

Political Campaigning Games: Digital Campaigning With Computer Games in European National Elections

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This study examines how politically themed computer games function as digital campaigning tools during elections. To make sense of this understudied phenomenon, the concept of political campaigning games (PCGs) is introduced and defined as advergames that promote a partisan political position in an electoral context. The study bridges theoretical literatures from game studies, media studies, and political communication to mount the argument that PCGs convey a persuasive political message through the rhetorical devices deployed in political cartoons as well as computer games. Methodologically, I develop a framework for rhetorical game analysis and apply it to 4 games from European national elections. The analysis expounds the games' strategic political messages as well as how they are rhetorically argued through game mechanics. The findings reveal that PCGs exemplify changing dynamics in digital campaigning, reify the enduring effectiveness of conflict framing, and codify how games can be designed to enact political rhetoric.

Keywords: political communication, media studies, rhetorical game analysis, video games, social media, virality

In 2008, game designer and academic Ian Bogost (2008) proclaimed the “death” of political computer games. According to him, American campaigns' brief experimentation with computer games in the 2004 election cycle gave way to a preoccupation with “online video and social networks.” In many respects, Bogost's postmortem still holds: Political parties have not widely adopted computer games, whereas nearly all prominent politicians have an active social media presence. However, what Bogost did not foresee comprises this study's foregrounding argument: Now that political actors' social media adoption has reached saturation, political video games are back in vogue.

When a communication medium becomes widely adopted, political actors experiment with alternative forms of voter contact to separate themselves from the pack (Epstein, 2018). Political computer games appear to be reemerging as both an electoral campaigning tool and a means to garner support for extraparliamentary protests. This trend is not limited to the United States; political computer games are being deployed in elections around the globe and at every tier of government.

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Date submitted: 2018-09-13

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Political versions of the classic arcade game *Space Invaders*, such as George W. Bush's *Tax Invaders* in 2004 and John McCain's *Pork Invaders* in 2008 (Bogost, 2011), were redesigned by civic groups on the left as *Tax Evaders* to support Occupy Wall Street in 2013. The same year in the Czech Republic, an independent game designer created *SoBoHaZem Invaders* to support Social Democratic party leader Bohuslav Sobotka after an attempted coup d'état (Švelch & Štětka, 2016). The well-known *Super Mario Brothers* took on a political version for Obama's 2008 campaign (Bogost, Ferrari, & Schweizer, 2010, p. 24) and has since been redesigned as *Mission Majority* to support Republican senators in the 2014 U.S. elections ("Republicans GOTY," 2014). In Europe, the games *Super Klaver* and *Super Gruene* were launched in 2017 to support the Dutch and German Green Parties in their respective national elections.

Apart from reskins of existing franchises, original video games have also been developed to support—or denigrate—political candidates, parties, and policies. In 2017, *Fiscal Kombat* and *Corbyn Run* aimed to promote party leaders, while bashing political opponents, during elections in France and Britain. *Pussywalk I* and *II* were developed to satirically chastise the public gaffes of Czech president Miloš Zeman. The controversial *Bolsimito 2K18* let players control Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro in slaughtering minority group activists and political rivals with gunfire. More recently at the local level, *Missione Bari* was launched in 2019 to support the mayoral reelection of Antonio Decaro in the Italian city of Bari. Outside of the West, *Run! Tapei* highlights the administrative achievements of Mayor Ko Wen-je and the policy reforms of the Tapei City Council. The Russian Internet Research Agency even tried to get in on the action by developing *Hilltendo*, a game aimed at discouraging Americans to vote for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 U.S. election (Pagliery & O'Sullivan, 2018).

To date, scholars have largely overlooked how computer games like these function as strategic communication tools during elections. Although a handful of studies briefly discuss games in conjunction with the 2004 and 2008 American campaigns (Bogost, 2007; Bogost et al., 2010; Schulzke, 2012), they do not provide a comprehensive framework to decode the content and function of these games in a systematic manner. This study marks an exploratory step toward correcting this theoretical and methodological oversight. As political systems reconfigure across the globe and unconventional political actors rise to power (in part) through running novel digital campaigns, a new theory of political computer games is needed to help explain games' reappearance in the contemporary campaign apparatus.

I therefore introduce the concept of political campaigning games—or PCGs—to understand how computer games function as digital campaigning tools during elections. PCGs are defined as advergaming that promote a partisan political position in an electoral context. To assess what PCGs reveal about the democratic process, the study takes an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that draws from three communication subfields: media studies, game studies, and political communication. Methodologically, I develop a framework for rhetorical game analysis custom-fit to the study of PCGs. The framework melds existing techniques used in analyzing rhetorical devices in political cartoons (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981) and video games (Fernández-Vara, 2015). The study applies the rhetorical game analysis to compare four PCGs from national elections in Europe during 2017 (France, United Kingdom, Netherlands, and Germany). Additionally, interview data from representatives of three of the four games helps buttress the analysis. Overall, the study finds that although PCGs vary in their sophistication, message, and design, these games

reify the enduring effectiveness of media framing, codify how games function as rhetorical devices, and exemplify changing dynamics in the digital campaigning space.

Defining Political Campaigning Games

PCGs are defined as advergimes that promote a partisan political position in an electoral context. This definition comprises three interrelated elements: function, content, and context. PCGs function as political advertisements, contain partisan political content, and are deployed in the context of an election campaign. This definition is designed to construct a narrow genre classification that distinguishes PCGs from other politically themed computer games. Furthermore, the delineation of PCGs into three component parts helps structure the study's analytical framework. Because definitions of game genres can be varied, loosely defined, and even contradictory (Fernández-Vara, 2015, p. 68), in the following sections I clearly delineate each element of the PCG definition while situating PCGs within the existing academic literature.

Function

PCGs function as political advertisements for a candidate or party. During an election campaign, political actors use various media to promote their platform and persuade voters. Off-line media examples include leaflets, direct mail, and television ads, whereas online examples include websites, e-mail programs, and social media posts (Aldrich, Gibson, & Cantijoch, 2016). PCGs may carry the same messages as any of these methods of political communication, but they are distinct in being computer games. Computer games can be imbued with arguments intended to persuade players, who decode these arguments by advancing through the game's computational protocols. Bogost (2007) refers to this form of persuasive messaging as procedural rhetoric, and he argues that encoding messages through a game's rules and procedures constitutes a different type of rhetoric than written, oral, or visual forms.

