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Article

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore how digital entertainment games are used as spaces for political persuasion in electoral campaigns, by examining Joe Biden's use of Fortnite during the campaign for the 2020 US presidential election as a case study. To date, the study of persuasive communication related to games has been mostly focused on persuasive games. This article approaches the use of entertainment games as spaces for persuasive communication answering the research question: How is political marketing—and electoral propaganda specifically—embedded into digital entertainment games? To answer this question, we have analyzed the persuasive dimensions of the Biden–Harris campaign in Fortnite using a qualitative mixed-methods approach that combined the identification and analysis of the persuasive strategies used in the game with a textual analysis of 19 articles discussing the campaign. The results of the analysis of the Biden–Harris campaign in Fortnite show that the persuasive efforts embedded in the game mostly made use of textual persuasion and procedural persuasion, relying largely on goal rules. The results of the textual analysis of the articles show that, although there is an appreciation of how the campaign links political persuasive goals with the challenges presented to the player, the lack of understanding of the persuasive potential of the game results in a gaming experience that in some cases does not meet the expectations of Fortnite's experienced and demanding players.

Issue

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1. Introduction

In his book *Making Democracy Fun*, Josh Lerner (2014) argues that democracy is not fun for most people, which leads to three major problems in our society: people are less engaged, less trusting, and less empowered. For this reason, Lerner proposes the use of games as a tool for making politics fun, based on the premise that games are inherently democratic as "they always involve participation and decision-making, by design" (Lerner, 2014, p. 16).

In today's political ecosystem, it is clear that political marketing strategists need to design new persuasive communication strategies to be deployed in the environment where their target audience is. Among the innovations emerging within political marketing, digital games are being used as an innovative tool to bring young people closer to politicians with successful results. Miller (2013) states that "by reaching out to them in their own element, campaigns and candidates can (hopefully) energize young voters and encourage them to be active in politics" (p. 327). In this regard, Neys and Jansz (2010)

demonstrated that playing a political game influenced players on their knowledge and opinion about the issue addressed in the game. Specifically, the 2008 Obama campaign marked the beginning of a "new era for the use of the Internet in political campaigns and marked the growing dominance of the medium as a political tool" (MacAskill, 2007, as cited in Miller, 2013, p. 332).

In the field of game studies, digital games have been defined as meaningful cultural artifacts (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). The fact that games are able to harbor meaning allows them to be used to persuade specific audiences in specific situations (Bogost, 2007). In academia, the study of persuasive communication related to games has been so far mainly focused on the use of *persuasive games* (Bogost, 2007): serious games designed with a persuasive purpose. Nieborg (2004), for example, has explored *propagames*—games with propagandistic content—that can be understood as a subset of *political games* (Bogost, 2007). Furthermore, Bossetta (2019, p. 3,424) has studied political campaigning games: "advergames that promote a partisan political position in an electoral context."

However, studies on the use of digital entertainment games as persuasive communication spaces, in particular as political marketing tools, are still scarce. Therefore, it is important to understand how digital entertainment games are used to convey the persuasive messages defined in an election campaign. This article aims to expand the scientific knowledge about this topic by exploring how Fortnite has been used as a space for political persuasion in the 2020 US presidential election by addressing the following research question: How is political marketing—and electoral propaganda specifically—integrated into digital entertainment games?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Games and Political Marketing

Lerner (2014) argues that both analog and digital games can be used for different political purposes. The author proposes three categories: games about politics, play as political action, and games as political action. Games about politics are defined as political games designed to educate, raise awareness or motivate players; these are related to serious games and social change. Play as political action involves incorporating game design principles into political practices. Finally, games as political action are games that can be integrated into political campaigns, meetings, actions, and debates. These games, unlike political play, are structured around specific rules and can have an impact on the decision-making process. This study addresses this third category, which has been less explored from an academic perspective.

