

Frame and Metaphor in Political Games

Ian Bogost

Georgia Institute of Technology
School of Literature Communication and Culture
686 Cherry St.
Atlanta, GA 30332 USA
+1 (404) 894-1160
ian.bogost@lcc.gatech.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper offers an approach to analyzing political rhetoric in videogames intended to carry ideological bias, based on cognitive linguist George Lakoff's notion of metaphor and frame as the principle organizers of political discourse. I then argue for three ways games function in relation to ideological frames: *reinforcement*, *contestation*, and *exposition* through examples of political games (*Tax Invaders*), art games (*Vigilance 1.0*), and commercial games (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*). Secondly, I offer thoughts on issues likely to arise from the hypothetical adoption of political frame and metaphor as design principles.

Keywords

Political videogames, cognitive linguistics, Grand Theft Auto

The 2004 US Presidential election renewed world citizens' recognition of a deep ideological polarization in US politics. Juxtaposing American morality against British class rifts, some cite religion as the key issue dividing the presidential vote [27]. The American Electoral College, combined with the lack of a viable third-party, only increases the apparent split: massive, telecast Electoral College maps displaying won states in red (Republican) and blue (Democrat) suggested a geographic divide to many Americans, with the west coast, northeast, and Great Lakes voting Democratic and the heartland and south Republican. Yet more detailed maps that showed county-by-county vote balance proved that the division runs even deeper [31], with most counties appearing some shade of purple, a combination of "red votes" and "blue votes." In the aftermath of the election, Democrats have acknowledged that their messages have failed, just as Republicans recognize how much theirs have succeeded. The left is now scrambling to develop a new strategy. Ideas are plentiful: avoid candidates from the northeast [32]; focus more strongly on domestic issues [28]; seek better management [20]. But two influential political theorists have suggested that political success draws less from reality and more from representation.

Cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggested metaphor is central to human understanding [12,15]. Influenced by Lévi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz, and Jean Piaget, Lakoff and Johnson argue that our conceptual systems are fundamentally shaped by cultural constructions; metaphor is not for them a fanciful language reserved for poets, but an active, conceptual framework that is central to how we understand the world. For example, the two unpack our under-

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standing of “time as a commodity,” showing how we relate our entire experience of time to monetary concepts of quantification (*you’re running out of time; is that worth the time?*). Turning to politics explicitly, Lakoff argues that the most important consideration in political discourse is not how politicians respond to the “facts” of the external world, but how they conceptualize, or “frame” that world in their discourse about it. Lakoff argues that political frames in the contemporary U.S. reflect metaphors of family management — conservatives frame political issues as “strict fathers” while liberals frame them as “nurturing parents” [13]. A self-professed liberal, Lakoff argues that if the left wants to regain political credibility, they need to start crafting their political speech with an understanding of liberal and conservative frames. They need to create words that reflect their ideas [14].

On the other side of the political fence, political scientist Frank Luntz specializes in helping conservatives frame their spoken discourse to create the greatest appeal possible — what he calls “message development” [17]. Luntz was responsible for much of Newt Gingrich’s 1994 “Contract for America,” and more recently he has guided conservatives on the strategic use of such terms as “war on terror” instead of “war in Iraq” and “climate change” instead of “global warming.” While Lakoff talks in terms of “frames,” Luntz speaks of “contexts” — ways to repackage positions so they carry more political currency [18,19]. Some have criticized Luntz’s message development strategy as misleading or immoral¹, but politicians take his advice to heart, and evidence of his influence and success are increasingly apparent [6,7].