As persuasive political advertisements, PCGs can be classified as advergimes. Advergimes are short, simple games that seek to condition players' attitudes toward a brand through narrative scenarios (Terlutter & Capella, 2013). Although advergimes typically promote commercial products and services, politicians increasingly borrow practices from corporate marketing to advertise their platforms to the electorate (Newman & Perloff, 2004). In being entertaining and easy to play, these advergimes fall into the category of "casual games" (Juil, 2010), which are aimed at a broad target audience rather than a niche group of gamers.

As casual games, PCGs are categorically distinguishable from serious games. Unlike advergimes, serious games are developed by noncommercial actors for educational purposes, such as teaching players about a policy or raising awareness about a specific issue (Fernández-Vara, 2015, p. 133). For example, in the context of journalism, newsgames (discussed below) are serious games that convey reporting or editorial lines to audiences in a playable format (Bogost et al., 2010). Although Bogost (2007) differentiates serious games from advergimes, he acknowledges that both can deploy procedural rhetoric: the former to "advance the function of existing or proposed policy" and the latter to "advance the function of products or services" (p. 264). If both serious games and advergimes can enact procedural rhetoric, then a crucial difference between them is the content of the game's persuasive message.

Content

The second component of a PCG is therefore its content, which promotes a partisan political position. Because PCGs function as political advertisements in the context of an election campaign, the content of their message will necessarily be biased toward supporting a candidate or party. This requirement for partisanship separates PCGs from serious games aiming to teach players about the mechanics of elections or campaigning, such as the Redistricting Game (which teaches players about gerrymandering) or Howard Dean for Iowa. Although the latter was commissioned by a political campaign, the game has been described as “apolitical” and not “contain[ing] any campaign promises or references to the Democratic platform” (Schulzke, 2012, p. 340). The partisanship requirement of PCGs further distinguishes them from advergames that exploit trending political topics to promote commercial services, such as the nonpartisan Brexit Bus game developed by Advisa (a Swedish loan refinancing company).

In addition to the partisan message being advertised, content also relates to message framing. Broadly speaking, media scholars have identified electoral coverage as being framed around substantive policy issues, or as conflict frames between political rivals. Previous research finds that journalists act as moderating gatekeepers (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006), who may intervene in political debates and present issues through their own interpretive frames (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001).

Because the framing strategies of politicians and journalists can differ, framing is a crucial component separating PCGs from existing classifications of political games. As a genre, political games have traditionally been understood as a type of newsgame, defined as computational simulations that “suggest any intersection of journalism and gaming” (Bogost et al., 2010, p. 13). Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca (2013) explicitly state that “political games overlap with the category usually referred to as newsgaming” (p. 244). However, the equivalence between political games and newsgames assumes that the creators of political games are journalists or actors upholding journalistic norms (e.g., editorialists).

Rather than adhering to the professional ethics of journalistic reporting, PCGs convey a partisan message, which is likely to promote conflict frames over issue frames. Thus, conflating political games and newsgames is problematic for two reasons. First, the conflation implies that the frame-building processes of political actors and journalists are synonymous, a hypothesis the media framing literature would reject. Second, and related, it disregards how political and media actors struggle to control the framing of issues in public debate, a dynamic that is particularly pronounced during electoral contexts.

Context

The third element of a PCG is that its function and content are situated within the context of a formal electoral campaign. As such, games supporting extraparliamentary protest (e.g., Tax Evaders) or privileging satire over explicit electoral messaging (e.g., the Pussywalk series) do not qualify as PCGs. PCGs relate specifically to the process of political campaigning, which is often couched in the games literature—quite derogatorily—as “politicking” (Bogost, 2011, p. 61). In democratic systems, politicking is the struggle for power that precedes policy making, creates conflict among political actors by design, and drives political communication innovation. For the electorate, politicking stirs emotionality, which precipitates democratic

mobilization and generates political culture (Huizinga, 1949, p. 207). The electoral context requirement of PCGs is therefore aimed at controlling for campaign conditions to maximize the presence of conflict frames.

To bring the PCG definition full circle, the function, content, and context of the game work together to advertise a partisan political message during an election. Each element is a necessary but insufficient condition to classify a PCG. The context of an election will likely influence the game's content and framing, which in turn influences how the game functions as a persuasive communication tool. The task for research is to disentangle how the three elements of a PCG create a rhetorical device that contributes to, but also reflects, the broader political communication dynamics of a campaign.

Although PCGs are unlikely to sway an election outright, they are digital artifacts that warrant scholarly attention precisely because campaigns are highly strategic and professionalized operations. Deconstructing a PCG's content reveals what political message a campaign wishes to convey, as well as what type of framing they think will maximize the persuasiveness of this message. Studying how game design mechanics function to reinforce (or undermine) a political message affords insight into the rhetorical capacity of computer games and allows us to assess their civic engagement potential (Foxman & Forelle, 2014). Further, examining a game's deployment within the broader electoral context helps make sense of why innovative forms of digital campaigning emerge, such as when parties are in opposition or aim to mobilize a specific voter demographic.

I therefore ask the following research questions, which correspond to the literatures on media studies, game studies, and political communication respectively:

RQ1: What political messages do PCGs convey, and how are these messages framed?

RQ2: How does the design of PCGs reinforce their political messages?

RQ3: Why are PCGs developed, and what do they reveal about contemporary campaigning practices?

Research Design and Methodology

Few studies have systematically compared PCGs. This study's research design is therefore exploratory, and I develop a framework for rhetorical game analysis that melds two existing methodologies. The first is Fernández-Vara's (2015) approach to studying video games and includes three areas of analysis: an overview of the game, its detailed mechanics, and the game's wider cultural context. These three areas of analysis correspond to the three aforementioned elements of the PCG definition. Providing an overview of the game presents its main political message (content), delineating the game's mechanics examines how this message is encoded rhetorically (function), and situating the game within the broader campaign helps expound the external factors that influence its development and distribution (context).