Digital games are increasingly an attractive space to push political propaganda. On the one hand, digital games can be used to articulate imaginaries and readings of contemporary political systems (Gómez-García

et al., 2022). Bossetta (2019) claims that, as rhetorical devices, *political campaigning games* "reify the enduring effectiveness of media framing" and "exemplify changing dynamics in the digital campaigning space" (Bossetta, 2019, p. 3,424). On the other hand, researchers have identified an emerging playful notion of civic protest (Stokes & Williams, 2018). In this respect, Huang and Liu (2022) stated that gamification has been used to organize and stimulate pro-democratic movements through three forms of resistance: (a) games as direct action tactics for advocacy; (b) games as a mechanism for movement pedagogy; and (c) games as a tool for civic education (p. 41).

Baltezarević et al. (2019) argue that it is only a matter of time before digital games are recognized as key media for political communication, capable of generating new voters. This is mainly because they can be used to "create highly compressed versions of the embodied experiences both of other citizens and of policymakers" (Bogost, 2006, para. 45). An example of the potential digital entertainment games as platforms for political marketing is the successful application of this marketing strategy in the Obama campaign during the 2008 US presidential election. This campaign deployed advertisements within entertainment games targeting eligible voters in key states (Baltezarević et al., 2019; Leng et al., 2010; Miller, 2013). However, other approaches have not been as effective. In the 2016 presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton's quip "Pokémon Go to the Polls!," referring to the popular video game, resulted in "ironic media gaffes and memes" (Tran et al., 2021).

We are now in a new phase of the use of digital games for political marketing. Examples are the initiatives of politicians such as Joe Biden and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, who chose games such as Animal Crossing: New Horizons and Fortnite as new media vehicles to deliver their political messaging (Tran et al., 2021). Akbar and Kusumasari (2021) claim that players in Biden's campaign embedded in Animal Crossing were "involved, informed, and strongly advocated on critical issues in the election" (p. 657). The success of these political actions was mainly due to the fact that politicians interacted with gaming cultures on the terms of their users and communities (Tran et al., 2021). With this study, we would like to provide more insights into the way political messages are articulated in this new type of political marketing.

2.2. Persuasive Communication Through Digital Games

The study of persuasive communication through digital games became particularly relevant in academia with the publication of the book *Persuasive Games*, by the game scholar Ian Bogost in 2007. Since then, numerous researchers (e.g., De la Hera, 2019; De la Hera et al., 2021; Ferrara, 2013; Ferrari, 2010; Heide & Nørholm, 2009; Seiffert & Nothhaft, 2015) have investigated the persuasive potential of digital games, providing more detail on what types of persuasive goals can be achieved and how digital games can be used for

these purposes. Complementary studies have also further explored aspects such as the effects of persuasive games (Jacobs, 2017; Jacobs & Jansz, 2021; Jacobs et al., 2017, 2019), the design principles of persuasive games (Grace, 2021; Kors et al., 2021; Siriaraya et al., 2018), and concrete applications and persuasive roles (De la Hera, 2017, 2018; Lee et al., 2021; Løvlie, 2008; Orji et al., 2013; Ruggiero, 2013).

From a political perspective, researchers have explored how persuasive games could be used for political propaganda in the form of *propagames*. Nieborg (2004), for example, has analyzed how the game America's Army has not only been used as a recruiting tool, an educational game, and a test bed tool for the US Army, but also as a propagame to convey political messages. In this vein, recent studies have investigated how propagames are used to convey persuasive messages. Chew and Wang (2021) established that propagames "operate as a part of digital authoritarianism, together with other forms of new soft propaganda, to legitimate populist authoritarian states around the world" (p. 1,431).

According to De la Hera (2017), three types of persuasion approaches can be found in digital games: exocentric persuasion, exercised with the intention of influencing the player's attitude beyond the game; endocentric persuasion, to keep the player interested in the game; and game-mediated persuasion, where an entertainment game becomes a persuasive element when used in a given context for a specific purpose. Within academic research on persuasive communication through digital games, the third category has been the least studied so far. In this article, we focus on this third category—game-mediated persuasion—through a case study on the use of Fortnite in the Biden–Harris campaign for political persuasion in the specific context of the 2020 US presidential election.

