

Contemporary Political Discourse in Digital Games: A Systematic Approach

Jennifer Soto de la Cruz , Sara Cortés Gómez , and Pilar Lacasa 

Department of Philology, Communication, and Documentation, University of Alcalá, Spain

Correspondence: Jennifer Soto de la Cruz (jennifer.soto@edu.uah.es)

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Abstract

This study reviews existing literature on how video games are being used to convey contemporary political discourse. Digital games, as meaningful cultural artifacts, have become a communication medium in their own right. They can serve as social mirrors, framing contemporary reality through metaphors that represent and recreate transcendent events or social facts through immersive experiences. Likewise, video games have played a significant role in shaping our current politics and culture. This article seeks to answer the research question: How has contemporary political discourse been explored through digital games in academic literature? To do so, we conducted a systematic literature review following the SALSA (search, appraisal, synthesis, and analysis) framework. We identified $N = 25$ journal articles written in English and Spanish, published between January 2013 and September 2023. We found that first-person shooter games were the most frequently discussed game genre in the academic literature, followed by newsgames. We propose a new method for categorizing political messages in digital games, which we have called the PRICE dimensions model (participation, representation, ideology, conflict, and education). The studied papers were classified into five main thematic groups: (a) video games as a tool for digital propaganda; (b) video games aiming to raise awareness of political issues; (c) games and gamification elements for radicalization; (d) game design that justifies, minimizes, or downplays violence; and (e) players' role in conveying political messages.

Keywords

digital games; first-person shooters; newsgames; political communication; political discourse; political games

1. Introduction

Play and games shape many aspects of people's daily lives, as well as contemporary societies. In game studies, this has been conceptualized as the "ludification of culture" (Raessens, 2006), which refers to the increasing influence of game elements in various aspects of culture, the economy, society, and politics in the context of the digital era. This phenomenon has also been referred to as "the cultivation of ludus" or "the gameful world" (Walz & Deterding, 2014). In this sense, Flanagan (2015, p. 249) states that ludic language involves "a game's cultural conventions, privileging agency with responsive feedback, and connoting meaning through the way in which players take actions and authenticate themselves through this action." Ultimately, game and play can be complex and multifaceted (Reer et al., 2024) and can serve as a guide on how to organize an experimental setting with players, roles, rules, and a scenario (Mayer, 2009).

Digital games as meaningful cultural artifacts (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) have become a communication medium in their own right. A wide range of governance structures and ideologies are found in contemporary political systems, which can be broadly classified into two categories: democratic and non-democratic systems. To study their role in these systems, video games have been divided into two macro-dimensions (Torres-Toukoumidis et al., 2023, p. 6). First, serious games, aiming to offer players a learning experience, which were also subdivided into persuasive games and expressive games. Second, entertainment games, designed exclusively for fun. The rhetorical potential in-game rules design, the ethical component of discourse, and persuasive effects in games have been addressed by numerous authors (Bogost, 2006, 2007; de la Hera et al., 2021; Ferrara, 2013; Frasca, 2007; Grace, 2021; Jacobs et al., 2017; Pérez Latorre, 2015; Sicart, 2011, 2023; Siriaraya et al., 2018).

Likewise, de la Hera (2019) studied the persuasive dimensions that game designers can use to persuade players within immersive spaces. In this sense, game systems and mechanics can embody beliefs (Flanagan, 2009) and persuade players in particular situations (Bogost, 2007). For instance, as Chess and Consalvo (2022, p. 161) state: "Video games have had as much (or more) impact on our current politics and culture wars than many care to acknowledge." They argue that video games have emerged as a pivotal element in the convergence of media content, platforms, and audiences.

Pérez Latorre (2015, p. 415) has analyzed the relationships between game design in conveying ideological values and the construction of social reality through social discourse in video games. He proposes a model based on three elements: (a) the representation of the character/player, (b) the game world, and (c) the main actions carried out in it. Thus, digital games can serve as social mirrors, framing contemporary reality through metaphors that seek to represent and recreate transcendent events or social facts through immersive experiences. We adopted Gee's (2010) framework to refer to "political discourse," in which discourse involves more than just language; it also includes other social practices within a specific group. In this vein, political discourse consists of the language-in-use, behaviors, values, ways of thinking, and other social practices that are associated with politics. This includes the language used by politicians, the rhetoric of political campaigns, the language used in political news coverage, and the everyday conversations that people have about politics—in this specific context, within digital games and social platforms.

With respect to the political context, scholars have studied how play and games can facilitate civic engagement and encourage political participation (Bennett, 1979; Lerner, 2014; Mayer, 2009). Specifically,

Glas et al. (2019, p. 19) argue that “the simultaneous ludification and digitization of culture has given rise to new connections between citizenship and participatory media technologies that are shaping our culture.” Moreover, the expressive dimension of video games allows the transmission of meaning essentially through the language of ludic design, which refers to game rules design and ludic interactive dynamics (Pérez Latorre, 2015, p. 416). Games (both analog and digital) have been used for diverse political purposes, such as political campaigns (Akbar & Kusumasari, 2022; Baltezarević et al., 2019; Leng et al., 2010; Miller, 2013; Tran et al., 2021), military recruitment (Nieborg, 2004; Schulzke, 2013), representation of democracy (Torres-Toukourmidis et al., 2023), or promoting civic learning experiences (Santos et al., 2018).

