Playful Politics and Political Play: Conceptualizing Videogames as a Political Arena

Kristine Jørgensen
Department of Information Science and Media Studies
University of Bergen
PO Box 7802
5020 Bergen
kristine.jorgensen@uib.no

Keywords

Play, politics, player studies

INTRODUCTION

Although it may be claimed that games always have been political, recent years have seen a tendency in which videogames and game culture have become an arena for political topics in new and more pervasive ways. Today we see that games are increasingly involving topics that reflect or comment on the political social reality (Mortensen & Jørgensen 2020); there is a rising awareness among game enthusiasts and professionals that game culture is an environment contested by different ideologies and values (Maloney et al 2019); and there is also the tendency among players and streamers to use rhetorics that integrate the playful and political (Hokka 2021). While the political orientation of games has led many players to argue against the presence of politics in games (Pfister 2018) based in the idea that games should only serve to entertain and not attempt to provoke reflection or to communicate an opinion, game developers have often responded to this in a defensive way by insisting that their games are not to be considered as political as long as they do not deal with the realities of contemporary political situations (Ruch 2021).

AIM AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Based in the observation above, this paper investigates *ludo-political mergers* in game culture: areas in which the playful and ludic aspects of games and game culture interact with political ideologies, values, attitudes, and topics. The idea of ludo-political mergers rests on the following understandings of *ludic* and *political*: While the ludic often refers to that which concerns games, in this paper we are more broadly referring also to play and the playful. Based on the knowledge that play is ambiguous and dependent on situation (Schechner 2013), the understanding of *play* in the paper is founded in the idea that it involves a form of meta-communication (Bateson 1972) that may frame an expression and thus alter its original and literal meaning (Goffman 1974). Further, the concept of *politics* used in this paper is based on a broad understanding from political philosophy. Rather than understanding politics as limited to issues concerning political processes or relating to that which concerns the state, this paper includes as *political* issues that concern a contest or a conflict relating to the distribution of values, resources, and power (Laswell 1936; Mitchell 1985). Thus, in this paper, the *political* concerns how political tendencies in society find their way into games and game culture, and the potential impact that this has on the way players negotiate the values and ideologies of game culture.

The paper will discuss two main forms of ludo-political mergers, which can be understood in terms of tendencies or social processes in which play and politics merge in game culture. Following game studies research games designed to provoke reflection, such as persuasive games (Bogost 2007), ethical games (Sicart 2013), and transgressive games (Mortensen & Jørgensen 2020), the first tendency identified is what I call *political play,* which is the situation that ideology and politics has become subject to play, games, and playfulness. Political play thus concerns the insertion of political issues into games and playful settings, and we see political play not only in games that are designed to present political issues, but also in critical readings and political interpretations of certain games. Political play is often contested by those arguing that games should be apolitical, but appreciated by those who find the integration between politics and gameplay meaningful (Mortensen & Jørgensen 2020).

Reflecting research on how the playful context of games can cushion potentially offensive or politically loaded messages (Mortensen & Jørgensen 2020; Schulzke 2020) and research on how politically oriented groups use game culture as a recruitment arena (Condis 2019), the second tendency to be discussed is the emergence of what I call *playful politics,* which is the merger between playful and political rhetorics. Playful politics is typically performed in order to frame or mask political opinions as play. This is the tactics performed by the alt-right and right-wing groups when they mask their intentions to gain a foothold in game culture and other parts of online culture (Bjørkelo 2020; Condis 2019). Playfulness is here utilized as a rhetoric for political persuasion and is contingent upon the existence of people or groups who view game culture as a potential audience for their message. This tactic may also be used as for masking harassment and toxicity.

METHODS

While we must expect both tendencies to thrive not only in game culture but in internet culture more broadly, I postulate that the implications of the two ludo-politic tendencies are radically distinct. While *political play* is embedded in games and game discourses, *playful politics* is a subversive strategy that indicates that the ludic is exploited for a purpose other than play, even though it can well be used by insiders of game culture. To investigate the dynamics of ludo-political mergers, it is essential that we understand how players themselves experience this. Thus, I will adopt a phenomenological perspective as adopted from ethnography, focusing on player emotion and interpretations (Ram & Houston 2015; Smith et al 2009). The existing research referenced above will for this reason be further contextualized through analyses of qualitative data from forum studies and research interviews with players. The focus of the qualitative studies is to gain insight into player experiences with games as a potentially political medium; how they respond to political content in games, and the degree to which they find that videogames as a playful medium can take the edge out of otherwise political contentious topics.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bateson, G. 1972. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. San Francisco: Chandler.

Bjørkelo, K. 2020. "White Nationalist Readings of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim". *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 20(3). http://gamestudies.org/2003/articles/bjorkelo

Bogost, I. 2007. *Persuasive Games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Condis, M. 2019. "Hateful Games: Why White Supremacist Recruiters Target Gamers and How to Stop Them". In *Digital Ethics. Rhetorics and Responsibility in Online*

Aggression edited by J. Reyman and E. M. Sparby, pp. 143-159. London and New York: Routledge. https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/41372

Goffman, E. 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York: Harper & Row.

Hokka, J. 2021. "Pewdiepie, racism and Youtube's newliberalist interpretation of freedom of speech". Convergence 27 (1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520938602

Laswell, H. 1936. *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*. New York: Whittlesey House

Maloney, M., S. Roberts & T. Graham. 2019. *Gender, Masculinity & Video Gaming. Analysing Reddit's r/gaming Community*. Palgrave.

Mitchell, W.C. 1985. "Politics as the Allocation of Values: A Critique". *Ethics: An International Journal of Social, Political, and Legal Philosophy* 71(2). https://www.jstor.org/stable/2379509

Mortensen, T.E. and Jørgensen, K. 2020. *The Paradox of Transgression in Games*. London and New York: Routledge.

Pfister, E. 2018. "Keep your politics out of my games!". *Spiel-Kultur-Wissenschaft* Feb 8. https://spielkult.hypotheses.org/1566

Ram, K. and C. Houston. 2015. *Phenomenology in Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ruch, A. 2021. "Signifying nothing: the hyperreal politics of 'apolitical' games". *Communicative Research and Practice* 7(2). https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2021.1902167

Schechner, R. 2013. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Schulzke, M. 2013. "Rethinking Military Gaming: America's Army and Its Critics". *Games and Culture* 8(13). https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412013478686

Sicart, M. 2013. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Smith, J. A., P. Flowers & M. Larkin. 2009. *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. London: SAGE.