De la Hera (2019) has developed a theoretical model that aims to highlight how persuasion can be structured within digital games and be useful to identify specific aspects of persuasion through games. The author states that digital games can persuade players on three different levels and that it is possible to find different persuasive dimensions in each of the three persuasive levels. The first persuasive level refers to signs (De Saussure, 2017) embedded within the game; the second refers to the system (Frasca, 2007) that allows players to interact with the game's signs; and the third is the context (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) in which the games are played. To date, this model has only been used to analyze persuasive strategies in persuasive games (i.e., games designed with the very purpose of changing players' attitudes beyond the game). In this study, we apply this model to analyze the use of an entertainment game to convey a political message—that is, game-mediated persuasion. The aim is to validate the usefulness of this model for the analysis of game-mediated persuasive strategies.

3. Methodology

This research work consists of a case study of the Biden–Harris campaign in Fortnite for the 2020 US presidential election. In this case, to guide the analysis we used De la Hera's (2019) model for analyzing persuasive communication in digital games (see Figure 1). We used an embedded design (Yin, 1989) to analyze the case (i.e., we gave attention to subunits and subprocesses). We critically analyzed the persuasive strategies used in the game in relation to the persuasive levels and persuasive dimensions described by De la Hera (2019). Within this study, we analyze the political message as understood by Lempert and Silverstein (2012): That is, we look beyond its literal meaning, also trying to reflect on its figurative meaning. We look into what the campaign seems to convey about the personality and personal values of the candidates by analyzing which issues have been focused on and which have been ignored (Lempert & Silverstein, 2012, p. 2).

For the analysis of the persuasive strategies used in the case study, we used a combination of qualitative methods. First, analytical play (Mäyrä, 2008) was used as the research method to collect relevant data from the case study. The researchers played through the island's challenges, critically examining their game experiences. This process included utilitarian play, which implies relating the game to "wider contexts of a historical, conceptual and social range of thought that constitutes game studies and game culture in their reflexive form" (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 165). Analytical play included total completion (Aarseth et al., 2003) of the island's challenges: That is, repeated play with the purpose of achieving total completion of the game including the exploration of multiple paths within the game. Screenshots and notes of relevant moments were taken for the data analysis phase.

Second, for triangulation purposes, we conducted a textual analysis (Brennen, 2017) of 19 articles published by US digital media that discussed the campaign. These articles were selected from an advanced Google search. The search results were filtered by date from October 30, 2020 (date on which the island went live) to November 3, 2020 (election day). We used the following search terms: intitle:"biden" and Fortnite; Biden Island and "Fortnite"; intitle: "biden" and "fortnite"; and "Biden Island" and "Fortnite." This resulted in 41 articles in different languages, from which we selected 19 that met the study criteria: English language, US digital media, and primary source or citing the official source (see Supplementary File for a complete list of articles analyzed). As sensitizing concepts for the textual analysis, we used the persuasive dimensions proposed by De la Hera (2019). Specifically, the analysis focused on the discussion of aspects related to the persuasive dimensions identified during the analysis of the game, with the aim of identifying how the press interprets the use of the different persuasive dimensions present in the campaign.
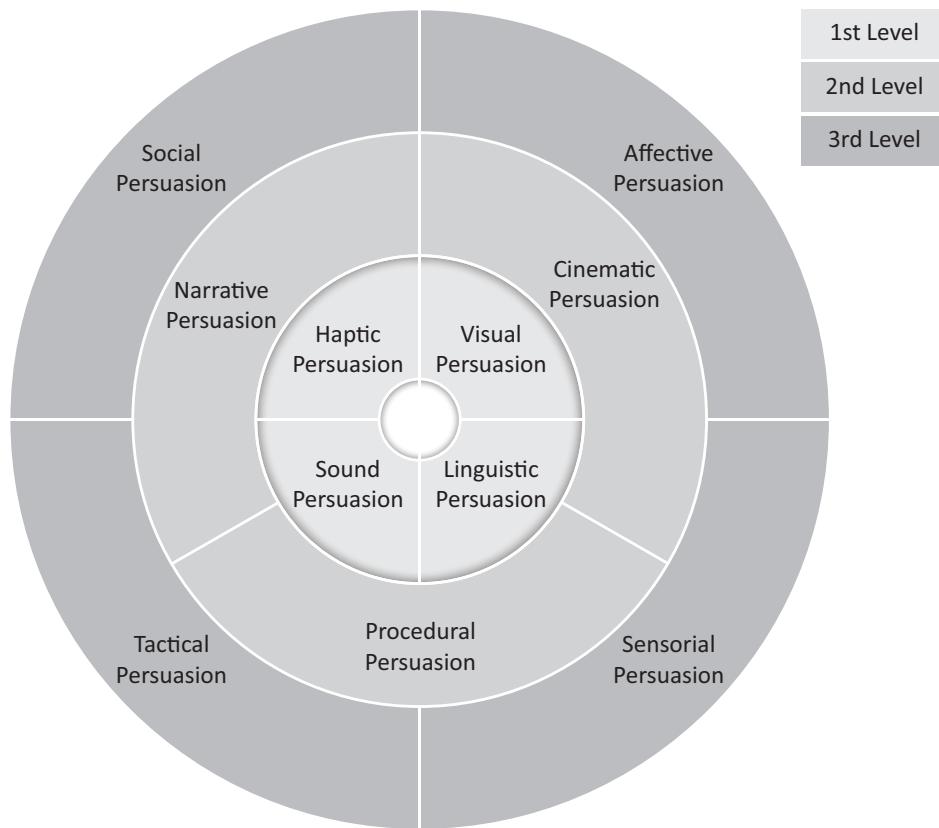
Figure 1. Model on persuasive communication in digital games. Source: De la Hera (2019, p. 104).