Regarding political discourse, Lerner (2014, p. 30) explains that “games serve as a symbol or rhetoric frame, to illustrate how politics works.” Recent studies show how video games become part of an individual argumentative repertoire (Randour et al., 2020; Torres-Toukourmidis et al., 2023). Borges Lima (2017, p. 71) argues that they contribute to day-to-day political discussions when they become part of media narratives. In addition, games can empower players to take civic action by protesting in a playful and expressive manner (Stokes & Williams, 2018) and partaking in playful resistance to authoritarian governance and the capitalist logic of gaming (Huang & Liu, 2022). However, games can also be linked to propaganda dissemination, radicalization, and mobilization by extremist groups (Kowert et al., 2022; Lakomy, 2019; Schlegel & Kowert, 2024).

This study aims to review the existing literature in order to better understand how digital games are being used to convey contemporary political discourse. Given the increasing social polarization, the fragmentation of democracy, the radicalization of extremist groups, and the disinterest of younger generations in politics, it is necessary to study video games as a vehicle to promote political and ideological rhetoric. Specifically, this article seeks to address the following research question:

RQ: How has contemporary political discourse been explored through digital games in academic literature?

To this end, we propose a new model to analyze political messages in digital games, which we have called the PRICE dimensions model, according to the following categories: participation, representation, ideology, conflict, and education.

2. Methodology

In order to answer the research question of this study, we conducted a qualitative literature review with a systematic approach. Booth et al. (2016) have established three main considerations: first, clarity—meaning a clear structure, focused question, and explicit search strategies; second, validity, referring to the review’s relevance and rigor to prevent bias; and third, auditability to increase transparency.

We chose the SALSA (search, appraisal, synthesis, and analysis) framework (Grant & Booth, 2009) as a tool, since it is specifically designed for conducting systematic reviews and aims to streamline the process. This framework comprises four steps: search, appraisal, synthesis, and analysis, which we used to guide the review process and ensure that the data were conceptually rich to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

2.1. Search

This step comprises organizing the search process, which involves an initial exploration of the literature to obtain an overview of the existing academic work on the topic. This includes scoping search, conduct search, bibliography search, verification, and documentation.

We selected the following multidisciplinary and specialized databases to search for documents: Scopus (Elsevier), Science Direct (Elsevier), Web of Science (Clarivate), Research Library (ProQuest, part of Clarivate), Academic Search Premier (EBSCO), and Dialnet Plus (Fundación Dialnet).

In order to retrieve relevant studies conducted on “contemporary political discourse,” we used the following keywords and Boolean operators to build the search equation in English: (“political discourse” OR “political communication” OR “political rhetoric” OR “political message” OR “propaganda”) AND (“videogames” OR “video games” OR “computer games” OR “digital games” OR “propagames” OR “serious games”). And for papers in Spanish: (“discurso político” OR “comunicación política” OR “retórica política” OR “mensaje político” OR “propaganda”) AND (“videojuegos” OR “juegos de ordenador” OR “juegos digitales” OR “propagames” OR “juegos serios”).

The entire process was recorded in a protocol document to register all the details of the decisions made. In addition, we used Zotero, a bibliographic reference manager, to organize the results into collections and subcollections. We also used tags and saved searches to classify, review, discriminate, and filter out the retrieved documents.

2.2. Appraisal

Appraisal consists of selecting the studies that are suitable for answering the research question. We employed a systematic selection process based on pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to refine the initial set of documents into a collection of relevant studies. To do this, we started with a data corpus of 325 documents retrieved from the previous search. Subsequently, we evaluated each document by applying the following inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Figure 1): journal articles published from January 2013 to September

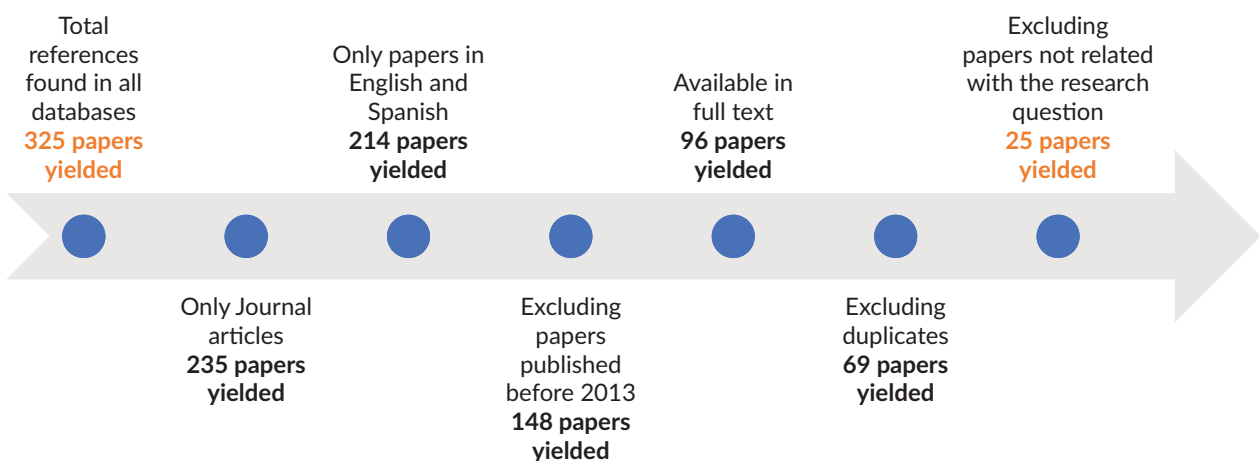


Figure 1. Appraisal process steps.