The second methodology is Medhurst and Desousa's (1981) taxonomy of rhetorical devices deployed in political cartoons, and the authors argue that political cartoonists deploy consistent persuasive techniques corresponding to the five neoclassical canons of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style,

memory, and delivery. Like PCGs, “cartooning is a form of graphic persuasion” (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981, p. 198), and the structured delineation of graphic rhetorical techniques helps expound how political cartoonists craft their messages in light of an audience. Although PCGs are not entirely synonymous with cartoons, graphics are a necessary component of any computer game. Thus, a rhetorical analysis of computer games benefits from the systematic inquiry into the graphic techniques of persuasion deployed by the games’ designers. Here, Medhurst and Desousa’s (1981) taxonomy is a useful guide because it is suited to a political context while firmly grounded in classic rhetorical theory.

Yet, unlike cartoons, PCGs are not static or limited to single frames. Rather than passively decoding a political cartoonist’s message, PCG players actively cogenerate the game designer’s message through unlocking the game’s coded procedures via gameplay. Bogost (2007) referred to this process as procedural rhetoric, but analyzing only procedures is insufficient to decode the political content of PCGs. Therefore, although the video game analysis acknowledges the relationship between player agency and computational structure that together enact procedural rhetoric, the rhetorical analysis of cartoons helps decode the political content and frame-building techniques exhibited at the level of graphics. By melding these two analytical toolkits, the study offers a methodological contribution through what I call a rhetorical game analysis. Table 1 summarizes the key elements of rhetorical game analysis as well as how they relate to the PCG definition and existing communication literatures.

Table 1. Rhetorical Game Analysis Framework.

Literature	PCG Definition	Video Game Analysis	Rhetorical Analysis
Media Studies	Content	Game Overview (Story, Goals, Message)	Invention (Subject Matter) Disposition (Framing)
Game Studies	Function	Formal Elements (Mechanics, Difficulty, Graphics)	Style (Design Elements) Memory (Use of Metaphor)
Political Communication	Context	Game Context (Production Team, Distribution, Media)	Delivery (Distribution)

Following the three rows of Table 1, I briefly present the three stages of the rhetorical game analysis. I first begin with an overview of each PCG, focusing on its story, goals, and message (Fernández-Vara, 2015, p. 88). This point of departure presents the content of each PCG, and two rhetorical canons— invention and disposition—reveal deeper insight into how the PCG’s political message is structured and framed. Invention refers to the subject matter of the game and can relate to political themes, cultural allusions, personality traits, or references to transient events during a campaign (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981, pp. 201–202). The second rhetorical device, disposition, refers to how the subject matter is framed. Disposition always revolves around some form of contrast, but here I focus on two specific forms: commentary and contradiction. Commentary “safely implies or reflects a cultural/political truism” (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981, p. 207) that is likely to be accepted by the audience, whereas contradiction presents a one-sided argument where every reader—or in this case, player—must either agree with the position or reject it outright.

The second step of the analysis details the PCGs' "formal elements" (Fernández-Vara, 2015, p. 122): the specific control schemes, difficulty levels, and graphic representations that strategically reinforce the designers' intended subject matter and framing. This stage seeks to elucidate how the games' computational procedures and graphic design function to enact procedural rhetoric. The rhetorical canons relevant to this stage are style and memory. Style refers to the idiosyncratic graphical elements of each game, such as their color schemes and rendering of political figures. Memory, meanwhile, connects these disparate visual characteristics to generate symbolic metaphors about politics, such as framing the election as a battle, a race, or a circus (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981, p. 222).

Lastly, the third step of the analysis places the games' content and persuasive elements in the context of the election campaign. Therefore, this stage belongs to the realm of political communication because it tries to explain the game's message and framing by the political context in which the game is deployed. From the video game analysis, I examine the game's production team, distribution channels, and relation to other types of media (Fernández-Vara, 2015, p. 59). The rhetorical category most associated with this stage is delivery, comprising the games' distribution channels and placement in the wider media ecosystem (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981, pp. 227–234).

The rhetorical game analysis I develop here aims to explicate how design choices in the PCGs' subject matter and computational mechanics reinforce a partisan position through gameplay. By doing so, I aim to expound the main political content and framing of the games (RQ1), how these messages are reinforced through game design (RQ2), and how PCGs reflect broader dynamics in political campaigning (RQ3). Because PCGs are simple advergames, they are treated as a single unit of analysis. In the following section, I briefly outline the study's case selection process to detail how the study's four PCGs were identified. The case selection only focused on one year (2017) and one region (the European Union) to keep the selection process temporally and regionally delimited.

Case Selection

The case discovery process was conducted by querying Google's search engine for the 10 European member states holding national parliamentary or presidential elections in Europe in 2017 (Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Bulgaria, France, Malta, United Kingdom, Austria, Czech Republic, Slovenia). The keywords, translated into local languages by Google Translate, were the adjectival form of the respective country (i.e., French vs. France) + "election" + keywords indicating games ("video game," "computer game," or "mobile game"). The search parameters were limited to one month before the election to account for electoral campaigning contexts where parties are likely to be active in digital outreach initiatives. The discovery process revealed mainstream media articles reporting about four games: Fiscal Kombat (FR), Corbyn Run (UK), Super Klaver (NL), and Super Gruene (DE).

From the media articles, the names of the developers or spokespersons were identified, and they were subsequently contacted for interviews. In total, three semistructured interviews were conducted. The

interview participants are James Moulding, lead producer of the game *Corbyn Run*¹; Arthur Dingemans, game designer of *Super Klaver* and *Super Gruene*; and Thomas Künstler, spokesperson for participation and digital initiatives at *Buendnis90/Die Gruenen* (the German party that released *Super Gruene*). Representatives from the *Fiscal Kombat* game did not respond to repeated interview requests; however, materials from previous interviews were located in media articles to include their perspectives in the study.

A Rhetorical Game Analysis of Four Political Campaigning Games

Game Overview, Political Message, and Framing Strategy

The first step of the rhetorical game analysis is to provide an overview of the games by delineating their main story lines, goals, and political messages. Beginning with the French case, *Fiscal Kombat* is a PCG designed to support the presidential candidacy of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the policies of his far-left party, *La France Insoumise*. In the game, players assume the role of Mélenchon and steal money from several “oligarchs,” represented in the game as caricatures of well-known French political and societal elites. The oligarchs include notable figures such as campaign rivals Emmanuel Macron and François Fillion, head of the International Monetary Fund Christine Lagarde, and business titans Pierre Gattaz and Liliane Bettencourt. The goal of the game is to steal as much money as possible from these oligarchs to fund the party’s policy proposals. As oligarchs are defeated, a special attack gauge is charged that, when full, allows the player to clear the screen of oligarchs as Mélenchon yells “Hypocrites!”

