

Play, Participate, Decide: The Emergence of Video Games as Tools for Political Participation

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Abstract

In recent decades, the incorporation of video games into the political context has sparked growing interest among scholars, politicians, and activists. This article proposes an analysis of the social dynamics and participatory processes that emerge from the interaction between video games and the political sphere. Through an interdisciplinary investigation that combines perspectives from political science, sociology, and media studies, this study explores how video games can influence the contemporary political landscape. It examines how video games have the ability to mobilize and engage a wide range of individuals, transforming how people approach politics and participate in public discourse. The analysis focuses on understanding the mechanisms that make video games a fertile ground for political expression and democratic engagement. It explores the ways in which video games can facilitate political discussion, promote social awareness, and foster active political participation. The article highlights the potential and challenges of using video games as political tools and explores possible future trajectories for this phenomenon.

Keywords: videogames, political communication, political participation, gamification, virtual community

1. Introduction

The interaction and active participation of the public within the media landscape are not a novelty exclusive to the digital realm, but they have experienced significant growth with the adaptation to the phenomenon of digital convergence (Jenkins, 2007). The increasing visibility of the political system has shaped the political sphere as a media sphere (Thompson, 2001). The relationships between representatives and the represented are shaped by forms of communication: the media frame politics, and political actors are compelled to play by the rules imposed by the media game (Castells, 2005; 2009). Today's politicians communicate in a personalized manner with the electorate through the media, which play a central role. We find ourselves in an era where even traditional media has undergone a crisis, and a new media system based on the internet, known as hypermedia, has emerged (Carlón, 2016). This media system is based on digitization, convergence, connectivity, and user interactivity (van Dijck, 2016). Election campaigns, and with them political communication, face a new scenario in which new technologies are producing significant changes both in social structures and in the information ecosystem of politics. Digital platforms are assuming a central role within candidates' communication strategies. By using these channels, candidates can establish a direct connection with citizens, bypassing intermediaries and creating a (hyper) personalized representational link. Digital structures have long introduced a series of innovations in political communication. For example, candidates can now reach a much larger and diverse audience through digital channels, allowing them to engage a wide range of voters who may have otherwise been overlooked. This broadening of the audience can contribute to increased political engagement and access to political information and debates by a wider variety of citizens. Additionally, they offer candidates the ability to personalize their message and communication based on the specific preferences and interests of individuals.

Through user data analysis and the use of personalization algorithms (Woolley & Howard, 2016), candidates can tailor their language and proposals to address the specific needs and concerns of certain segments of the electorate. This level of personalization can help create a sense of closeness between candidates and voters, enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of political communication. However, the use of digital platforms in political communication is not without challenges, as many political actors see social media as not bringing substantial changes in the way they communicate (Magin et al., 2017), but rather integrating these platforms simply as another element in the overall mix of their electoral campaign (Stromer-Galley, 2014). In this regard, video games play a pioneering role both in introducing new participatory experiences and in the debate on the behavior of media in relation to their users. The aim of this article is twofold: on one hand, to explore and decode the new way of engaging in political communication, and on the other hand, to highlight possible correlations within the levels of social and political participation.

The exploration of mechanisms offered by public media reveals that social networks are the predominant tools, and at the same time, innovative strategies need to be employed in the realm of political communication. Moreover, it is undeniable that web tools and current communication strategies are advancing in this direction, proposing a system of intercreativity (Fernández-Castrillo, 2014). Political communication has undergone a process of

desacralization (Mazzoleni & Shulz, 1999) over time, adapting to the standards of the media system, primarily television. However, the forces of change have compelled it to invade numerous spheres and become the object of entertainment or even a product of popular culture. Within this environment, the gaming industry gains considerable consideration, closely connected to communication, in order to capture a significant portion of the audience. This new *modus operandi* is redefining the boundaries between public and private spaces, and between political actors and the public. In this context, these tools play a crucial role in making political communication attractive and engaging by utilizing innovative techniques for content production and distribution. In this article, therefore, we will explore the mechanisms that govern this new environment and analyze how certain political figures have adapted to new technologies and digital platforms to promote their image and interact with the public in a constantly evolving political communication landscape. Through these reflections, we hope to contribute to understanding the new panorama of political communication and provide food for thought on the challenges it will face in the near future.