3.1. Case Study

The Biden–Harris campaign featured a custom map in Fortnite's creative mode. The Build Back Better With Biden island created by Alliance Studio was launched on October 30, 2020, just days before the US presidential election. Biden–Harris's director of digital partnerships reported that the purpose of using digital games was "to meet people everywhere they are online and offline with innovative and thoughtful activations," with the advertising objective being "engaging players in a substantive, approachable, and fun way to reach and mobilize voters" (Foreman, 2020). The in-game objective was to complete six challenges related to the Biden–Harris political agenda. The player must activate Fortnite's creative mode and go through a magic portal or insert the map code 0215–4511-1823 to access it. The defined target group was young people, especially men, between 18 and 35 years of age.

4. Results

The results of our case study show how the Biden–Harris persuasive strategy was embedded in the Fortnite island at the three persuasive levels described by De la Hera (2019; see Figure 1): signs, system, and context. Below we discuss in detail how the campaign's persuasive strategies were embedded in each of the three levels.

4.1. Level 1: Signs

At the first level of persuasion, signs are understood "as the whole that results from the association of the signifier, i.e., the form the sign takes, with the signified, i.e., the concept it represents" (De la Hera, 2019, p. 102). We have found that the campaign makes use of two of the four persuasive dimensions described by De la Hera (2019) at the first level of persuasion: linguistic persuasion and visual persuasion. Furthermore, some of the signs identified in the game are multimodal signs: signs rendered in more than one mode at the same time. The use of each of these dimensions is discussed below.

4.1.1. Linguistic Persuasion

Linguistic persuasion refers to how linguistic communication is used in the game to persuade the player (De la Hera, 2019). The linguistic signs that can be found on the island are: title of the island, instructional texts, names of spatial locations, and dialogues.

When the players reach the island, they appear on a stage in the town hall where the name of the island can be read in the background: Build Back Better With Biden (see Figure 2), which is the Biden–Harris campaign slogan. Build Back Better is a promise of hope and a better future for Americans. This phrase comes from the United Nations (2015) improvement plan for disaster risk reduction in areas such as physical infrastructure,

social systems, economies, and the environment. Using this intertextual reference, both the campaign and the game could be alluding to a possible disaster brought about by the administration headed by Donald Trump. The player's goal on the island is connected to its title, which is also captured in the campaign slogan: to rebuild what has been destroyed by Trump's administration. Medhurst and Desousa (1981) explain how, in political communication, metaphors are used to "frame the election as a battle, a race, or a circus" (as cited in Bossetta, 2019, p. 3,428). It could be argued that in this case, the purpose is to frame the election as a race, in which the player is responsible for taking care of this reconstruction under time pressure.

Figure 2. Title of the game.