Figure 1 below depicts a video (Figure 1a) and two images (Figure 1b and Figure 1c) of *Fiscal Kombat*’s gameplay. Although the game’s mechanics will be broken down in the second phase of the analysis, the overall political message is clear: Mélenchon is fighting against the French elite class. Interestingly, this antiestablishment message is not limited to political opponents; the inclusion of Lagarde and two business leaders conveys a broader criticism against the French elite. Reinforcing this narrative is the exclusion of National Rally leader Marine Le Pen from the game, despite her being a front-runner in the campaign. According to *Fiscal Kombat*’s lead producer, Le Pen was not included because she does represent the elitist oligarchy (Lamy, 2017). The combative message of *Fiscal Kombat* is therefore aimed primarily at the wealthy, who are denigrated in the game through a negative conflict frame.

¹ This interview is openly accessible as an episode of the *Social Media and Politics* podcast. Listen through the website or any podcast app (<https://socialmediaandpolitics.org/corbyn-run-game-british-elections-labour/>).



Figure 1a. Fiscal Kombat gameplay video.
Source: Bossetta (2019b).



Figure 1b. Shaking down oligarchs.



Figure 1c. Special attack.

Transitioning to the British case, in *Corbyn Run*, players guide Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn through a crumbling British town (see Figure 2a). The player steers Corbyn to avoid potholes and knock over enemies associated with the Conservative Party: bankers, tax dodgers, and Members of Parliament.

When Corbyn knocks over an enemy, money is collected for investing in social services (constituting a player's score). Like in *Fiscal Combat*, a special attack gauge is charged by knocking over enemies, and when full, the player can unleash "manifesto pledges" by pressing the spacebar. Five manifesto pledges highlight the core policy aspects of Labour's 2017 election manifesto: raising the minimum wage, funding the National Health Service, abolishing tuition fees, building new homes, and banning zero-hour employment contracts. After the player releases these manifesto pledges, nonplayable characters representing social actors affected by these policies (e.g., food delivery cyclists, nurses, and students) join Corbyn to form a movement. During the game, the player encounters a number of villainous bosses: Conservative politicians Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Jeremy Hunt, and even the ghost of Margaret Thatcher. The final boss of the game is Theresa May's battle bus, which is emblazoned with the slogan "#LIES."

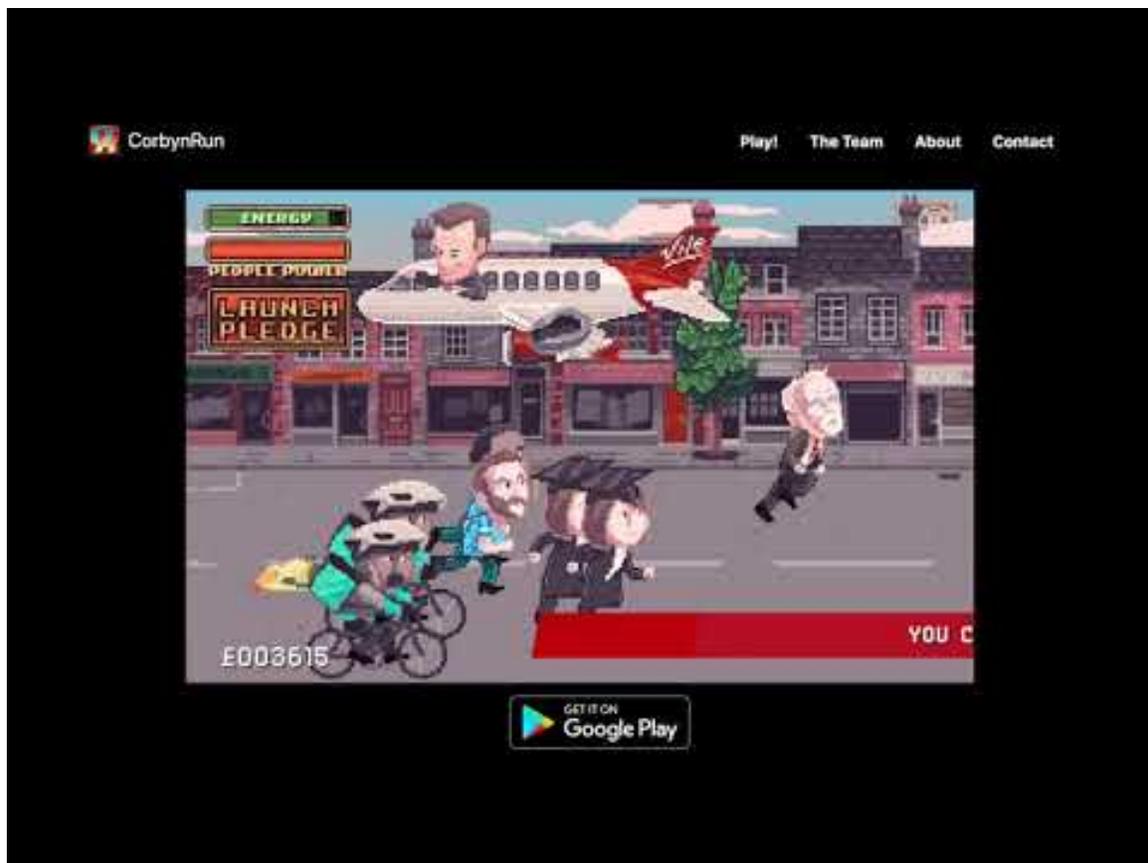


Figure 2a. Corbyn Run gameplay video. Source: Bossetta (2019a).

Although the game includes enemies and bosses, *Corbyn Run*'s political content is primarily focused on communicating the core areas of Labour's policy (see Figure 2b). James Moulding, *Corbyn Run*'s lead producer, noted that the game was inspired by *Fiscal Combat*. However, *Corbyn Run* was designed to be educational while also highlighting the grassroots momentum and positivity exhibited in the Labour party's

2017 campaign. Unlike Fiscal Combat, Corbyn Run presents a positive message conveyed through a mix of issue framing (the policy proposals) as well as conflict (against the Conservative political opposition; see Figure 2c).