2. From Squares to Platforms: The Evolution of Political Communication in the Digital Society

In recent decades, political communication has undergone drastic changes, leading to a significant transformation in how politicians engage with voters. While traditional means of expression remain relevant for winning elections, it has become essential for politicians to also have access to digital media tools. In fact, the use of digital media tools is having an increasingly significant impact on influencing the outcomes of electoral campaigns (Tambini, 2018). Political communication has become more "professionalized" over time (Battista & Salzano, 2022), which means that politicians need to recognize the importance of digital media as an indispensable tool and utilize it as effectively as possible. Nowadays, politicians enjoy greater freedom in creating their online image, but it has become less clear which aspect of their character is most relevant to voters. This trend is fueled by the "hyper-individualization" and "personalization" of political communication in the modern landscape of political media (Russmann et al., 2019).

In other words, politicians face an increasing challenge in communicating their vision and proposals in a personalized and targeted manner to meet the expectations and preferences of voters. The growing importance of digital media has allowed politicians to reach a wider audience and establish a direct connection with voters through tools such as social media, personal websites, and online advertising campaigns. Adding to this process is the evolution of the phenomenology related to videopolitics, which has notably positioned political leaders as central figures within the democratic context on a global scale. This scenario has occurred following the widespread diffusion and pervasive impact of visual communication media, which have transformed the nature and dynamics of electoral campaigns, public policies, and the interaction between citizens and their political representatives. Videopolitics can be seen as the natural evolution of the media era, in which television has played a predominant role in political communication. However, with the advent of digital platforms and social media, the

influence of visual communication media has significantly grown, opening new opportunities and challenges for political leaders. The use of the web offers politicians multiple opportunities in political communication. Digital media is integrated into the process of political communication for several reasons: firstly, speed allows for uploading political messages from anywhere and receiving immediate feedback; secondly, the versatility of digital platforms supports various content formats, such as text, photos, and videos; finally, the ease of access enables any user to become a reliable source of information (Maarek, 2014).

However, it is important to emphasize that digital communication only makes sense as part of a comprehensive and well-planned strategy (Giansante, 2014). The new media, therefore, facilitate the viral spread of conventional political campaigns while also offering the possibility of direct communication with citizens without intermediaries. Citizens not only listen but also have the opportunity to express themselves. However, many politicians still treat the web as if they were on television, merely expressing their opinions and viewpoints without listening to or interacting with their followers. In other words, there is a lack of a solid culture that guides how to use the web to create and consolidate political consensus (Giansante, 2014), which results in a waste of the communicative potential of social networks (Tuñez and Sixto, 2011). Despite the rise of online communication, traditional political practices typical of representative democracy based on mass party systems do not disappear but coexist with new citizen practices centered around online participation. These practices are structured according to the horizontal model proposed by mass self-communication (Castells, 2009; Menéndez, 2014). And it is precisely in this hyper-complex and information-saturated world that leaves no room for foundational certainties that video games could represent a profitable match due to the inherently popular nature of politics (Pels & Corner, 2003; Van Zoonen, 2005; Jones, 2005; Riegert, 2007; Boni, 2008; Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009; Battista, 2023), in order to constitute a formidable operation of complexity reduction for citizens seeking a compass to navigate politics. The image of a leader is cultivated in various aspects, but it becomes particularly crucial to nurture it in terms of visual presentation. Many factors and different realms come into play that were considered, until recently, quite distant from the realm of politics.