An example of a linguistic sign in the form of an instructional text can be seen in Figure 3. This text encourages players to text a number to retrieve information on how to vote. This strategy is linked to the fact that the campaign is trying to reach young voters, some of them voting for the first time. Seven of the articles analyzed discuss this strategy. Matt Baume, from *The Stranger* (11-03-2020), claims that one of the purposes of this is to collect players' phone numbers and emails to add them to the official campaign mailing list. This allows the creation of a database with possible voters, in order to personalize the political content sent and monitor their behavior.

Figure 3. Instructional text.

Names of spatial locations on the island are also used to convey a political communication goal. An example of this is the station named No Malarkey, an intertex-

tual reference to one of the campaign's slogans and to one of the most popular phrases of the presidential candidate, Joe Biden (see Figure 4). This slogan was a source of ridicule among some citizens, as it was considered a difficult term to understand, especially among the younger generations (Korecki, 2019). The fact of using it in this case is compared by Steve Watts, from GameSpot (11-02-2020), to a meme. Baume, from *The Stranger*, criticizes this strategy, claiming that specific locations in the game are only created for political communication purposes and are not engaging for the player, as they do not have a specific purpose within the game:

> Players who load up the custom map (the code is 0215–4511-1823) will find themselves wandering a windswept small-town setting that inexplicably has a subway station, devoid of all human activity as though you are the sole sinful survivor of the rapture. (*The Stranger*, 11-03-2020)

Figure 4. No Malarkey station.

Dialogues with non-player characters are also used in the game to convey the political agenda, explaining why players are expected to do certain things in the game and how these are connected to the candidates' plans for the country (see Figure 5). For example, the character in the information counter states: "Joe Biden has a jobs and economic recovery plan for working families. We need your help to Build Back Better." This sentence, which is encouraging players to help rebuild the country, is linked to the candidates' recovery plan, suggesting that the country is in crisis due to Trump's management of the Covid pandemic. The Fortnite campaign tries to illustrate how these campaign goals would translate into reality. Another example is a dialogue in the ice cream store, in which the player can read: "Celebrate a better tomorrow by ordering some ice cream." This phrase promising a better tomorrow is key because it conveys a message of hope in the face of uncertainty and political mismanagement (economic, health, social, etc.). Rilley MacLeod, from Kotaku, reflects on the fact that, although these texts are clearly linked to Biden's political agenda, there is a lack of depth in the information provided in this form:

> Text printed on a speech bubble can't get at the nuances of Biden and Harris' positions, but, as a whole, the island paints the ticket as good for the

economy, the environment, and people who aren't white or straight. (Kotaku, 10-31-2021)
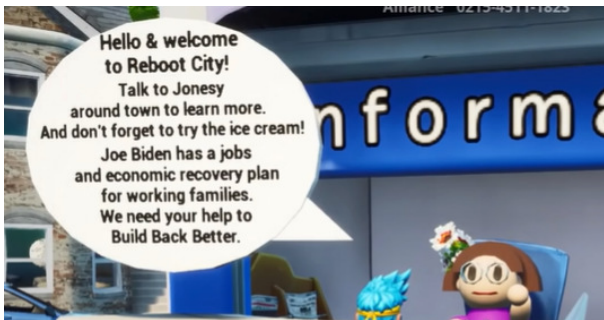

Figure 5. Dialogue.

Linguistic persuasion is the most common persuasive dimension to convey a political message and also one of the two strategies most often discussed in the online articles analyzed for this article. The 19 articles analyzed discuss the political content of the textual references on the island in different ways, the campaign title being the most widely cited in these texts. The use of linguistic signs in the Biden–Harris campaign is significant from the perspective of political communication because it seeks to attract players with a political project that offers arguments on relevant issues, such as an economic recovery plan, well-paying jobs, promoting home-grown industries throughout America, and investing in science, technology, education, and energy efficiency. Through linguistic persuasion, the messages in the Fortnite campaign appeal to emotions and point to the candidates' credibility. By focusing on these specific points of their political agenda, the Biden–Harris campaign team is trying to create an image of the candidates' values without explicitly referring to the candidates themselves. This is in line with the strategies described by Lempert and Silverstein (2012) to build a politician's persona through political communication.