2023, covering the last 10 years, since we are analyzing literature on contemporary political discourse. Only papers written in English and Spanish were chosen. To ensure an in-depth analysis, only papers with the full text available were included. This allows for a complete evaluation of the methodology, results, and discussion sections, leading to a more accurate and well-rounded review. Then, we removed duplicates. Finally, only papers relevant to the research question were considered. This resulted in 25 papers to be analyzed.

To conduct a proper critical appraisal in qualitative research, it is important to consider whether the findings are applicable, transferable, or generalizable. To this end, Booth et al. (2016, p. 148) argue that “assessing the evidence base focuses on the practical application of research, and similar pragmatism is required when you are performing quality assessment.”

2.3. Synthesis

Synthesis is an iterative process that seeks to identify any common threads, patterns, and themes that emerge from the data. In qualitative approaches, synthesis can be aggregative, configurative, or integrative (Booth et al., 2016). Also, it is important to pre-specify and examine the data extraction in order to determine which pieces of data can be identified in each individual study. To this end, we summarized the findings by creating a literature matrix that included the relevant information from each paper selected in the previous phase: ID, reference, aim of the study, theoretical/methodological approach, game genre, game element, political discourse, main observation, other observations, and future research.

In this study, we used interpretative data extraction to optimize the explanatory value of the results. We extracted data in the form of specific findings and illustrative text excerpts. Furthermore, we examined the papers to identify gaps that needed to be filled in future research (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

2.4. Analysis

This step involves identifying methods, interventions, and potential research gaps in the field. Booth et al. (2016, p. 274) state that the contribution of evidence synthesis to existing research could be: theory testing or validation, theory generation, problem solving, or fact finding. In this study, we used fact finding. Therefore, we focused on three aspects to explore how contemporary political discourse can be conveyed through digital games.

First, we examined the full text of the 25 final papers to identify the purpose and the theoretical and/or methodological approach—whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed. We sought to understand the method used and the line of theory or empirical research established. We also classified the papers according to their scope and objective, as outlined by Dempsey et al. (1996): research, theory, review, discussion, and development papers (see Figure 2).

Second, we extracted all the individual game titles mentioned in the selected papers; we decided to only count each single title, independently of how many times it was cited. We then categorized each game according to genre (Sevin & DeCamp, 2020) and identified the most frequently discussed genres in relation to political discourse in the studied papers (see Figure 3).

Finally, we conducted a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) on the 25 selected papers. This method is used to identify patterns (themes) within the data that are consistent with the categories of analysis used in this study. We then analyzed the political messages by focusing on figurative meaning (Lempert & Silverstein, 2012; Silverstein, 2003). In addition, we devised the PRICE dimensions model (see Figure 4), an acronym formed by the first letter in each of the following five categories: participation, representation, ideology, conflict, and education. All of them aim to identify and classify the political rhetoric found in digital games, such as the language used by politicians and organizations, election campaign messages, and players' political conversations and behaviors.

2.4.1. Overview of Studies on Contemporary Political Discourse in Digital Games

2.4.1.1. Study Types

In this work, papers exploring political discourse within digital games were categorized (see Figure 2) primarily as research articles ($N = 16$), which seek to contribute new knowledge to the understanding of video games as political and/or ideological tools through systematic data gathering and analysis (e.g., Ashraf, 2013; Hopp et al., 2018). The second category was theory papers ($N = 5$), aiming to enhance understanding and interpretation of games and propaganda by proposing conceptual models or frameworks (e.g., Andrews, 2023; Bossetta, 2019). Less frequent were discussion articles ($N = 2$), which explore ideas, criticize existing perspectives, or examine implications of findings about the persuasive potential of games (e.g., Seiffert & Nothhaft, 2015). The development study ($N = 1$) focuses on practical innovations in video games as technopolitical devices (Carrubba, 2018). Finally, the review paper ($N = 1$) provides an overview and evaluation of research on war games, identifying gaps and suggesting future research directions (del Moral Pérez & Rodríguez González, 2021).