Figure 2b. Manifesto pledge.



Figure 2c. Game bosses.

Super Klaver and Super Gruene were designed to support the Green Parties of the Netherlands (Groenlinks) and Germany (Buendnis90/Die Gruenen). Both games are reskins of the classic Super Mario Brothers. Instead of playing as Mario, in Super Klaver, players control Groenlinks party leader Jesse Klaver, whereas in Super Gruene, players control either of the party's two leaders: Katrin Goering-Eckardt or Cem Özdemir. As will be discussed below, the games' similarity stems from being produced by the same designer, Arthur Dingemans, a Dutch software engineer who decided to create a computer game after being dissatisfied with the way Dutch parties were communicating their platforms in the 2017 election.

Although the games largely follow the mechanics of the original Super Mario Brothers (see Figures 3a–3c), to win, players must shut down the coal-fired power plants to proceed to the games' endings. Both games also include a number of enemies, but instead of "goombas" as in the classic version, the enemies in these PCGs are nationalist politicians. In Super Klaver, all goombas have been reskinned as Geert Wilders, the controversial leader of the far-right Party for Freedom. In Super Gruene, the goombas are caricatures of Alexander Gauland, leader of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland. Although Super Klaver and Super Gruene include caricatures of far-right politicians as enemies, the conflict framing is less explicit compared with Fiscal Kombat or Corbyn Run. The games primarily revolve around an issue—environmental protection—and the games' objectives promote a positive message of "saving the planet" through curbing fossil fuel emissions.

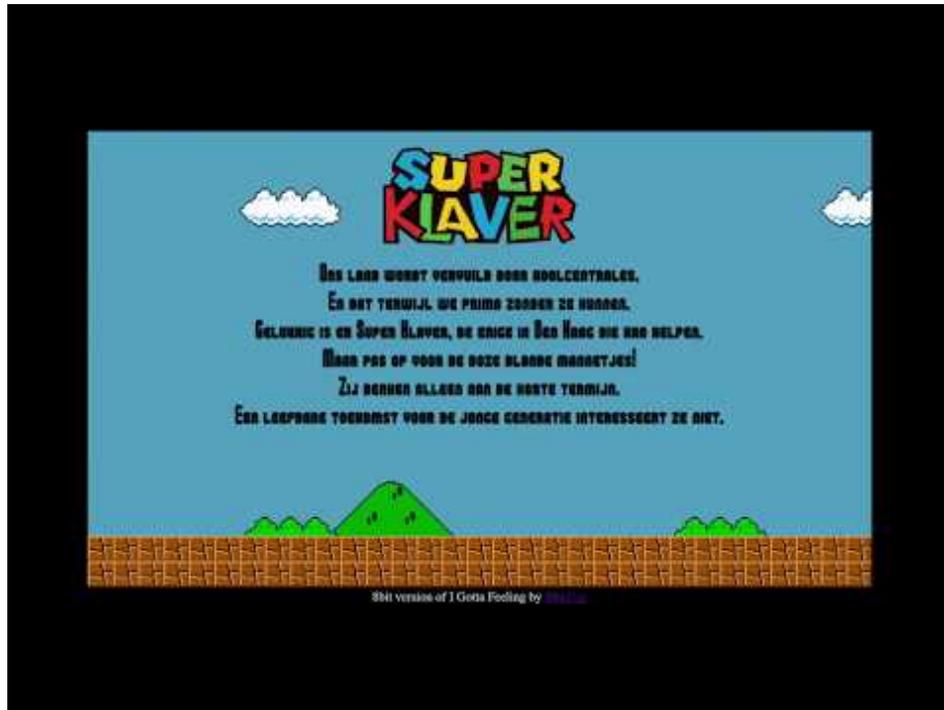


Figure 3a. *Super Klaver* gameplay video. Source: Bossetta (2019c).



Figure 3b. *Super Klaver*.

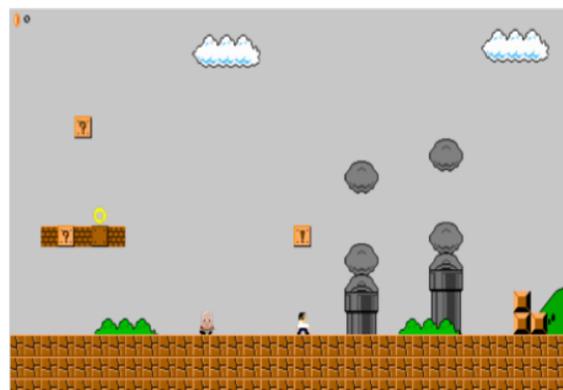


Figure 3c. *Super Gruene*.

Rhetorical Invention and Disposition

From this short overview, key similarities and differences are observable that relate to the games' rhetorical invention (subject matter) and disposition (framing). The games can be separated into two groups based on their content and framing strategies. On the one hand, Fiscal Combat and Corbyn Run use the

subject matter of transient political events to deploy the framing strategy of contradiction. On the other hand, *Super Klaver* and *Super Gruene* rely on cultural allusion to the *Super Mario Brothers* franchise to convey political commentary.

Medhurst and Desousa (1981) note how political cartoonists often draw on context-dependent events to form the subject matter of their work. Both *Fiscal Kombat* and *Corbyn Run* are built around references to such events. In *Fiscal Kombat*, each cut scene between Mélenchon and an oligarch refers to a scandal or a memorable moment in the election campaign. For example, in Figure 1a's video clip, the cutscene between Mélenchon and campaign rival François Fillon references Mélenchon's use of a hologram to announce his candidacy while also alluding to a corruption scandal during the campaign, where Fillon allegedly paid millions of euros to his family. The implication to the scandal is made explicit through the textual dialogue (at the one-minute mark); Mélenchon's repeated calls for Fillon to "Rends l'argent!" ("Give the money back!") references a slogan that was widely circulated in protest of the scandal through memes on social media (Vinogradoff, 2017). The broad, antiestablishment message of *Fiscal Kombat* exemplifies what Medhurst and Desousa (1981) refer to as contradiction, a framing strategy where "the idea being exposed is condemned . . . because it has been judged guilty of that most unpardonable political sin, hypocrisy" (p. 207). Contradiction is explicitly encoded into the game through Mélenchon's special attack, where he obliterates all oligarchs on the screen after yelling "Hypocrites!"