Using linguistic persuasion to persuade players in a game is, however, not considered the best persuasive strategy, as players tend to skip text or do not read it in detail unless doing so is required to progress in the game (De la Hera, 2019). Game designers try to overcome this challenge by using two strategies. The first one is repe-

tition. The slogans, for example, are all over the island, so the player encounters them repeatedly. The second strategy is conveying the message in the form of instructional texts embedded in dialogues, which players are expected to read to understand the challenges that need to be completed.

4.1.2. Visual Persuasion

By visual persuasion we mean how the visual elements of the game are used to persuade the player (De la Hera, 2019). On the Biden–Harris island, we found two types of visual persuasive signs: interface design and spatial design. An example of this is the use of the three colors of the American flag in the spatial design of the island, such as the blue, white, and red flowers that are shown in Figure 6. Furthermore, some elements of the interface design also use the three colors and the stars of the American flag. An example of this is the leaderboard design (see Figure 7). These are used on the island as signs of patriotism, identification with the country, or the essence of the American dream: Values that the candidates want to convey through their campaign. According to Silverstein (2003), this strategy is commonly used to "create cross-cutting senses of groupness" (p. 536). The author claims that in a dialectic of social distinction, identity indicators regularly replay one another, thereby conveying several possible messages of profundity or at least importance.

4.1.3. Multimodal Signs

Some of the signs identified on the island are multimodal signs: That is, signs rendered in more than one mode at the same time (De la Hera, 2019). Billboards alluding to social movements can be found throughout the island. In this way, linguistic and visual signs merge and are used not only to convey information through their denotative meaning, but also through their cultural connotations. The phrases "love is love" and "Black lives matter" (see Figure 8) are currently linked to social movements— the former to the LGBT community and the latter to racial activism. Billboards in Spanish ("voy a votar") can also be found, appealing to the Hispanic community in

Figure 6. Flowers: Example of spatial design.

Figure 7. Leaderboard: Example of interface design.

Figure 8. Billboards.

the US. According to Silverstein (2003), this could be considered an "instrument of mobilizing sentiment" (p. 533). These signs try to convey the inclusive values of the candidates, which aspire to govern for all citizens without discrimination. Furthermore, billboards are elements that we often encounter in a city, so this form of persuasive communication in games is considered useful to create realistic gameplay and has been proven not to be considered intrusive for the player, which helps to reduce players' resistance to persuasive communication (De la Hera, 2019).

4.2. Level 2: System

At the second level of persuasion—the system—relationships are established between signs to create meaning. This is achieved with the rules that guide the player through the game (De la Hera, 2019, p. 101). We have found that the campaign makes use of one of the three persuasive dimensions described by De la Hera (2019) at the second level of persuasion: procedural persuasion.

4.2.1. Procedural Persuasion

By procedural persuasion, we mean how the rules of the game are used to persuade the player (Bogost, 2007). Procedural persuasive strategies can be designed using four different types of rules: model rules, grade rules, goal rules, and meta-rules (Frasca, 2007). In this case, only goal rules are used to persuade the players on the island.

Goal rules determine when a player wins or loses in the game (Frasca, 2007). An example of their use for political communication in this game is the fact that, to feature on the winner's board that appears at the end of the game, the player must complete a total of six challenges. There are two persuasive goals linked to these challenges: (a) create awareness about the political agenda, and (b) create emotional empathy with the candidates.

The first persuasive goal—create awareness about the Biden–Harris political agenda—is conveyed through

four challenges presented to the player: help build a new research facility at the local Historically Black College; install three Scranton towers; restore The Aviator river; and help make Major's auto factory run clean. These challenges require tasks such as installing energy-efficient AC units and solar panels, removing industrial waste from a river, and investing in science and education. Using textual and visual persuasion, the designers explain the relevance of these challenges and how they are connected to the candidates' political agenda. The persuasive message conveyed by the Biden–Harris campaign with these challenges emphasizes the candidates' commitment to African American education (challenge 1); technology and innovation (challenges 2 and 3) and the environment (challenge 4). Furthermore, the third challenge includes an intertextual reference to Joe Biden's Ray-Ban Aviator sunglasses.

The second persuasive goal—foster emotional empathy with the candidates—is conveyed through two challenges presented to the player: visit Joe's famous ice cream shop, and complete Kamala's sneaker run collecting sneakers around the island. Both challenges allude to two of the candidates' personal tastes: Joe Biden's fondness for ice cream and Harris' obsession with Converse sneakers. From a political communication perspective, this strategy is used to create a youthful public image of the candidates. These human characteristics are attributed to them with the intention of demystifying the political figure.