In addition to becoming the year of an American political divide, 2004 was also the year when political videogames became legitimate. While there are early precedents games that carry political messages [2,8,9], as well as independent games created to make political statements [10,16,22], 2004 was the first year that candidates and party groups created officially endorsed games to bolster their campaign for U.S. President [3,23], U.S. State Legislature [4], U.S. Congress [3], and even President of Uruguay [11]. As the worlds of political message strategy and political videogames gain momentum, an opportunity arises for each to inform the other. However, Luntz’s message development and Lakoff’s framed discourse both define strategies for *spoken or written* political rhetoric. This paper offers an approach to analyzing political rhetoric in videogames intended to carry ideological bias, paying special attention to the work of metaphor and frame as a procedural rather than verbal strategy. I argue for three ways games function in relation to ideological frames: *reinforcement*, *contestation*, and *exposition* through examples of art games, political games, and commercial games.

REINFORCEMENT

“Traditional” uses of language do have some place in videogame-based political messaging. The GOP’s second game of the 2004 campaign, *Tax Invaders*, is a replica of the classic arcade game *Space Invaders*, but players defend the country against John Kerry’s tax plans instead of an alien invasion [23,30]. The player controls a disembodied George W. Bush head, which he moves from side to side along the bottom of the screen in place of the original game’s space gun. Instead of descending aliens, the player combats potential John Kerry tax cuts, represented as abstract rectangles bearing the value of the proposed tax. The player fires projectiles out of the top of Bush’s head to “shoot down” the tax hikes and defend the country.

¹ cf. Luntzpeak.com, a website maintained by the National Environmental Trust whose sole purpose is to critique specific instances of Luntz’s messaging strategy.

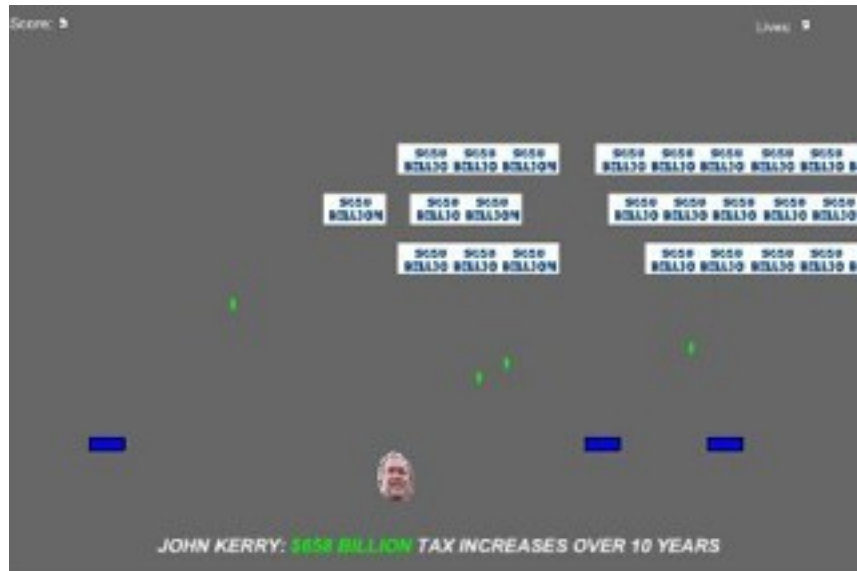


Figure 1: *Tax Invaders*, a web-based game created by the GOP

The game’s implementation is extremely crude; if left idle long enough the taxes/aliens even pass over the player and off the bottom of the screen. But the written text used to contextualize the game actions enacts logic familiar to both Lakoff and Luntz: it casts tax increases as an anthropomorphized enemy in itself, a thief against whom you must defend yourself. The game’s opening text announces, “only *you* can stop the tax invader” and invites the player to “Save the USA from John Kerry’s Tax Ideas.” Lakoff would argue that such language reflects an underlying logic at work in conservative politics, that the people know what’s best for themselves and that material success is moral and shouldn’t be punished. These points are evident in the language used to frame the game. *Tax Invaders* extends the verbal metaphor of “taxation as theft” to the tangible plane.