Among these, video games could play a significant role as innovative tools in the complex field of political communication. Video games effectively project the body of the leader into a permanent narrative of space and time. However, there has rarely been a synergy between video games, politicians, and politics, as video games have always been stigmatized for their violence and perceived as sources of addiction, with content that is difficult to appreciate and never considered dignified cultural products. It is enough to consider that during a briefing at the White House, former President of the United States Donald Trump condemned the role of video games, accusing them of fostering a culture of violence glorification in society. In his speech, the Tycoon urged:

"We must stop the glorification of violence in our society. This includes disturbing video games that have become commonplace. It is all too easy to surround today's youth with a culture that glorifies violence. Changing culture is difficult, but each of us can choose to create a culture that celebrates the inherent value and dignity of every human life. That is what we must do."

In a prompt response, the Entertainment Software Association released a statement citing a series of scientific studies that found no causal link between video games and violence. They presented a range of data emphasizing how over 165 million Americans were inclined towards video games and billions of people worldwide were passionate about and users of them.

Nevertheless, such events do not come as much of a surprise anymore, as these prejudices are the same ones that later affected social media as well (Carbone & Fassone, 2020). Yet, as far back as ancient times, Plato argued that in an hour of play, one could learn more about a person than in a year of conversation. Despite the significant role that videopolitics has assumed in the democratic sphere, the phenomenon did not foresee a rapid rise of video games in contemporary socio-cultural context. This prediction, based on the increasing influence of visual communication media and their ability to shape social dynamics, did not materialize as initially hypothesized. On the contrary, the impact of video games on society has taken a different direction, characterized by a gradual and complex evolution. The diffusion of video games has certainly experienced significant growth over the years, but their grip on culture and society has not reached the proportions that some commentators had anticipated. Despite the concerns raised, including the accusation of a tendency towards sometimes anti-democratic portrayals (Pfister et al, 2020), video games continue to evolve as an entertainment medium and as an art form that intersects various disciplines such as computer science, design, and interactive storytelling. Their influence on society remains an area of research and investigation that requires further interdisciplinary studies to fully understand their role in contemporary culture.

3. Improving Political Engagement: How Videogames are Changing the Rules of the Game

The speed and communicative efficiency of social networks have changed the way we perceive politics, which has now become a space where actors interact with each other in multiple ways. Their incorporation gives rise to transmedia political narratives, allowing for the expansion of the political message through various media, along with the collaboration of citizens and voters (D'Adamo et al., 2015). In this regard, it strongly emerges that video games represent a powerful medium to preside over the field of political communication, as they combine interactivity, immersion, and the ability to convey political messages and values through engaging narratives. The term "gamification" refers to a fairly recent phenomenon that involves using game mechanics in non-gaming contexts (Maestri et al., 2015; Sgueo, 2018; Viola, 2011). Gamification, at a deeper level, can serve various functions, including information dissemination, education, problem-solving, and customer loyalty development towards a product or brand. The advancement of new technologies, including the significant role of social platforms, has amplified its development. These platforms facilitate the viralization of gaming experiences, allowing for their rapid dissemination. It is not surprising that the potential of these mediums has also been exploited for political purposes.

A significant example is the official "Hillary 2016" app created for the presidential elections associated with Hillary Clinton's candidacy. This app offered a simulation game in which