The ice cream challenge is discussed in 9 of the 19 articles analyzed for this study, while the sneakers challenge is mentioned in six of them. MacLeod, from Kotaku, labels these as "easter eggs," meaning that these are surprising elements hidden in the game. Some authors, however, are skeptical about the value of these challenges from a gameplay perspective. Baume, from *The Stranger*, calls into question Harris' "exaggerated" number of missing sneakers and Biden's "love" of ice cream:

> Cardboard cutouts will appear now and then to implore you to find Kamala Harris' ten missing

sneakers (is she a centipede???), or to visit an ice cream shop because "Joe Biden loves ice cream." (*The Stranger*, 11-03-2020)

MacLeod also wonders about the value of these challenges from a political communication perspective and criticizes the use of humor as a resource to get closer to voters, based on the argument that electing a political representative is a serious matter:

> The island tries to give Biden personality, with mentions of his favorite ice cream flavor and his dogs, but to me it reads like a desperate, hollow attempt to get me to like a man I mostly scream at through my computer as he distances himself from the Green New Deal and professes a misguided allegiance to fracking. Hunting through a virtual town for Kamala Harris' sneakers taught me that Harris likes sneakers I guess, but I don't care about her footwear—I care far more about her stance on prisons and policing. (Kotaku, 10-31-2020)

From a persuasive communication perspective, the fact that the goals of the game are linked to the goals of the political campaign is a good strategy, as the player needs to go through the six challenges to finish the game. The fact, however, that the player needs to read all the written instructions in the game in detail to understand the political meaning of these challenges shows that the designers do not have an accurate understanding of the persuasive potential of digital games. Basing the most important part of the political message on textual persuasion is always risky because players might skip the text and still complete the challenges (De la Hera, 2019). The strength of procedural persuasion in games relies on the fact that players can experience the consequences of their actions in the game. This could be better done in this case by combining persuasive goal rules with persuasive grade rules. Grade rules give players the opportunity to understand the consequences of their performance (Frasca, 2007). Using grade rules to show players the relevance of electric cars or efficient AC units by letting them experience the positive and negative consequences of their use or the lack thereof, for example, would have been a better way to use the persuasive potential of the game in this case.

4.3. Level 3: Context

At the third level of persuasion—the context—the objective is to foster feelings and emotions in the player that favor the interpretation of the persuasive message embedded in the other two persuasive levels of the game (De la Hera, 2019). Here we have found that the campaign makes use of three of the four persuasive dimensions described by De la Hera (2019): tactical persuasion, affective persuasion, and social persuasion. The use of each of these dimensions is described below.

4.3.1. Tactical Persuasion

Tactical persuasion consists of designing pleasurable gaming experiences that engage the player through challenges (De la Hera, 2019). The fact that this campaign chooses Fortnite as the space for conveying a political communication campaign is a tactical persuasive strategy. First of all, Fortnite is a very successful game among the target group of this campaign action, which created anticipation around the Biden–Harris island. Furthermore, the very fact that the campaign made use of an existing entertainment game, instead of creating a new game from scratch, makes it easier for the player to have prior experience with how the game world works and the skills it requires. This allows the player to focus their attention on the message being conveyed and not have to put effort into learning how to play the game. The advantage of Fortnite players already having the skills to play the game is also highlighted in Kotaku: "It's certainly approachable if you're a Fortnite player, in that you understand how to click prompts, drive vehicles, and build" (Kotaku, 10-31-2020).

This, however, becomes a double-edged sword for the Biden–Harris island, as players are familiar with the game and might have high expectations about the content that they are going to encounter on the island. Consequently, although some label the island as "really impressive" (GameRant, 10-31-2020) others describe its challenges as "basic and clumsy" (Kotaku, 10-31-2020). This is in line with the results of previous studies, which have found that games specifically designed to convey a persuasive message offer more advantages and flexibility to convey the political message (Bossetta, 2019).