Released in early 2004 at the height of the second Gulf War, some might find it surprising that the GOP would choose to publish a depiction of George W. Bush *shooting anything*. But within the verbal rhetoric of conservative politics, taxation is a “battle” to be waged. Lakoff argues that from the conservative perspective tax increases are never proposals to improve the general social good, but always threats on the part of the government to steal what does not rightly belong to them. When someone breaks into your home, it is appropriate to brandish a gun; it’s *your property* and you have to defend it. There is thus no political inconsistency in contextualizing tax opposition as hostility, indeed as violent hostility. In the context of *Tax Invaders*, George W. Bush’s bullet-like projectiles are not akin to Army rifled wielded against innocent Iraqis, but rather to the policeman’s sidearm wielded against a criminal.

A simple game like *Tax Invaders* could be said to wear its rhetorical frame on its sleeve; indeed, the instantiations of conservative contexts are almost identical to their verbal counterparts; for example, we might talk about politicians “shooting down” a measure in Congress. The idea of a legislator “shooting down” a tax hike proposal is hardly preposterous; the game just makes such a verbal frame visually manifest. The game also frames the metaphors of its rhetoric; Bush *fires* projectiles at the tax cuts, representing the metaphor of tax hikes as enemy threat. Thus while *Tax Invaders* does little to represent actual tax policy, it frames tax policy in a way that rein-

forces a conservative position. Verbal language tends to remain imperceptible; its function as metaphor remains largely hidden to speakers because they are mired in their own fluency. I would argue that the game thus serves as an example of the *reinforcement* an ideological frame. By drawing attention to the correlation between battle and taxation, the game not only makes its argument from within that frame, but also it explicitly draws attention to the frame itself.

A game like *Tax Invaders* can thus serve opposing political purposes. For conservatives it reinforces the notion that taxes are an invasion and we need to “wage war” against them, like we would against alien invaders. This sort of rhetoric would be much more difficult, or at least more inappropriate, to enact on the soapbox. On the public pulpit, grandstanding politicians rely on the perlocutionary rather than illocutionary effect of their rhetorical frame. In speech act theory, an illocutionary act carries propositional content that the utterance expresses literally. A perlocutionary act carries an effect that is not expressed in the utterance, such as persuasion [1,29]. A game like *Tax Invaders* can thus serve opposing political purposes. For conservatives it reinforces the idea that taxes are an invasion and we need to “wage war” against them, like we would against alien invaders. This sort of rhetoric would be much more difficult, or at least more inappropriate, to enact on the soapbox. *Tax Invaders* offers the unique ability to convert perlocution into illocution. Instead of using verbal frames, the GOP has made the symbolic underpinning of their rhetorical context manifest in the game itself. In essence, *Tax Invaders* is a lesson in how to *think about* tax policy like a conservative. The game says “Think of taxation as an invasion meant to harm you” rather than “We must fight against tax increases.” For liberals, *Tax Invaders* reinforces the conservative frame on taxation, namely that it is a theft rather than a contribution to the common social good. Playing the game critically might assist liberals in orienting their frame in opposition to that of conservatives. Each perspective is one side of the same coin: while *Tax Invaders* offers only a very rudimentary treatment of tax policy, it offers a more sophisticated reinforcement of a conservative rhetorical frame on tax policy.

CONTESTATION

Tax Invaders’ political register still operates primarily through verbal language (the text inside the game) and macroscopic imagery. Yet games are fundamentally procedural, not written or visual. To understand the function of frame and metaphor in communicating ideological bias in videogames, we must look at how the interactions of rules create similar frames as language-based political expression, equal in significance to families around the dinner table or a public figure at the podium but different — and perhaps differently successful — in form.

In Martin Le Chevallier’s art installation game *Vigilance 1.0*, players seek out deviants on surveillance screen-like sections of an urban environment [16]. The game screen is divided into small squares each of which display a different segment and scale of the detailed city. Citizens traverse the environment, completing tasks like shopping at the supermarket or relaxing in a park. The player’s task is to watch these screens and identify improprieties ranging from littering to vagrancy to prostitution. Armed with a small circular cursor, the player must constantly scan the environment, pointing out infractions by clicking on offenders. For each success, the player is rewarded with points proportional to the severity of the offense. Erroneous identifications lose the player points for defamation. With every offender that passes by unnoticed, the more depraved the society becomes, and vice-versa.