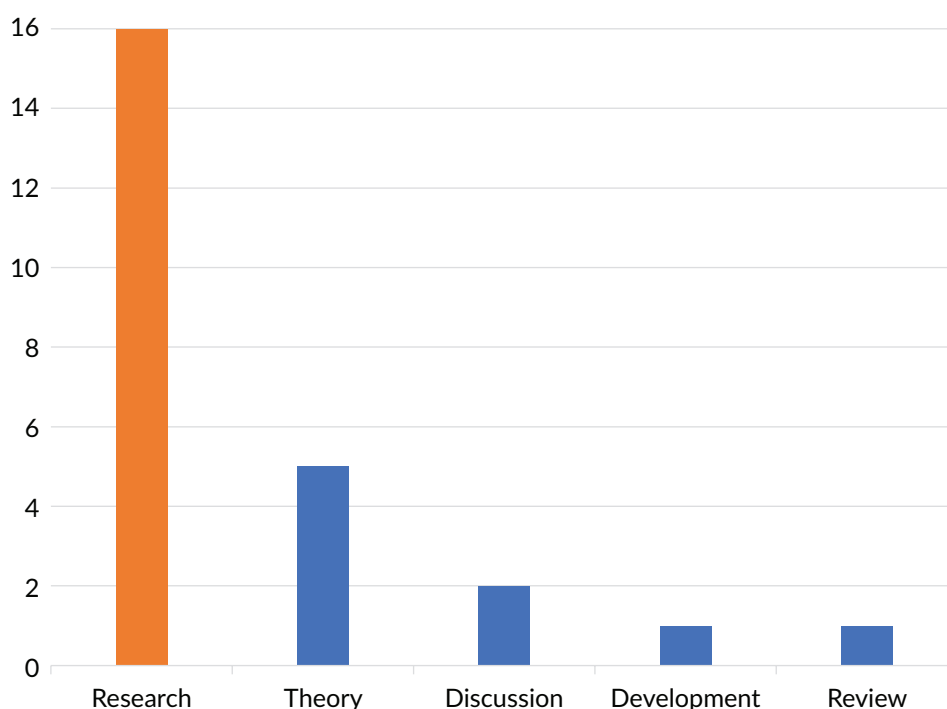


Figure 2. Number of papers classified by type of study. Source: Adapted from Dempsey et al. (1996).

2.4.1.2. Purpose of the Studies

The purpose of the papers can be classified into five thematic groups (see Table 1). First, video games as a tool for digital propaganda ($N = 11$ studies). Second, video games aiming to raise awareness of political issues ($N = 5$ studies). Third, games and gamification elements used for radicalization ($N = 4$ studies). Fourth, game design that justifies, minimizes, or downplays violence ($N = 3$ studies). Fifth, players' role in conveying political messages ($N = 2$ studies).

We identified that 23 of the examined papers follow a qualitative approach, 13 of which are case studies. Only two papers can be classified as mixed (qualitative and quantitative). It is plausible that the choice of keywords and the framing of the research question could have influenced the predominance of qualitative studies over mixed ones in the retrieved results.

Table 1. Purpose of the studies on contemporary political discourse in digital games.

Purpose of Study	Number of Studies	Examples in Literature
Group 1	Total: 11	
Video games as a tool for digital propaganda	2 QUAL	<p>“The findings reveal that PCGs [political campaigning games] exemplify changing dynamics in digital campaigning, reify the enduring effectiveness of conflict framing, and codify how games can be designed to enact political rhetoric.” (Bossetta, 2019)</p> <hr/> <p>“Our previous analysis reveals some ways through which historical military propagames [propagandistic games] effectively integrate entertainment and propaganda. The developers of Kangzhan Online create a local imaginary world instead of a Western one.” (Ming-Tak Chew & Wang, 2021)</p>
	7 QUAL CS	
	2 QUAL/QUAN	
Group 2	Total: 5	
Video games aiming to raise awareness of political issues	3 QUAL	<p>“The 4 video games proposed as part of this study have been received as political communication tools around the theme of housing and tourism, proposing awareness-raising processes in the players, as well as links between the community of game creators and the community of activists who develop activities in urban spaces.” (Carrubba, 2018)</p> <hr/> <p>“Video games, as a mediated experience, are a unique format through which to denounce human rights violations and encourage critical judgment.” (Moya Martínez, 2021)</p>
	2 QUAL CS	
Group 3	Total: 4	
Games and gamification elements for radicalization	3 QUAL	<p>“Along with these modifications, titles directly linked to the terrorist world have also been developed, such as the Special Force saga, linked to Hezbollah. The West also has a high responsibility in relation to this propagandistic and video-ludic game, because for years and years, in its great war titles it has identified the enemy with Islam, enhancing a negative and demonized image of the same among the general public.” (Moreno Cantano, 2022)</p> <hr/> <p>“Both gamification and video games have the potential to influence radicalization processes. Top-down as well as bottom-up gamification have already been observed in relation to extremism, attesting to the increasing prominence gamified elements have for the development of tools by extremist organizations.” (Schlegel, 2020)</p>
	1 QUAL CS	

Table 1. (Cont.) Purpose of the studies on contemporary political discourse in digital games.

Purpose of Study	Number of Studies	Examples in Literature
Group 4	Total: 3	<p>“This article argues that the desire to minimise the impact of in-game deaths by rendering victims as ‘monsters’ enacts a type of cultural violence by dehumanising them. This aesthetic dehumanisation of in-game victims echoes propaganda strategies used to justify historical violence.” (Kocurek, 2015)</p> <p>“The second conclusion is that Japanese video games promote a positive image of the military and warfare. This is not based on racial superiority, as in World War II, but on the defense and protection of the most defenseless individuals.” (Galván Jerez, 2016)</p>
Game design that justifies, minimizes, or downplays violence	1 QUAL 2 QUAL CS	
Group 5	Total: 2	<p>“It is found that many aspects of political activism in games tightly align with aspects of everyday life activism, but some aspects appear novel, different, and original.” (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018)</p> <p>“The results show the audience’s active role in the construction of nationalist identities and demonstrate how authoritarian regimes promote them.” (Moya Martínez & Moreno Cantano, 2022)</p>
Players’ role in conveying political messages	1 QUAL 1 QUAL CS	

Notes: QUAL = qualitative; QUAN = quantitative; QUAL CS = qualitative case study.

