guided by the research question “how do online mass media outlets use newsgames to report, interpret, and critically analyze democratic politics?” A constructive grounded theory method has been used to approach the analysis of 29 political newsgames published in 25 different media outlets and a total of 11 countries. This analysis was carried out from a ground-up perspective moving from an inductive to an abductive approach in which the categories emerge from the ongoing data analysis process.

While earlier studies on political newsgames emphasized their editorial role, recent research has broadened the scope of examination to uncover a wider range of



Figure 5. Screenshots from *Corrida Eleitoral*. Source: *Corrida Eleitoral* (2010).

functions and potentials that political newsgames can fulfill (e.g., García-Ortega & García-Avilés, 2020). Despite this growth in understanding, the study of the role of digital games as political actors remained underrepresented. This study contributes to the study of this phenomenon by illustrating how online media outlets use political games to portray the four roles of the media as political actors (as discussed by McNair, 2014). According to our research, mass media outlets use games to fulfill four functions when addressing political topics: Analytical Reportage, Political Commentary, Critical Scrutiny, and Representation. These findings offer a more extensive and ambitious understanding of the role of newsgames as political actors in digital journalism, allowing for systematic identification and categorization of these games. A description and key elements of each category are discussed below (Table 5).

The analysis of the 29 games that constitute the sample for this study did not reveal a dominant category, and the distribution is well balanced, indicating that political newsgames serve different roles of political actors similarly to other media. First, in their role for Analytical Reportage, political newsgames are used not only to report on political events but also to interpret and analyze their complexity to inform and educate players on current political issues. Thus, it is not surprising that these games usually deal with economic or electoral topics that are sometimes difficult to understand for citizens. Numerous studies point to the importance of an informed citizenry in the face of the risks of populism (e.g., Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). These games seek to convey an explicit message using a narrative supplemented by background and contextual information. This type of political newsgame does not require a complex, lengthy,

Table 5. Roles of newsgames as political actors.

| Category | Description | Significative political traits | Significative game traits |
|----------------------|---|---|--|
| Analytical reportage | Newsgames that provide in-depth analysis of political events and issues, aiming to inform and educate players on current political situations. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Claims of objectivity or neutrality (moderate bias); 2. Presentation of facts and data; 3. Complex topic conveyed in a simplified form. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Game genres that require prior knowledge, such as trivia, are used to raise players' awareness about their knowledge of political topics; 2. Real-time strategy games to let players experience the consequences of politician's decisions. |
| Political commentary | Newsgames designed to express opinions and thoughts on current political events and issues, often from an editorial perspective. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Personal and subjective interpretation; 2. Clear bias towards a particular point of view or perspective; 3. Usually satirical or cynical in nature. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Simple and well-known game mechanics combined with written and visual rhetoric to frame the political message. |
| Critical scrutiny | Newsgames that examine the workings of political systems, institutions, and individuals, often with the purpose of exposing corruption, abuse of power, or flaws in the political process. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Investigative journalism approach; 2. Clear tendency to expose shortcomings; 3. Focus on systematic issues and problems. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Text-based role-playing games; 2. Unique gaming experiences strongly supported by a game narrative used to convey complex messages; 3. Combination of multiple persuasive dimensions, including visual, textual, and procedural persuasion. |
| Representation | Newsgames that serve the purpose of political representation by showcasing various political perspectives and viewpoints. They aim to present different political parties and/or politicians, and sometimes highlight the differences between them. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reflects the heterogeneity of political forces in election campaigns; 2. Goes beyond mere politician promotion to show how systems work; 3. Highlights commonalities and differences among political forces. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sports games to address the competitive and confrontational nature of election campaigning; 2. Trivia or quizzes to simulate or predict upcoming election results. |

or costly game design, and they are closer to the type of content with which users of these media are familiar. Among the games analyzed fulfilling this role, we found that (a) the use of game genres that require prior knowledge, such as trivia, are used to raise players' awareness about their knowledge of political topics, and (b) the use of real-time strategy games lets players experience the consequences of politician's decisions.

Second, political newsgames are used for Political Commentary when they emphasize the editorial line of the media outlet in which they are embedded. This subjective function appears, in traditional media, in the form of columns, editorials, opinion pieces, or cartoons. In political newsgames, this type of game tries to convey a subjective point of view with casual and basic game mechanics that do not require too much time to master, allowing the player to focus on the political message framed with the use of visual and textual rhetoric. These games include clear bias towards a particular point of view or perspective and are usually satirical or cynical in nature. These games inherit the narrative legacy of early political agenda games such as *Dennis Through the Drinking Glass* (1985) or *Spitting Image* (1988).

Third, a relevant part of the results of this study has been the identification of games that question the inconsistencies of the political system or warn of its shortcomings, fulfilling the role of Critical Scrutiny. These games frequently address issues that usually generate "news fatigue," trying to promote interest and engagement among digital media audiences. These games denounce unlawful political activities or social inequalities by critically scrutinizing complex and controversial political topics. The use of the first-person point of view in these games aims to immerse and engage the player in controversial issues such as the Brexit referendum, political corruption, or social inequalities linked to economic or foreign policy. Unique gaming experiences strongly supported by a game narrative in combination with multiple persuasive dimensions (including visual, textual, and procedural persuasion) are used to convey complex messages.

Fourth, the participation of digital games in the media's contribution to the advocacy, representation, and visibility of political plurality in Western democracies is the final role played by games in the sample. All the games in this category reflect the heterogeneity of the political forces in the election campaigns. Some of them go beyond the mere promotion of these candidates or political forces and reflect the functioning of the electoral system and the possibilities of the different candidates winning.

Among these four identified roles, two significant elements are common to all political newsgames of the sample. First is the prevalent use of a pixelated or cartoonish aesthetic with a parodic or humorous purpose. Other serious games with political overtones, such as migrant games, avoid this aesthetic when the subject matter is deemed too sensitive. So, this choice in the political

newsgames of the sample suggests that this distinctive aesthetic approach of political games is partly due to the fact that the influence of political cartoons is still predominant in this format and, furthermore, the perception that this specific content corresponds to the logic of soft news.

A second aspect, in line with previous findings of García-Ortega and García-Avilés (2020), is that almost all the games in the sample present a viewpoint with different levels of editorial intensity, as in *The Voter Suppression Trail*, which clearly conveys a grievance regarding the US electoral system. Still, others—which might be perceived as more objective—also contain infotainment features, such as *Could You be a Speaker?* In this game, humor and cartoon animation suggest a lighthearted approach, often a hallmark of satire. The focus on some eccentric rules and regulations of the British House of Commons also suggests criticism or mockery of the formalities of parliamentary procedure.

This research offers a broader and more ambitious reading of the use of digital games published by media when addressing political issues. The analytical approach proposed in this article encompasses a comprehensive and systematic way of identifying and classifying the roles of digital games as political actors in digital journalism. It is important to note that the identified roles are not mutually exclusive, and games may sometimes fulfill several roles. How these roles are combined in political newsgames could be explored in future research. The results could be further extended with additional games developed by institutions, political parties, collectives, or individuals. Further research should also assess players' perceptions and the effectiveness of political newsgames in fulfilling the functions identified in this article.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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