players could "work" for the Democratic campaign, earning virtual money that could be used in the game or exchanged for real-world items related to the candidate. In Italy, one of the pioneers in politics was undoubtedly Mario Monti in 2013 when he turned his government program, known as "Agenda Monti," into a game with scores and levels to reach. In 2018, Matteo Salvini organized the "Vinci Salvini" game on Facebook in preparation for the political elections. The intersection between video games and politics has become increasingly evident in contemporary society. This emerging genre of video games explores various aspects of political life, ranging from simulation games that allow players to assume the role of politicians and make strategic decisions, to those focused on electoral campaigns and dynamics of political power. These political video games offer a unique opportunity for players to delve into the complexities and challenges of the political system, simulating real or imaginary situations involving politicians, parties, and institutions. Some of these games provide a critical perspective on politics, challenging conventions and raising issues of public interest, while others can be used as training or civic education tools. Despite the criticisms directed towards this genre of video games, they are believed to contribute to promoting political engagement and civic awareness, offering an interactive medium to explore and understand the intricate mechanisms of politics. This emerging genre of video games explores various aspects of political life, ranging from simulation games like "Democracy 3" and "Tropico," which allow players to assume the role of politicians and make strategic decisions to govern a nation, to those centered around electoral campaigns like "The Political Machine" and "Campaign Trail," where players take command of a political campaign to compete in elections and seek public support. Some games, such as "Papers, Please," highlight the moral and political implications of bureaucratic decisions, while others, like "This War of Mine," delve into political conflicts and the human consequences of war. These political video games offer a unique opportunity for players to explore the complexities and challenges of the political system, simulating real or imaginary situations involving politicians, parties, and institutions. The same applies to the video game Prime Minister Forever, as it offers participants the opportunity to take on the role of a political leader in the elections of nations such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Germany, or the United States. The game's interface is modeled similarly to the graphical representations used by the media during real electoral processes. In this virtual context, players enjoy considerable decision-making freedom to shape strategies and locations for conducting their political campaigns. Victory can be achieved through a deep familiarity with the various political systems at play. It is evident, therefore, that video games constitute an educational tool in the realm of political education (Torres-Toukoumidis et al, 2023). The actions undertaken within the game, in fact, influence the direction of national policies in specific ways. Through such simulations, participants gain a practical understanding of political theory, virtually experiencing the role of a president. An example that goes against the current state of affairs regarding the appreciation of the political class and the utility of video games in political communication is represented by "Mission Bari," launched for Antonio Decaro, the mayor of the Puglia region's capital city. "Mission Bari" takes the form of a marketing tool employed during Antonio Decaro's electoral campaign. The game allows players to navigate the streets of the Puglian town, participate in time-based missions across five categories: waste management, traffic, vandalism, tourism, and environmental conservation, and complete a

short quiz on the city's rules and services. The application aims to raise awareness among citizens about civic and social issues and provides a leaderboard where players can compete online based on their "citizenship points." This approach utilizes video games as a means of actively engaging citizens, encouraging participation, and providing an interactive platform to promote dialogue between the political class and citizens. Despite potential criticisms regarding the instrumentalization of video games for political purposes, this example highlights how video games can be adopted as innovative tools in political communication, seeking to effectively reach and engage the public. The role of games, especially online video games, should not be underestimated as an element of contemporary culture (Filiciak, 2006). Moreover, in recent years, many Western democracies have witnessed a flourishing of experiments in innovating the democratic process due to the development of tools, methods, and practices for the active involvement of citizens (Allegretti, 2010).

The digital revolution has significantly transformed the mode of democratic participation, opening new windows for dialogue and management of user interactions. In particular, the combined use of platforms and technologies has allowed for the expansion and diversification of access to deliberative and consultative processes, involving new audiences that are commonly excluded from traditional means of engagement. While the hybrid mode remains predominant in the current situation, there has been the introduction of new means that, on the one hand, increase complexity and, on the other hand, pose new challenges to both the capacity for engagement and the deliberative quality of such processes. It is evident, therefore, to attribute a strong influence to modern society linked to the development of technological and digital innovation. Indeed, for decades, the debate has been animated by the impact of networks and their consequences in almost all areas of reality. Frequently, when we analyze a field that is difficult to decipher like this, we refer to the semantic field of revolution. The changes taking place in the course of this digital revolution have caused a fundamental paradigm shift, as various social dynamics are influenced by network technologies. In this regard, video games represent a pioneering process in inaugurating new participatory experiences. Exploring the opportunities, they offer shows that, despite the prejudices stemming from past reminiscences that have also affected social networks in their time, video games could become dominant and necessary tools for exploiting innovative strategies. After all, the path is marked by the various tools of the web and the current communication strategies that advance in this direction, proposing a genuine system of creative engagement (Berners-Lee, 2001). Furthermore, the continuity between the offline and online dimensions of the experience in which citizens move and act to express their opinions and feelings in a social climate of increasing media personalization (Boccia Artieri, 2012) is now well-established. In this new arrangement, an adaptation has occurred where video games position themselves as a phenomenon worthy of attention with the goal of engaging a significant portion of the audience. Therefore, the increasingly complex digital evolution positions video games as a possible ally to interact with the public and create new forms of storytelling and participation in the realm of democracy. On the other hand, in light of the increasing importance of online communication strategies and the growing attention given to web and social media dynamics, we are immersed in a "technologically immersive" reality (Pecchinenda, 2003).