Vigilance’s rules are incredibly simple. The player can censure citizens, successes are rewarded and failures punished, for each success the society becomes more pure, for each failure or

omission more base. It is a game about surveillance guised as one about moral depravity, the 16 rectangular segments of the screen akin to a security guard's video monitors. The player's "vigilance" quickly devolves into its own perversion, that of unfettered surveillance.



Figure 2: *Vigilance 1.0*, here showing a player's reward for identifying a drunkard

Because the game creates a positive feedback loop for depravity in the society, any attempt on the player's part to cease his vigilant oversight creates more corruption, reinforcing the need to monitor. By forcing the player to see the consequences of the metaphor of vigilance as comprehensive regulation, the game *challenges* the ideological frame it purportedly represents. The game's purpose is not to promote surveillance or moral purity, but to call it into question by turning the apparently upstanding player into one of the depraved whom he is charged to eliminate.

On first blush, the game seems to reinforce the ideological frame of vigilance as safeguard. The game supports this sentiment through its rules, which provide positive feedback for increased surveillance. But over time, the player comes to realize that his adopted role as overseer is no less perverse than the game's abstract representations of moral depravity — prostitution, vagrancy, zoophilia. The game then affords the player a variety of ways to interrogate this challenge. For one part, it uses an arithmetic algorithm to control the amount of depravity to feed back into the system. Identifying more perverse acts increases the score more rapidly; for example, public drunkenness is worth +2, abandoned trash +1. The player could choose to target only the most egregious acts as a kind of strategy for more efficient moral sanctity. But while watching for public urination or zoophilia, many more low-level acts will already have begun spiraling the society into further chaos. *Vigilance* thus provides a variety of player-configurable lenses through which to consider and reconsider the ideological frame of vigilance as inviolability.

EXPOSITION

Both *Vigilance 1.0* and *Tax Invaders* might seem like special cases, games created explicitly with ideological bias in mind. Commercial games may be less deliberate in their rhetoric, but they are not necessarily free from ideological framing. In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, players enact the life of an early 90's Los Angeles gangbanger [24]. Whereas previous iterations of the series favored stylized representations of historico-fictional times and places [25,26], *San Andreas* takes on a cultural moment steeped in racial and economic politics. Rather than taking on the role of an organized criminal, the player is cast as CJ, an inner-city gangster. *GTA's* use of large navigable spaces and open-ended gameplay have been widely cited and praised, but in *San Andreas* open gameplay, expansive virtual spaces, and the inner-city characterization collide to underscore opportunity biases.

Some of these collisions are straightforward; for example, *San Andreas* added the requirement that CJ eat to maintain his stamina and strength. However, the only nourishment in the game comes from fast food restaurants (chicken, burgers, or pizza). Eating moderately maintains energy, but eating high fat content foods increase CJ's weight, and fat gangsters can't run or fight very effectively. Each food item in the game comes at a cost, and the player's funds are limited. Mirroring real fast food restaurants, less fattening foods like salad cost much more than high calorie super-meals. The dietary features of *San Andreas* are rudimentary, but the fact that the player must feed his character to continue playing does draw attention to the material conditions the game provides for satisfying that need, subtly exposing the fact that problems of obesity and malnutrition in poor communities can partly be attributed to the relative ease and affordability of fast food.



Figure 3: *CJ stands outside a fast food restaurant in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas.*

More meaningfully, the game's use of open-ended virtual spaces also frames a discourse about crime and criminals. *San Andreas* intricately recreates representations of three huge cities (the equivalents of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Las Vegas) along with rural spaces in-between.