Corbyn Run similarly uses controversies and campaign-specific events to make up the political content of the game. The game's first boss, Theresa May, launches bottles of champagne from a helicopter, a critique referencing her widely criticized campaign launch, where she announced a snap election after flying into a posh English golf club. The game's final boss, Theresa May's battle bus with the slogan "#LIES," primes players to make the connection between the Conservative Party and the highly controversial messaging used by the Vote Leave campaign in the 2016 Brexit referendum. In both *Fiscal Kombat* and *Corbyn Run*, the player is reminded of political opponents' scandalous activity to portray them in a negative light. The games can therefore be argued to function as political attack ads against opponents, and the positive qualities of the games' playable characters are highlighted through contradiction.

Conversely, *Super Klaver* and *Super Gruene* lack references to political or campaign events. Rather, the main subject matter of the game is constructed through cultural allusion (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981, p. 201), which requires that the player be familiar with the cultural source—in this case, *Super Mario Brothers*—to decode the game's message. The main plot of *Super Mario Brothers* revolves around a damsel-in-distress trope; the hero, Mario, navigates through obstacles and villains to rescue the heroine, Princess Peach. In these political versions, the hero narrative takes the form of Green Party leaders saving the world from pollution.

For cultural allusion to be effective, the referenced cultural source needs to be recognizable to the audience. Arthur Dingemans, the designer of both games, chose to reskin *Super Mario Brothers* for its widespread recognition: "Mario was chosen because it's very simplistic, everybody recognizes it. . . . I went for a recognizable game to speak to a broad audience" (personal communication, March 13, 2018). When Dingemans was later contacted by the German Green Party to adapt the game to a German context, the party's spokesperson, Thomas Künstler, noted that Mario's storyline also communicates the self-image of

the Greens: "We feel like some sort of super heroes trying to save the world, fighting against climate change, fighting against big bosses, et cetera" (personal communication, March 29, 2018).

The games' environmental message is not arranged through contradiction, but commentary. Players are invited to accept the games' political message that fossil fuel omissions should be curbed, which is a popular position in both the Netherlands and Germany. Although caricatures of nationalist parties in the games could be interpreted to constitute a conflict frame, Dingemans notes that Wilders was primarily added to the game to make the game more relatable to the Dutch public.

Whereas Fiscal Kombat and Corbyn Run can largely be interpreted as attack ads reminding players of past political scandals, Super Klaver and Super Gruene primarily convey a message of sustainability that is not particularly tied to specific national or electoral politics. Extrapolating these messages to the language of media framing, Fiscal Kombat and Corbyn Run both promote conflict frames, but Corbyn Run also highlights substantive policy issues characteristic of issue framing. Both Super Klaver and Super Gruene are less focused on explicitly communicating policy proposals, but their core message substantially revolves around an issue frame relating to climate change.

Game Mechanics, Difficulty, and Graphics

The second stage of the analysis seeks to expound how the games' mechanics, difficulty, and graphics reinforce the political message and framing outlined in the previous section. Beginning with the games' mechanics, all games use the directional arrows on the keypad (e.g., left, right, up, down) to control the playable character. However, differences in how these controls interact with the games' mechanics contribute to the games' political messages. In Fiscal Kombat, the player can only move left and right. No control mechanism exists for players to avoid the encroaching oligarchs. Mélenchon must confront each and every enemy, automatically grabbing them upon contact. These control mechanisms help reify the game's conflict frame by forcing confrontation between Mélenchon and the various oligarchs he faces. To continue the game, the player must repeatedly shake and toss oligarchs, further contributing to the games' militant, antiestablishment message.

As Fiscal Kombat progresses, the speed of the game increases, and the oligarchs become more numerous. Given that Mélenchon cannot avoid the onslaught, in later stages the game becomes increasingly difficult. Interestingly, the game is impossible to win. Mélenchon is eventually overcome by oligarchs, but players can donate their collected (virtual) cash to a common pot to fund the party's spending program. This ending is notable for two reasons. First, it symbolizes that the power of the La France Insoumise is in the people (i.e., the players) and not a figurehead. Second, as the game's producer notes, it adds a "participatory and pedagogical dimension" (Lamy, 2017, para. 7) that the realization of La France Insoumise's mission is a collective one.

In Corbyn Run, the player can steer Corbyn in all directions: left, right, up, and down. However, the game's political message of grassroots momentum and positivity are embedded in other aspects of Corbyn Run's design. Apart from the game's increasing speed with the addition of new characters, Corbyn's momentum is conveyed through the fact he always faces to the right. Moreover, the game's side-scrolling

mechanism forces Corbyn toward the end of the game, encoding forward motion—or momentum—into the game’s mechanics. Positivity, meanwhile, is achieved through the difficulty of the game, which is extremely hard to lose. The game can only be lost if the player does not activate the manifesto pledges that load the next boss and continue the game’s coded procedures.

In *Fiscal Kombat* and *Corbyn Run*, particular design choices pertaining to what is allowed—and not allowed—regarding character control help reinforce the games’ militant and movementist messages, respectively. Players of *Fiscal Kombat* must fight the establishment. In *Corbyn Run*, players must unlock the manifesto pledges to build a movement. These game-specific customizations help align the designers’ political messages with the actual gameplay and enact procedural rhetoric more effectively than in *Super Klaver* and *Super Gruene*. As reskins of *Super Mario Brothers*, these PCGs largely follow the rules and procedures of the original franchise: Players progress from left to right and can jump to smash blocks, collect coins, and squash enemies. The only significant alteration to these reskinned PCGs, in terms of gameplay, is the addition of toxic clouds of pollution that end the game if the player comes into contact with them.