The use of video games in politics has the potential to promote active citizen participation. Video games offer an interactive environment that can deeply engage players. Through political video games, citizens can be directly involved in political dynamics, assuming the role of leaders or making decisions that influence the development of the game's storyline. This form of engagement can increase interest and empathy towards political issues, allowing players to firsthand experience the challenges and choices that political leaders face. Additionally, video games can be used as educational tools to promote understanding of political institutions, decision-making processes, and complex political issues. The study of persuasive communication through video games has become particularly relevant in academic circles with the publication of Ian Bogost's book "Persuasive Games" in 2007. Since then, numerous researchers have analyzed consumer persuasion (De la Hera, 2019; De la Hera & Raessens, 2021; Seiffert & Nothhaft, 2015). From a political perspective, it is evident that persuasive games can be used for political propaganda. Nieborg (2004), for example, analyzed how the game "America's Army" was not only used as a recruitment tool and educational game for the U.S. Army but also as a propaganda tool to convey political messages. Therefore, video games can be helpful in political communication, both by stimulating engagement and voter loyalty, as well as promoting policy proposals and increased mobilization. For politicians, gamification is a way to reach out to the new generations who are alienated from politics, capturing the hearts and minds of many skeptical young people towards institutions and disapproving of the style and communication system of political parties (Mahnic, 2014). To understand the potential of the examined tool, it would be beneficial to delve into the leverage points of game elements, as there are numerous factors and mechanics to utilize in gamification. Some scholars, for example, identify 52 of them (Marczewski, 2018; Tondello et al., 2016), including challenges or missions, points, achievements, and leaderboards. Engaging in video games, especially in competitive contexts, means "getting into the game," activating a strategic plan (Wagner, 2006) that, within the framework defined by the rules, allows for the achievement of specific objectives (De Giuseppe et al., 2020). Those who enter this universe find themselves virtually exploring specific contexts, experiencing different roles, assuming new identities, and interacting with others (Shaffer et al., 2005). In this way, not only knowledge and action are combined, but there is also an integration of ways of knowing, ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of caring (De Giuseppe et al., 2020). Individuals who approach this product, regardless of their level of practice, can be defined as "critical consumers of information" (Shaffer et al., 2005). Delving deeper, the multidisciplinary nature of the phenomenon emerges strongly, as gamification is capable of serving various functions: informing, educating, problem-solving, developing user loyalty towards politicians, as in this case. Undoubtedly, the development has been amplified by the advent of new technologies, which play a significant role, especially in their ability to give viral dimensions to the case at hand.

4. Beyond Theory: Transforming Play into Knowledge

According to the proposed hypothesis, video games can play a significant role as tools for political socialization, enabling learning within the socio-political context. In this sense, video games can offer in-depth knowledge of the mechanisms of the political universe. This also