CJ has recently returned to his hometown neighborhood (the San Andreas equivalent of LA's Compton) to avenge his mother's death. The player can customize CJ's clothes to some extent and, of course, steal nice cars for him, but he remains a black youth from Compton wearing classic gang-associated paraphernalia like do-rags. Thanks to the immense simulated space of the city, the player can travel from neighborhood to neighborhood; the buildings, scenery, vehicles and people adjust accordingly. But something remains the same everywhere in San Andreas, from its Compton to its Beverly Hills: no matter the location, the game's non-player characters (NPC's) respond to your semiautomatic-toting, do-rag wearing black gangsta character in roughly the same way.

While major technology challenges impede the development of credible large-scale character interactions [21], *San Andreas* makes no effort to alter character behavior based on race, social standing, or location. Bumping into a leggy blonde on Rodeo Drive elicits the same anonymous outcry as would jostling a drug dealer on Atlantic Drive. When mediated by the game's inner-city context, its procedural interaction of space and character creates a frame in which the player's street gang persona does not participate in any historical, economic, racial, or social disadvantage. The aggregate procedural effects in *San Andreas* thus *expose* an ideological frame, and perhaps a surprising one.

In *Moral Politics*, George Lakoff convincingly argues that the conservative frame for crime is an extension of the "strict father" model of seeing the world. The strict father disciplines his children and acts as a moral authority. Through this example, he instills discipline and self-reliance. Self-reliant, morally disciplined adults make the right decisions and prosper. Morally depraved adults do not deserve to prosper and may even be dangerous. Lakoff contrasts the conservative strict father with the progressive "nurturing parent." Unlike the strict father, the nurturing parent believes that support and assistance helps people thrive, and that people who need help deserve to be helped. Nurturing parents reject self-discipline as the sole justification of prosperity and allow for economic, cultural, or social disadvantages that might suggest some people deserve even more assistance.

By failing to generate responses across the socioeconomic boundaries of the game's virtual space, *San Andreas* exposes something closer to the conservative ideological frame on crime. If the game's NPC logic were to admit to cultural and economic disadvantages as factors that mediate interaction between characters, it would also have to admit that such factors are external to CJ (the player's character) and thus attributable to something outside CJ's character and self-discipline. To play *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is to participate in the metaphor of crime as decadence. This is an especially troubling frame for the game to expose given that the player is the one in control of CJ. Despite its purported open-endedness, *San Andreas* offers incentives to play its missions, and thus incentives to engage in criminal behavior. While the story does problematize the notion that gang members have moral options — CJ is set up by a corrupt cop and sent on the run — once outside of the mission architecture the game has no procedure in place to mediate character interactions. Notably, the open-ended gameplay reorients the player back toward the missions; the game will not unlock cities beyond San Andreas unless the player reaches key waypoints in the missions. Despite its narrative gestures toward subverting the gang as a possible social adaptation, the game situates the story missions as small accidents in the broader urban logic. As the player exits the open urban environment and re-enters the missions, he does so willingly, not under the duress of a complex historico-social precondition. This rhetoric implicitly affirms the metaphor of criminal behavior as moral depravity.

DESIGN FUTURES FOR POLITICAL GAMES

Politicians are already familiar with Lakoff and Luntz's strategies on framing political speech, especially public speech. Those who wish to create videogames as endorsed speech will undoubtedly need to pay more attention to the use of context in such games. A shift away from verbal contextualization and toward procedural contextualization in such games will likely take longer. Perhaps most promising is videogames' potential to help citizens change or "shift" frame through reinforcement, a task George Lakoff argues is the central one in contemporary progressive politics. Finally, unexpected ideological frames like those exposed in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* do not necessarily indicate that commercial developers have a hidden political agenda. It is much more likely that they are unaware that the procedural interaction in the game can imply a particular ideological stance. Market forces are unlikely to expose such failing as imprudence, and thus the task of unpacking ideology in games like *San Andreas* will become the work of the critic.

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