Rhetorical Style and Memory

However, game mechanics are only one facet of game design; graphics also serve to reinforce a game’s persuasive message. In their study of political cartoons, Medhurst and Desousa (1981, p. 212) refer to these visual elements as “style,” which include idiosyncratic aspects such as line and form, placement of objects in the frame, and caricature. Such stylistic choices “offer cartoonists a wide range of tools with which to fashion their rhetorical invitations to the reader” (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981, p. 212). Line and form, for example, set the tone of a cartoon through varying shades of color. A quick glance at the included figures clearly show *Fiscal Kombat* has the darkest tonality, creating an ominous atmosphere in comparison with the other three PCGs, which are all brightly colored and aim to convey a more positive political message. For Gombich (1973), the “contrast between light and darkness” in political cartoons is a “symbol for that between good and evil” (p. 138). This moral contrast is clearly exhibited through the special attack in *Fiscal Kombat* (see Figure 1c), where Mélenchon rises up as a bright, flaming deity to eviscerate the shaded oligarchs below. Such design choices in color are not coincidental. Dingemans expressed how for both *Super Klaver* and *Super Gruene*, he “changed the green, optimistically looking [warp] pipes” in *Super Mario Brothers* “to grey, polluting coal mine pipes” (personal communication, March 13, 2018) to make a negative statement about fossil fuels.

Apart from line and form, the position of objects within the game as well as caricature can assist the audience in decoding the game designer’s message. In *Corbyn Run*, for example, the placement of Conservative bosses above Corbyn—in helicopters and private jets—helps draw a contradiction between “Corbyn campaigning on the ground” and his elitist opponents detached from the working class. The clearest example of caricature, or the “amplification of physiognomical features” (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981, p. 212), is in *Fiscal Kombat*, where the oligarchs’ exaggerated nose sizes connote lying to the public.

Such stylistic elements work together to express a broader metaphor about politics for the games’ audiences. Medhurst and Desousa (1981, p. 222) refer to this process as “memory” and argue that because cartoons are often compressed into a single frame, cartoonists draw on commonly acknowledged metaphors of politics to aid readers in decoding the cartoon’s message. These metaphors include relating political

campaigns to a battle, race, or circus. PCGs similarly rely on such enthymematic premises, but they can further reinforce such metaphors through the design mechanisms outlined above. Fiscal Kombat clearly characterizes the campaign as a battle, not only through its storyline but also through a “beat-’em-up” style of gameplay. Corbyn Run, meanwhile, conveys campaigning as a race, encoded through Corbyn’s forward motion and his eventual surpassing of Theresa May’s battle bus. Finally, Super Klaver and Super Gruene portray their campaigns as a heroic quest, where the shutting down of power plants will save the world for future generations.

Production Team, Distribution, and Media

The final stage of the analysis examines the contextual factors surrounding the games, including the election dynamics, production teams, and distribution methods. Each of the PCGs studied here supports left-wing parties. Although it is tempting to attribute the games’ development to factors related to a leftist ideology, the examples outlined in the introduction show that PCGs have previously been developed by the political right. Thus, the main reason posited for the games’ left-wing skew is not ideological; rather, I argue that the deployment of PCGs can be explained by factors intrinsic to the cases’ electoral contexts. In particular, each PCG supports a party in political opposition, and campaign underdogs typically experiment with unconventional digital communication technologies at a higher rate than incumbents or frontrunners do (Bossetta, 2018; Epstein, 2018). The deployment of PCGs in support of political challengers may also explain why all the games incorporate aspects of collecting money to fund policy proposals. Especially in Fiscal Kombat and Corbyn Run, money is “taken back” from elites or the ruling governing party. It would hardly make sense for a governing party to design a game around collecting money, as this narrative would signal a lack of competency around government budgeting and expenditures.

Regarding production teams, one might expect that the development of PCGs would originate from highly resourced parties (Lilleker et al., 2011, p. 205). However, all of the PCGs studied here were initiated and constructed in a bottom-up fashion by citizens. Fiscal Kombat was developed by a dozen young activists who met on the popular gaming forum jeuxvideo.com and coordinated their efforts through a dedicated group on the Discord platform (Lamy, 2017). Corbyn Run, meanwhile, is the product of the activist organization Momentum, a grassroots organization with ties to the Labour Party. In the cases of Super Klaver and Super Gruene, a single software developer was able to reskin an existing game to convey a political message in a matter of hours. According to Dingemans, the entire process of creating Super Klaver took only 10 hours and was conducted entirely outside any contact with Groenlinks.

Rhetorical Delivery

Although volunteer or activist designers can produce games to promote their preferred political party, the distribution of the game is key to garnering widespread attention and virality. Medhurst and Desousa (1981, p. 225) equate the distribution of political cartoons to rhetorical delivery, referring to where and how prominently the cartoon is displayed in a newspaper. Traditionally, the decision about the placement of a political cartoon is made by an editorial journalist and is therefore outside the control of the artist. As mentioned earlier, however, PCGs are created by politically motivated actors who are not bound by journalistic norms. PCG designers can use any distribution channel at their disposal, and the widespread

adoption of social media lends to these platforms being an obvious, cost-effective method of distributing PCGs. Moreover, because journalists now source their reporting partly from social media platforms (Broersma & Graham, 2013), sharing PCGs on social media can lead to mainstream press reporting about the games through legacy channels.

All four PCGs were shared on social media; however, Fiscal Kombat clearly outperformed the other games in terms of garnering virality on social media. Fiscal Kombat received an official endorsement from the Mélenchon campaign in the form of a YouTube video, showing Mélenchon himself playing the game. The video garnered more than 400,000 views, and the Mélenchon campaign posted links to the game multiple times from their official social media accounts across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Given Mélenchon's massive social media following, the official campaign's promotion of the game is intimately intertwined with its success. According to Moulding, though the Labour Party originally intended to share Corbyn Run, a terrorist attack that occurred during the election halted their plans to do so. Although Corbyn Run was "built around virality" through its easy difficulty level and calls to action to share on social media, the lack of official campaign promotion hurt the potential reach of the game. Super Klaver, as a standalone project by Dingemans, was not shared by any national Groenlinks accounts. However, the game was picked up by local media, who, according to Dingemans, liked that his volunteer, citizen-driven initiative fit with Groenlinks' focus on grassroots campaigning. Though the German Green Party did share Super Gruene once on Facebook, the party lacked a substantial social media following to send the game viral. Künstler noted that the game was partly developed to garner media attention, but the party simply did not prioritize promoting the game relative to other modes of electioneering.

Concluding Discussion

This study provides an operational definition of PCGs and offers an accompanying methodology to study them. After theoretically uncoupling the content, function, and context of PCGs, the rhetorical game analysis helped answer three research questions that correspond to each element of the PCG definition. In concluding the study, I answer each question separately before discussing the implications of the findings and offering up avenues for future research.