The reason most papers take a qualitative approach to studying political discourse in video games could be due to the nature of the subject matter. Political discourse is often complex, nuanced, and context-dependent, making it well-suited to qualitative methods that allow for an in-depth exploration of themes and patterns.

As for the prevalence of case studies, these are popular in qualitative research because they allow for an intensive analysis of a specific instance or context. Examining a particular game can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of political discourse within that specific context.

2.4.1.3. Game Genres

We observed that first-person shooters (FPSs) are the most common genre in the studied sample (see Figure 3). They were mentioned on 79 occasions across the papers, representing 36% of the total. Some of the titles mentioned were America’s Army, BioShock Infinite, Call of Duty, and Counter-Strike. Following them are newsgames, representing 14.61% of the total with 32 mentions. Games as The Waffler or The Federator are some examples of this genre.

The wide presence of FPS games (entertainment games) in the papers might respond to the fact that they are popular and effectively convey political discourse due to their immersive and emotional gameplay, as well as their wide audience reach, modifiability (the ability to implement mods), and narrative control. They also allow for impactful political messages, emotional resonance, audience engagement, and content alteration for specific political themes. For example:

Usually, activists select game titles which offer gameplay and game content related to the political message (e.g., violent and militaristic FPS games). Other factors are popularity and availability in the target player community (for example Counter-Strike used as a platform by the activist mod Velvet-Strike). (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018, p. 64)

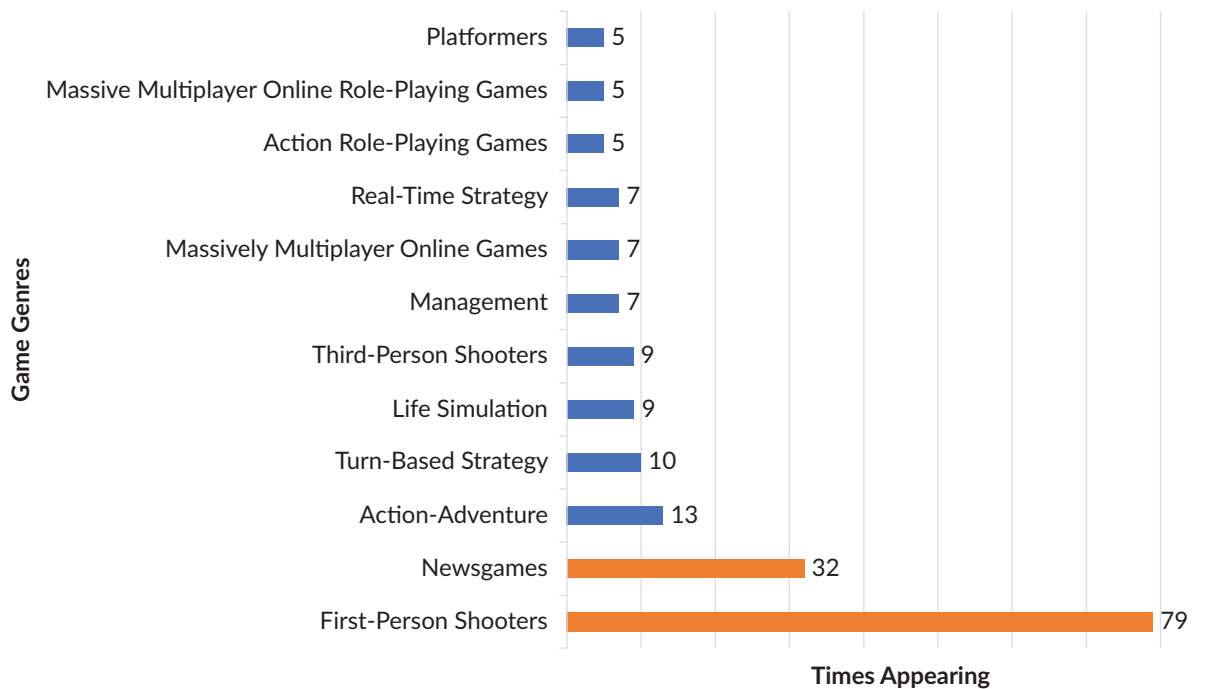


Figure 3. Most frequent game genres in the reviewed papers.

Newsgames (serious games), the second most prevalent game genre in the studies analyzed, can offer interactive engagement with real-world events and issues, providing an engaging and memorable experience. They serve as educational tools with real-world relevance, making complex issues accessible and understandable:

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. (Gómez García & de la Hera, 2023, p. 282)

2.4.2. PRICE Dimensions Model: Identifying Political Discourse in Digital Games

Contemporary political discourse through digital games is portrayed in academic literature in five main ways (see Figure 4): (a) participation by protesting, voting, and producing in the game world; (b) representation of political figures, political parties, and political events; (c) ideology for promoting, criticizing, recruiting, raising awareness, and building identities; (d) conflict by presenting and gamifying; and (e) education by gamifying, motivating, interacting, and reflecting.

2.4.2.1. Participation

By participation, we refer to the way in which digital games encourage citizens to engage with political processes. We found that the most common forms of civic participation discussed in the papers are protesting, voting, and producing.



Figure 4. The PRICE dimensions model.

In regard to protesting, players dissent through symbolic actions and in-game political expressions, such as rallies, demonstrations, pacifist guilds, and gender-bending (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018). Similarly, they defend causes, such as real-life political positions, lifestyle choices, and in-game practices. Through game mechanics like standing, sitting, walking, or sailing to occupy a location, players imitate aspects of real-life activism. They use signs with political slogans, images, and symbols, and reproduce typical behaviors, such as addressing and discussing with passers-by and counter-demonstrators. Moreover, players integrate original aspects like shouting or chanting (text, voice chat, or pre-recorded audio) into their performances. For example:

Two areas of activism can be identified which exclusively refer to in-game practices. One is works which protest and aim to overcome game violence; the other is works which protest rules and policies (such as top-down corporate control without residents' participation in *Second Life*). Activists might also protest against the imminent shut down of a platform, such as *Club Penguin*. (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018, p. 64)

Concerning voting, through in-game persuasive strategies, political marketers intend to attract young voters in an entertaining space (Soto de la Cruz et al., 2023). One example is provided by Bossetta (2019, p. 3434): "The game's final boss, Theresa May's battle bus with the slogan '#LIES,' primes players to make the connection between the Conservative Party and the highly controversial messaging used by the Vote Leave campaign in the 2016 Brexit referendum."

As for producing, players take on the role of game developers by producing mods of commercialized released games to enhance the gaming experience (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018; Robinson & Whittaker, 2020). In this sense, sympathizers of extremist groups and terrorist organizations create mods to engage with and spread their ideology (Schulzke, 2014, 2016):

To take an illustrative example, the modifications that have been made to the game ARMA3 to allow the player to play as a member of IS/AQ necessarily still rely on gameplay structured by the original game. While the changes serve to shift the positionality of the player, enabling them to embody a group that was absent from the original game—and in so doing, also allows the player to shoot and destroy those from “the West” that the original game frames as heroes—it still uses gameplay mechanics from the original. (Robinson & Whittaker, 2020)

2.4.2.2. Representation

Representation means characterizing, symbolizing, and giving a sense of authenticity to politicians and government institutions through political rhetoric in entertainment games and serious games. The papers studied mention the use of a pixelated or cartoonish aesthetic to convey political messages for parodic or humorous purposes (Gómez García & de la Hera, 2023). In the analyzed studies, representation takes three forms: political figures, political parties, and political events.

In relation to political figures, with in-game political communication strategies, candidates seek authenticity by cultivating a youthful public image (Cerqueira Sobrino, 2020) and aim to foster players’ emotional empathy (Soto de la Cruz et al., 2023). In this sense, some papers examined candidates’ strategies to reach younger voters through new channels and formats, such as Twitch and games like Among Us.

The case of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who on October 20 livestreamed on Twitch a game, along with prominent content creators, of the video game Among Us, with a peak audience of more than 400,000 people connected at the same time, in which [sic] could be established as a new form of connecting with the people. (Cerqueira Sobrino, 2020)

Relative to political parties, these can promote their political position through communication strategies using metaphors, such as fights, races, and tropes, to frame politics (Bossetta, 2019). In electoral campaigns, advergames (branded games) can serve as vehicles to convey a political agenda. For example:

Fiscal Kombat clearly characterizes the campaign as a battle, not only through its storyline but also through a “beat-’em-up” style of gameplay. Corbyn Run, meanwhile, conveys campaigning as a race, encoded through Corbyn’s forward motion and his eventual surpassing of Theresa May’s battle bus. (Bossetta, 2019, p. 3437)

Concerning political events, the persuasive potential of video games allows game developers to create and recreate real-life events and situations linked with politics, such as wars, terrorist attacks, and social revolutions, in a playful format. They often do so to maintain a certain image or to change the established perception of these events (Ming-Tak Chew & Wang, 2021; Moreno Cantano, 2022; Schulzke, 2014, 2016):

Kangzhan Online encourages gamers to cultivate memories of the War of Resistance. It does this through both game design and game management. Like most historical military games found in Western markets, Kangzhan Online's design realistically reproduces war-related details in its imaginary world. (Ming-Tak Chew & Wang, 2021, p. 9)

2.4.2.3. Ideology

Ideology focuses on how political ideologies are addressed in video games. We have identified five ways in which this occurs throughout the articles: promoting, criticizing, recruiting, awareness, and identities.

In regard to promoting, political and ideological organizations seek to persuade players with pro-war messages (Galván Jerez, 2016), entertainment and authoritarian propaganda (Ming-Tak Chew & Wang, 2021), and radicalization by desensitizing individuals to violence (Schlegel, 2020). This includes extremist views:

Video games with extremist content may play a part in facilitating susceptibility to radicalization by familiarizing individuals with narrative structures, such as a return to a glorified past, the importance of individual agency and the individual capability (if not duty) to fight evil, advocated by many contemporary extremist movements. (Schlegel, 2020, p. 26)

Concerning criticizing, games can take positions on social and political issues by condemning the dangers of nationalism and fanaticism in historical portrayals (Schubert, 2018), as well as endorsing war-making to the detriment of peacemaking (Hopp et al., 2018). One example is BioShock Infinite's visual manifestation:

In terms of how the events at Wounded Knee are portrayed in this exhibition, the Native Americans appear as the sole aggressors, with no mention of a massacre committed by US soldiers, instead honoring their heroic battle. Again, this depiction is partly influenced by the actual history of Wounded Knee, which at times was also considered a "battle" in US history but is nowadays usually recognized as a massacre. (Schubert, 2018, p. 15)

As for recruiting, political, military, and terrorist organizations use video games to engage or recruit young people. Moreno Cantano (2022) explains this phenomenon:

Video games have a strong emotional charge, significant psychological impact, and a vast field of dissemination thanks to the Internet. This interest has not gone unnoticed by the most dangerous terrorist organizations, especially those related to Islamic jihadism, which have used this medium to spread their messages and try to garner support for their cause among young people, those most familiar with this digital format. (pp. 399–400)

In relation to awareness, games can create new playful narratives to raise citizens' awareness of political issues. We found that the studied papers discuss urban phenomena like housing shortages or homelessness (Carrubba, 2018), denounce human rights violations, and encourage critical thinking (Moya Martínez, 2021). This example illustrates an effort to raise citizen awareness by playing as a homeless character:

The game [The Last Hope] is a simulation of the day-to-day life of a homeless person. Its aim is to invite the player to put themselves in the shoes of this individual to experience the problems of this group first-hand, as well as to connect this experience with the available data on the homeless population in the city of Barcelona. (Carrubba, 2018, p. 229)

As for identities, video games use narratives to foster communities. These are often rooted in nationalistic values, cultivating a sense of belonging among players (Moya Martínez & Moreno Cantano, 2022):

Individual users like Gu Wenlong, who has created within the video game H1Z1: King of the Kill (Daybreak Game, 2015) the group Red Army, which attacks in this virtual space any foreign player who goes against China, forcing them to shout “China No. 1” if they do not want their avatar to be eliminated. (p. 31)

2.4.2.4. Conflict

Conflict refers to how political conflicts are described, resolved, or promoted within digital games. In the studied papers, two modes are discussed: presenting and gamifying.

In regard to presenting, games can create a positive image of powerful countries or extremist organizations, as well as seek a moral justification for criminal interferences (Ashraf, 2013) by dehumanizing in-game enemies and masking the impact of in-game deaths by alternative blood and monstrosity (Kocurek, 2015). Also, through the cult of the insurgent (Schulzke, 2014), games can be used to rationalize the use of force (Schulzke, 2016), presenting countries like Russia, the Middle East, and Latin America as real-world threats (Valeriano & Habel, 2016). Here is an example of how conflict can be depicted:

Games about the Israel–Gaza Conflict relied on many of the persuasive techniques that are ubiquitous in propaganda. Each game constructed the conflict in a way that supported a particular side by demonising the opponent, affirming the favoured side’s justness, and excusing that side’s actions. (Schulzke, 2016, p. 592)

Concerning gamifying, terrorist organizations can use game elements to manipulate reality. In attack footage, terrorists can imitate or resemble FPS games, increasing the affective appeal of propaganda (Andrews, 2023). For example:

The obvious point is that Christchurch, and similar attacks, produced footage that looked like FPS games that strive to be realistic, and which place a heavy emphasis on modern warfare, accurate reproduction of weaponry, lifelike animations, and immersive game mechanics that mimic the tropes of popular war media. (Andrews, 2023, p. 62)

2.4.2.5. Education

Education consists of using video games to instruct players about certain political issues through soft news and historical content. In the studied papers, we observed four ways to accomplish this: gamifying, motivating, interacting, and reflecting.

In relation to gamifying, players and educators can benefit from game elements applied to educational contexts to explore and understand the historical context of war. In this regard, Díaz (2014, as cited in del Moral Pérez & Rodríguez González, 2021, p. 221) argues that the gamification of war scenarios and first-person gameplay help to understand and empathize with victims by making decisions in extreme situations. It prompts reflection and attitude change.

As for motivating, through games, students can immerse themselves in virtual worlds that encourage learning and reward players who adopt non-violent strategies.

These video games can promote learning of historical content, although it is acknowledged that not all of them faithfully represent historical facts. Some merely present events in a trivial and decontextualized manner, omitting crucial elements, such as the causes that led to wars and their resulting consequences. (del Moral Pérez & Rodríguez González, 2021, p. 224)

Regarding interacting, games can be used for educational purposes to promote social connection among students in attractive scenarios. In this sense, Marcano (2014, as cited in del Moral Pérez & Rodríguez González, 2021, p. 216) explains that it enhances sensory perception and fine motor skills, social competence when playing in a team, and tolerance towards weaknesses and differences.

