

Digital games as persuasion spaces for political marketing. The case of Fortnite and Joe Biden's campaign

Jennifer Soto de la Cruz

University of Alcalá
Pza. San Diego, s/n
28801, Alcalá de Henares, Madrid, Spain
jennifer.soto@edu.uah.es

Teresa De La Hera

Erasmus University Rotterdam
Burgemeester Oudlaan 50
3062PA, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
delahera@eshcc.eur.nl

Sara Cortés Gómez

University of Alcalá
Pza. San Diego, s/n
28801, Alcalá de Henares, Madrid, Spain
sara.cortesg@uah.es

Pilar Lacasa

University of Alcalá
Pza. San Diego, s/n
28801, Alcalá de Henares, Madrid, Spain
p.lacasa@uah.es

Keywords

Politainment, in-game propaganda, political marketing, political communication, in-game persuasion, Fortnite

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore the way in which entertainment digital games are used as spaces for political persuasion in electoral campaigns, employing the use of *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) during Joe Biden's campaign for the 2020 U.S. presidential election as a case study. In the field of game studies, digital games have been defined as cultural artifacts full of meaning that can be used to persuade specific audiences in specific situations (Bogost, 2007; de la Hera, Jansz, Raessens, & Schouten, 2021). The study of persuasive communication related to games is mostly focused, however, on the use of serious games, designed with a persuasive intention. Studies on the use of digital entertainment games as spaces for persuasive communication, particularly as tools for political marketing, are still scarce. This paper approaches the understanding of this phenomenon from a holistic perspective, using qualitative mixed methods to give an answer to the research question: *How is political marketing, and specifically electoral propaganda actions, integrated into entertainment digital games?*

Proceedings of DiGRA 2020

© 2020 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Building on the idea of “making democracy fun” Josh Lerner (2014) argues that both analog and digital games can be used for many political purposes. He proposes three categories: games about politics, play as political action, and games as political action, the latter linked to our object of study. Furthermore, Baltezarević and colleagues (2019) state that “digital games have the ability to be political products and to reflect, interpret, and sometimes even redefine the political dynamics with which we engage with every day” (2019, p.30). They affirm that digital games have the potential of being the platform of the future “guiding young people to form 'desirable and acceptable' attitudes toward political issues” (2019, p.30). We currently are in a new phase of political marketing supported by the use of digital games and livestreaming. Some examples of this are the initiatives of US politicians such as Joe Biden and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, who chose games like *Animal Crossing* and streaming platforms like Twitch as new media vehicles to deliver their political messaging (Tran, Ruberg, Lark, & Guarriello, 2021).

In a recent academic publication Akbar and Kusumasari (2021) have analyzed how political aspects are found inside games and their influence on affairs and issues in certain countries through the case study of the games *Animal Crossing: New Horizon* and *Genshin Impact*. They concluded that “video games have become an election-winning strategic political marketing and communication policy” (Akbar & Kusumasari, 2021, p.1). In addition, they noted that “these video games have used procedural rhetoric, which reveals how game producers promote certain ideologies through legislation and rules in their games” (2021, p.1).

In this study we analyze the *Build Back Better With Biden* campaign (Alliance Studios, 2020) in *Fortnite* from a qualitative mixed-methods approach. First, we analyzed the persuasive dimensions used in the design of Joe Biden’s island in *Fortnite*, by means of a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). For this purpose, we used the persuasive communication analysis model developed by De la Hera (2019). Second, we explored the repercussion in the general and specialized digital press, by conducting a discourse analysis (Gee, 2010) of 20 articles selected through an advanced Google search. To this end, we used the dimensions of what media do in the world according to Couldry (2019). Third, we explored players’ perceptions through in-depth interviews with a convenience sample of 10 players between the ages of 12 to 28.

Preliminary results show how electoral propaganda actions can be configured in a game environment on three persuasive levels (signs, system, and context) with the intention to influence players’ perceptions and beliefs not only in the game world but also in the physical world context. In addition, the results of the discourse analysis show that digital media fulfill two main functions in the electoral process: *representing* the social reality to transmit it to the people and *governance*, by helping or hindering certain types of governments. From the players’ perspective, there is a twofold interpretation of how they perceive the irruption of politics in game. On the one hand, the approach of politicians to the space in which young people interact is seen in a favorable, fun, and sympathetic way towards the candidate. On the other hand, this type of political content is considered intrusive, out of place and aimed at an audience of an inappropriate age for this type of messages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Akbar, F., & Kusumasari, B. (2021). Making public policy fun: How political aspects and policy issues are found in video games. *Policy Futures in Education*, , 1-18. doi:10.1177/14782103211033071

Alliance Studios. (2020). *Build back better with biden* Alliance Studios.

- Baltezarević, R., Baltezarević, B., Baltezarević, V., Kwiatek, P., & Baltezarević, I. (2019). Political marketing in digital games: 'Game over' for traditional political marketing methods. *Acta Ludologica*, 2(2), 28-47.
- Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT.
- Couldry, N. (2019). *Media: Why it matters*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- De la Hera, T. (2019). Persuasion through digital games: A theoretical model. *Digital gaming and the advertising landscape* (pp. 95-146). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. doi:10.1515/9789048538676-008 Retrieved from <http://www.degruyter.com/doi/10.1515/9789048538676-008>
- De la Hera, T., Jansz, J., Raessens, J., & Schouten, B. (Eds.). (2021). *Persuasive gaming in context*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press B.V. doi:10.5117/9789463728805
- Epic Games. (2017). *Fortnite Free-To-Play Game*.
- Gee, J. P. (2010). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (3rd Edition ed.). London: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203847886 Retrieved from <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/introduction-discourse-analysis-james-paul-gee/10.4324/9780203847886>
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (Segunda ed.). United State of America: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Lerner, J. (2014). *Making democracy fun: How game design can empower citizens and transform politics*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Tran, C. H., Ruberg, B., Lark, D., & Guarriello, N. Playing at the polls: Video games in/as platforms for political participation. Paper presented at the Panel Presented at AoIR 2021: The 22nd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers.