

# Playing with Perspectives: German *Planspiele* as Tools for Political Education

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

*Planspiele*—serious games developed and utilised to simulate complex real sociotechnical systems to train decision-making competencies—have a long and important tradition in Germanic history and culture (Herz and Blätte 2000; Rempe and Klösters 2006; Nohr 2019). Initially devised by the Prussian army as mechanisms of planning, exploring, and testing strategies of warfare during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and refined throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the games’ value for education was soon recognised and the underlying principles of this kind of simulation games adopted to other scenarios, such as economics, politics, and social processes (Wintjes 2019). While *Planspiele* mark the foundation for complex simulations, they also had an impact on ludology more broadly, particularly since an early version from 1811 used a physical sandbox to depict different terrains, later leading to contemporary ideas of sandbox games as free-to-roam places (von Hilgers 2000: 62–63). After the Second World War, education systems in the two Germanies and Austria drew on the concept of analogue *Planspiele* to further political education, economic knowledge, strategic thinking, and civic engagement and to “foster a range of cognitive and emotional benefits, such as enhanced problem-solving abilities, collaborative skills, and resilience in the face of challenges” (Christopoulos and Mystakidis 2023, 1223). In recent years, these simulations entered the digital realm in the form of hybrid or fully digital games (Freese, Schier, and Mühlhausen 2018), while analogue simulation games still have a central role in German and Austrian curriculum planning.

This paper seeks to analyse *Planspiele* for educational purposes as depictions of pathways from two distinct but related perspectives: firstly, the relationship between analogue and digital and their impact on teaching and learning; and secondly, the relationship between public discourses and education to foster civic engagement and informed decision-making processes. This analysis uses a qualitative, multimodal

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research approach that draws on game studies, educational theory, and discourse analysis. The study uses close reading of gameplay elements, visual and narrative design, and player interaction models, triangulated with developer intentions (where available) and accompanying educational materials. The games forming the corpus for this study were selected based on three main criteria: (1) representativeness of analogue, hybrid, and digital formats; (2) affiliation with public, educational or political institutions to ensure relevance to civic education; and (3) accessibility to educators and learners (e.g. publicly available, low-cost or distributed through educational programmes). Consideration was also given to thematic breaths, aiming to capture a range of sociopolitical topics. Once selected, each game was subjected to a three-phase analytical process: (1) descriptive mapping of game mechanics, aesthetics, and narrative framing; (2) identification of embedded learning outcomes aligned with cognitive dimensions of critical, explorative-heuristic, and structural learning; and (3) evaluation of the interplay between game structure and intended civic or social competencies, with attention to potential limitations in inclusivity, ideological bias or accessibility.

The paper's first part focuses on design choices and developments of Planspiele used for education in their configurations as analogue, hybrid, and digital ludic experiences. By analysing exemplary games, these three modes of gaming are studied in relation to the processes used to foster critical (reflecting on a situation), explorative-heuristic (testing possibilities and variations), and structural (applying ludic situations to social reality) learning (Geuting 2000; Zeiner-Fink, Geithner, and Bullinger-Hoffmann 2023). The games analysed here are the analogue game *GEMEINSAM.ÖSTERREICH REGIEREN* (2018), developed by the Austrian Ministry of the Interior, the hybrid game *Commander Sisu – Shadow over Germany* (n.d.), created by the public charity Junge Deutsche Atlantische Gesellschaft and the Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung, and *Moderate Cuddlefish* (2017), a digital game created by Germany-based developer Topicbird in collaboration with the government agency Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung and social workers. The study of these games foregrounds the mode of engagement offered to players through the different frameworks created by design choices and their impact on the act of learning, such as collaborative gameplay, accessibility, current affairs, engaging/interactive design, and complexity of the presentation mode of topics.

The second part of this study is interested in the relationship between Planspiele and the public discourse around topics addressed in them (Bühler 2020). It draws on the rich archive of Planspiele created by government bodies in Germany, notably the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung with its database of over 200 games for education, and Planpolitik, a Berlin-based provider of over 100 Planspiele, created in collaboration with public bodies, such as the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Goethe Institut. These games serve as the corpus to determine the relationship between the topics addressed in them and the socio-cultural discourses around the same issues. To understand the focus of their educational endeavours, the games are classified into five thematic tracks: politics, society (including migration and discrimination), economy, the legal system, and sustainability (including climate change and smart city planning). In particular, the relationship between game design, target audience, modes of communication, and potential for learning are researched to understand better how Planspiele can be used in the education sector and to what effect. Besides games produced and/or provided by government-related bodies, this section also considers how commercially made Planspiele, such as *Path Out* (2017), which renders an individual's experience to mirror that of millions in the context of the Syrian

refugee crisis, can be used to encourage critical thinking, compassion, and civic engagement, while the Islamophobic game *Moschee Baba* (2010), released by the right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), serves as an example of political radicalism in digital simulations.

This paper hence argues that Planspiele, with their origins in military strategy and subsequent adaptation for educational use, have demonstrated significant utility in fostering decision-making competencies and socio-cognitive skills by offering modes of engagement that support critical reflection, explorative-heuristic problem-solving, and structural understanding (Rappenglück 2017). By examining their educational purpose and value in terms of design choices, thematic focus, and modes of learning, this study underscores the need for carefully crafted simulation games to foster informed and socially aware citizens.

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