Finally, for reflecting, through games, players are encouraged to develop critical thinking, particularly on political issues (Gómez García & de la Hera, 2023) and moral dilemmas. This is illustrated in the following example:

Spec Ops: The Line promotes reflection and provokes a feeling of guilt in the player for the decisions made; This War of Mine shows the emotional impact of war on victims, allowing for reflection on moral dilemmas, and the Metal Gear series offers a critical view of the Cold War from the perspective of the opposing sides. Meanwhile, the study focused on the Call of Duty series shows a biased view of various war conflicts by omitting the presence and suffering of civilians. (Verino, 2019, as cited in del Moral Pérez & Rodríguez González, 2021, p. 223)

In summary, political rhetoric in digital games can be studied using the PRICE dimensions model as a systematic model, which can be an effective tool for understanding current knowledge of this topic.

3. Future Research

After analyzing the selected articles, we identified research gaps that need more attention from the academic community. Following the same reasoning as in the Analysis section, the 25 papers were classified into the five established thematic groups, as we did when categorizing the studies according to their purpose (Section 2.4.1.2).

First, video games as a tool for digital propaganda: On this topic, future studies could investigate the effects on players' political interest and participation in propagames and compare it with the exposure to political advertisements (Bossetta, 2019; Soto de la Cruz et al., 2023). In addition, multidisciplinary studies could provide a better understanding through an in-depth analysis of the discourse within the games themselves

(Gómez García et al., 2022). It is also necessary to study the new contexts and new actors in video games generating propaganda (Schulzke, 2016). Similarly, how propagames integrate entertainment with authoritarian propaganda could be examined (Ming-Tak Chew & Wang, 2021). Finally, the use of live-streaming gaming platforms as advertising spaces for political purposes needs to be explored (Cerqueira Sobrino, 2020).

Second, video games aiming to raise awareness of political issues: In this category, further research could study the use of video games to explore citizens' reactions to different social issues in different urban contexts (Carrubba, 2018). Addressing the critical aspect of war games could also be necessary, particularly in how they present events, facilitate critical thinking (del Moral Pérez & Rodríguez González, 2021), and incorporate civilians in decision-making (Valeriano & Habel, 2016).

Third, games and gamification elements for radicalization: Future studies could examine the psychological harm online activity can have in the physical world, as well as how recruitment and radicalization might take place in the metaverse (Lakhani, 2023). In this vein, further research is needed on how extremists, terrorists, and their sympathizers engage in game spaces (Robinson & Whittaker, 2020).

Fourth, game design that justifies, minimizes, or downplays violence: Future research could explore whether the vilification of certain ethnic groups in video games has real-life consequences (Kocurek, 2015). Studies might also analyze whether masking violence in video games desensitizes players to violence in real life or, on the contrary, creates a clearer separation between the fantasy world and the real world (Galván Jerez, 2016).

Fifth, players' role in conveying political messages: An in-depth study on how players disseminate political views and organize rallies and demonstrations within video games would be necessary, as well as how they use other adjacent platforms, such as YouTube (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018). Similarly, further research could address the analysis of gaming communities as opinion spaces for digital technonationalism (Moya Martínez & Moreno Cantano, 2022).

4. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to review existing literature on how digital games are used to convey contemporary political discourse. We used the SALSA framework, which is an effective tool for a systematic literature approach. A novel contribution of this study is the PRICE dimensions model, a systematic model providing categories and subcategories to identify and classify current political rhetoric in digital games.

The results show that most of the papers examined fell under the category of research, indicating a strong empirical approach to understanding this complex intersection of politics and gaming. Theory, discussion, development, and review studies were also present in the sample, in this order.

The methodologies employed in these papers predominantly involve qualitative approaches and case studies, underscoring the importance of theoretical analysis and empirical research in examining current political discourse within gaming spaces.

The papers analyzed primarily fell into five thematic groups according to how political discourse is integrated into video games, namely the use of games as digital propaganda tools, their ability to raise political awareness, the role of gamification in radicalization, game design that justifies, minimizes, or downplays violence, and the role of players in conveying political messages.

In our sample of studies related to political rhetoric, we observed that FPSs are the most frequently explored genre followed by newsgames. The prevalence of FPS games mentioned and discussed in the analyzed papers may be attributed to their ability to convey political messages effectively through immersive and emotionally engaging gameplay, their extensive audience reach, their modifiability, and narrative control.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors



Jenniffer Soto de la Cruz earned her PhD in communication, information, and technology of the network society from the University of Alcalá (Spain) in September 2023. Her research focuses on the intersection of digital games, marketing, and communication, exploring how new media platforms shape public opinion and player engagement. She is particularly interested in exploring digital persuasion through digital games in social, cultural, and political contexts.



Sara Cortés Gómez holds a PhD in audiovisual communication and advertising from the University of Alcalá (Spain). She is also a member of the Images, Words, and Ideas (GIPI) research group of the University of Alcalá. Her research focuses on education, new technologies, and video games as cultural tools, and her new lines of research focus on the use of video games from the idea of creators and designers, considering these instruments as multimodal narratives from their production.



Pilar Lacasa (PhD) is an emeritus professor at the University of Alcalá (Spain) and senior eminent researcher at the International University of La Rioja. She has been a visiting researcher in the MIT Comparative Media Studies (CMS) program and at the Digital Ethnography Research Centre (DERC) at RMIT University (Melbourne, Australia). She coordinates the Images, Words, and Ideas (GIPI) research group at the University of Alcalá. Her research focuses on fan communities, video games, narratives, and digital media.