The first research question focused on the content of PCGs and asked, What political messages do PCGs convey, and how are these messages framed? Each game advertised a partisan political issue through some degree of conflict framing. Fiscal Kombat expresses the militant, antiestablishment message of La France Insoumise through explicit conflict framing against societal elites. Corbyn Run, though similarly chastising the elitism of governing Conservatives, aims to convey a more positive, policy-oriented message that reflected the Labour Party's campaigning style in 2017. In Super Klaver and Super Gruene, the player must shut down coal-fired power plants to cut carbon emissions and save the future, while eliminating nationalist opposition to a global, environmentalist message.

While demonstrating the pervasiveness of conflict frames outside of journalistic reporting, the findings align with the study's theoretical presupposition that PCGs are a distinct genre from newsgames, which rely on the presentation or curation of facts (Bogost et al., 2010, p. 25). The militant Fiscal Kombat, the movementist Corbyn Run, and the heroic Super Klaver and Super Gruene each convey highly partisan,

opinionated political arguments that players decode through their engagement with the games' computational procedures. Prior experimental research suggests that the interactive quality of games, by which I mean the coconstitutive process of player agency interacting with games' computational procedures, encourages sustained political consumerism vis-à-vis watching videos online (Courbet, Bernard, Joule, Halimi-Falkowicz, & Guéguen, 2016). Future research should investigate whether playing PCGs has differential effects on players' political interest, knowledge, and participation in comparison with exposure to political advertisements.

The second research question—How does the design of PCGs reinforce their political message?—sought to examine precisely how computational procedures function to support PCGs' political content. Here, the study posits a critical distinction between originally developed games and reskins of traditional franchises. Though reskins may be convenient from a resource perspective, the development of an original game affords designers the flexibility to customize the game's graphics and procedures in ways that rhetorically accompany the game's partisan message. The analysis revealed how the idiosyncratic control schemes, difficulty levels, and graphics of each PCG serve to reinforce their political content. For *Fiscal Kombat*, the inability of the player to avoid enemies encodes the game's militant message and generates the metaphor of politics as a fight. *Corbyn Run* downplays explicit violence in comparison to *Fiscal Kombat*, and instead focuses on conveying policy proposals to propel Corbyn forward to symbolize politics as a race. *Super Klaver* and *Super Gruene*, constrained computationally by their reliance on the mechanics of *Super Mario Brothers*, conveys heroic narratives of environmental protection by relying on the preexisting tropes of a highly recognizable franchise.

The third research question placed the electoral context in focus and asked, Why are PCGs developed, and what do they reveal about contemporary campaigning practices? The investigation of this question reveals four interesting findings relevant to the study of political communication. First, PCGs are by and large developed by citizens, either independently or in a coproduced model with political campaigns. This bottom-up style of digital campaigning, which in three of the four PCGs was conducted in collaboration with the party, exemplifies what Gibson (2015) refers to as citizen-initiated campaigning. Tech-savvy citizens, disgruntled with the current state of politics, use their game design skills to affect political change, further supporting Chadwick and Stromer-Galley's (2016) argument that "digitally enabled citizens breathe new life into an old form [of campaigning] by partly remaking it in their own participatory image" (p. 283).

Second, and related, the relationship between volunteer game designers and the official campaign can influence the game's reach among the electorate. Campaign resources, especially in terms of social media promotion, are integral to the widespread dissemination of the game. Particularly in the case of *Fiscal Kombat*, multiplatform sharing from a candidate with a large social media following helped make the game go viral. Third, the adoption of games as a digital campaigning tool across national contexts demonstrates the transnationalization of digital campaigning, where campaigners borrow practices from a foreign electoral context and adapt them to their own. *Corbyn Run* was inspired and adapted from *Fiscal Kombat*, and the same holds true for *Super Klaver* and *Super Gruene*. Fourth, the development of a PCG seems to be affected by internal factors relating to the election, and the study's cases point to the primacy of the incumbent/opposition dynamic (with innovation spurred by support for opposition candidates).

In all, the study finds that although PCGs vary in their sophistication, message, and design, these games reify the enduring effectiveness of conflict framing, codify how games can be designed as rhetorical devices, and exemplify changing dynamics in digital campaigning. To advance this research paradigm, I conclude by introducing two concepts with which scholars may wish to engage in future research. The first is gamification, which refers to the application of game design elements in nongame contexts (Deterding, Sicart, Nacke, O'Hara, & Dixon, 2011). Though PCGs initially seem to fit this definition par excellence, I would argue that gamification refers not to creating games about politics, but rather toward the specific incentive structures that designers incorporate into games to encourage repeated player engagement. For example, Fiscal Kombat and Corbyn Run encourage players to replay the game to collect more monies, which constitutes an incentive to replay the PCGs in search of higher scores to share on social media. Future research should focus on individuals' motivations to play these games, whether gamification engines encourage repeated play, and attempt to quantify gamification's impact on the cognitive reception of PCGs' intended political messages.

The second concept I wish to address is rhetorical coercion, which stems from the international relations literature and refers to when an actor or group backs their opponent into a position with no acceptable rebuttal (Krebs & Jackson, 2007). Though the computational component of PCGs encourages a unique form of coproduction between designer and player, little remains known about the extent to which designer-imposed computational procedures coerce players into accepting an ideological position. Precisely because designers set the parameters for player agency, an open question remains as to whether game design power is coercive and to what extent this power may affect players' political preferences or trust in democratic politics.

Though these concepts open up exciting avenues for future research, this study's primary aim has been to focus scholarly attention on the growing prominence of games as digital campaigning tools. I have offered a theoretical definition and methodological approach to study this phenomenon, but the study is not without limitations. Representatives from Fiscal Kombat did not respond to repeated interview requests, and a lack of clarity regarding the games' reception and player demographics limits an analysis of the effects of these games on voter perceptions and behavior. Moreover, the throttling of Facebook APIs limits the ability to measure the games' dissemination on social media. Future research should use the study's findings to test the effects of PCGs on microlevel variables such as political interest, knowledge, and participation through experimental designs. When doing so, scholars should be sensitive to political context to accurately assess the effect of these games under context-specific campaign conditions.

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