happens because the transformation of video games represents an influential mode of expression with political connotations, thereby demonstrating their predominant impact on shaping the educational, cognitive, and creative processes of contemporary society (Brown, 2014). It is important to emphasize that video games have long been recognized as engines for promoting creativity, holistic development, problem-solving, and the acquisition of cognitive, emotional, and social skills, as well as a global understanding of the world (Domínguez et al. 2021). Political socialization can manifest explicitly or implicitly in video games. Some video games have a stated objective of political socialization, as is the case with "serious games," while in other cases, this socialization may occur more implicitly, as in all other types of video games. "Serious games" are primarily designed with the intention of facilitating specific learning or training of particular skills, rather than entertaining or providing amusement. They can have educational, social, political, therapeutic, and other purposes. In line with this concept, numerous games have been developed with the goal of promoting political learning, fostering the development of citizenship skills, and stimulating political participation. Cabañes and Jaimen (2021) argue that political video games, as a subtype of political games and serious games, can serve as tools for citizen participation, enabling real transformations in the political context through collaborative and collective gameplay. An example of this is represented by Craftea, which aims to promote collective interventions in public space through collaborative mapping. Furthermore, Juegos del Común focuses on promoting citizen participation in the processing and understanding of open data as common goods. Returning to our initial question, we can assert that video games possess unique characteristics that give them unparalleled potential to promote political learning in a playful manner. Oulton (2021) highlights the immersive power of video games, their ability to promote new forms of social interaction, their persuasive potential, and their capacity to generate empathy. Moreover, video games provide individuals with the opportunity to be protagonists and make decisions within a ludic context. All of these features are inherent in the narrative and aesthetics of video games, which are linked to the concept of pleasure. Therefore, learning through enjoyment, pleasure, and the characteristics positions video games as a space that addresses traditional modes of teaching and learning (Oulton, 2021). Similarly, video games facilitate contextual and experiential learning, aligning with the educational praxis model proposed by Haste (2004). In essence, video games offer an engaging and interactive experience that allows players to learn in an active and participatory manner. Their playful characteristics and the emotional engagement they create promote more effective learning and understanding of political topics compared to traditional teaching methods.

5. Conclusion

In the face of this revolution, several questions arise that are nothing more than latent alarm bells and are difficult to interpret. Could this series of changes potentially disrupt and influence the functioning of democracy? Today's reality has somewhat overshadowed aversion to new media, but the issue regarding the relationship between consumption and civic engagement remains open. The question and concern primarily revolve around the quality of content and the quality of its consumption by the public, by citizens. In other words, it is being asked

whether the purpose of politics as currently represented, and the sensationalistic communication of politicians is to generate interest, attraction, and participation among citizens. Alternatively, as some scholars argue, the populist turn in politics entertains but does not inform, evokes emotions but not commitment. Italian political and sociological research has yet to produce an answer that can reach a consensus. In fact, on this topic, there are many conflicting conclusions that make the expectations regarding the case at hand even more intriguing. On the contrary, a series of international studies has highlighted that, contrary to what catastrophists feared, this combination can paradoxically represent a "lifeboat of civics" for large sections of the public traditionally distant or distracted from the world of politics. In short, even video games, which might appear unrelated to the realm of political communication, can serve as schools for political participation. In summary, despite their apparent detachment from the realm of political communication, video games can assume the function of educational institutions for fostering political engagement. The interactive nature of video games, coupled with their ability to engage and entertain users, creates a context that favors experiential learning and the building of socio-political skills. The elements of storytelling, context, and problem-solving present in games can contribute to the formation of an active citizenship, providing an environment in which players can explore social dynamics, political issues, and the consequences of choices. As a result, video games emerge as potential tools for political socialization, facilitating the acquisition of knowledge and skills that can incite greater involvement in the democratic process and the public arena. Indeed, they contain sufficiently substantial information to prevent the public from becoming completely alienated from the world of political events. Despite the limited scope of the analyzed corpus, this contribution aims to provide an illustration of how the political landscape can benefit productively from the means offered by video games and emerging technologies. The goal is to enhance voter loyalty, catalyze more fervent participation within the political sphere, facilitate the formulation of proposals, and, more broadly, generate greater civic mobilization through the creation of a strong sense of belonging, mediated by the ardor of participatory interest. Therefore, this contribution aims to demonstrate how politics can leverage video games and new technologies to promote voter loyalty, stimulate participation in political life, encourage proposals, and, more generally, foster greater mobilization by creating a sense of belonging under the auspices of active interest.

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