4.3.2. Affective Persuasion

Affective persuasion arouses the player's deepest feelings and emotions with the aim of triggering affective experiences ranging from mildly positive feelings to strong emotions. This type of persuasion is used with the aim of generating a state of mind in the player that helps the message to be conveyed (De la Hera, 2019). Through a persuasive communication strategy, the team behind the design of the island claims that the objective of the island is to create a "fun" experience as a way to engage young players:

> Christian Tom, director of digital partnerships for the Biden–Harris campaign, told Mashable that…they "designed the custom 'Build Back Better with Biden' Fortnite map to do just that—engaging players in a substantive, approachable, and fun way to reach and mobilize voters." (MIC, 11-02-2020)

From the analysis of the strategies implemented on the island, it is also possible to conclude that there are other strategic motivations, such as creating a database of potential voters and benefiting from the fact that games

are an excellent medium to collect data from players that can be used to create profiles and better cater to their expectations.

Furthermore, the analysis of the articles shows that the campaign also aroused negative emotions. This is illustrated through statements that claim that the island "is more depressing than inspiring" (Kotaku, 10-31-2020) or label the gameplay as "janky" (MIC, 11-02-2020).

In addition, the analysis also shows that the island is able to foster complex emotions in those players who feel identified with the campaign's political message:

> It gave me an hour of something to do on another Saturday spent inside so as to do my part in combating the pandemic the US' current government has given up on fighting. It reminded me of some of the positions I agree with Biden on, which was heartening. It encouraged me to think about politics while playing a video game, which felt good at a time when I'm sick of escapism (Kotaku, 10-31-2020).

4.3.3. Social Persuasion

Social persuasion aims to influence players' attitudes by providing them with experiences that focus on encouraging them to interact with others (De la Hera, 2019). In our study, we have been able to identify two different strategies used on the island in the form of social persuasion: information sharing and relationship building.

In terms of information sharing, a persuasive message at the end of the game encourages players to share a photo of their time spent on the island on Twitter, using the hashtag #SquadUpandVote. Furthermore, the island includes a leaderboard that encourages competition among players. Players are also instructed to share their results on social media. This persuasive strategy seeks to get players to let others know about their achievements (De la Hera, 2019), which translates into greater visibility and status for the Biden–Harris political campaign, promoting viral marketing.

In terms of relationship building, the island includes several matchmaking points. Fortnite's matchmaking points are designed to pair players with complementary skills so they can collaborate to complete challenges together. One of the island's most notable flaws is that these matchmaking points do not work, so it is impossible for players to pair up, making the map experience a solitary one. Collaborative play is commonplace in Fortnite and is one of its more relevant and attractive features for players (Carter et al., 2020), so the fact that this option is not available is disappointing to some. This is discussed by Tebany Yune, from MIC: "Reviewers have noted that matchmaking didn't seem to work from the map, leaving players alone to explore the island for about a solid hour" (MIC, 11-02-2020).

Ultimately, social persuasion benefits both the players in terms of relationship building and social recognition, as well as the persuasive goal of the campaign, which is to attract as many voters as possible in an entertaining environment. However, the analysis shows that social persuasion has not been properly implemented on the island, creating disappointment among some players.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore how digital entertainment games are used as spaces for political persuasion. We have done so by studying Joe Biden's use of Fortnite during the campaign for the 2020 US presidential election using analytical play and textual analysis as research methods. The results of the analysis show that procedural persuasion and textual persuasion were the most prominent strategies used to convey the campaign's political agenda, with the support of other persuasive dimensions such as visual, affective, tactical, and social persuasion. The results of the textual analysis show that, although there is an appreciation of how the campaign links political persuasive goals with the challenges presented to the player, the gaming experience in some cases does not meet the expectations of Fortnite's experienced and demanding players.

This study demonstrates that the theoretical model for persuasive communication in digital games (De la Hera, 2019) is useful for analyzing persuasive strategies mediated by digital entertainment games. So far, this model had only been used to analyze persuasive games. For this reason, the study provides new insights into academic research on political communication in digital games.

This is an exploratory study focusing on a case study. To gain a better understanding of the use of digital entertainment games for political communication, further studies exploring and comparing more cases would be necessary. Further research should also explore voters' perceptions of this political communication strategy, as well as the effectiveness of this type of campaign through quantitative research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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