

# GAMOCRACY: POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE AGE OF PLAY



**Master Thesis**

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“He hated games they made the world look too simple. Chess, in particular, had always annoyed him. It was the dumb way the pawns went off and slaughtered their fellow pawns while the king lounged about doing nothing. If only the pawns would've united... the whole board could've been a republic in about a dozen moves.”

— Terry Pratchett, *Thud!*

More than a second  
When reading the newspaper  
I felt the war  
I felt her... exposed position  
I saw myself in the picture

— The Knife, *You Make Me Like Charity/ Deep Cuts*

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And to Neta, without whom none would have happened.

## **Abstract**

This thesis brings together the fields of political communications and games studies, in order to facilitate novel analysis methods for post-broadcast democracies and the digital citizens that inhabit them. Following the process of mediatization, in which the dominant media exerts “moulding forces” over the socio-cultural spheres in which it resides, the author suggests that digital games are a growing component in mediatization, as part of the overall development of the ludification of culture. Consequently, this work implements play and games studies theoretical framework in order to explain how political engagement is shifting from the ideological to the casual, how politicians use game-like mechanics in their campaigns to influence and engage audiences and how the gaming skills of the younger generation are applied also to navigating public battlefields rather than only virtual ones. The author dubs these new forms of engagement “casual politicking”, as it prioritizes non-committing and mundane actions facilitated through the amalgamation of digital devices and social practices arising from ICT and games culture. Such forms are dependent on actions more than words, evoking and harnessing impulsive bursts of productivity that serves certain issues, utilizing technological interfaces and social connectedness of users. The author concludes by suggesting that future propagation of playful and gameful practices in political communications implores the employment of additional research framework from cultural studies and humanities to supplement traditional tool of communications.

**Keywords** Ludification of Culture – Games – Gamification – Political Communication - Mediatization

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## **Introduction**

And suddenly, games seem to be everywhere. The growing rows of video game titles, televised “reality” shows that turn the lives of everyday people into a well-scripted competitions for viewer sympathy<sup>1</sup>, free flash games for the masses, social Facebook games to capitalize on our existing interpersonal networks – it seems that life is becoming more ludic than ever.

In parallel, both popular and academic discourses notice the rising centrality of media in the public sphere. The process of mediatization (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Schulz, 2004) occurs across post-modern societies, ensuring an increased significance of ICT’s and the traditional media institutions which make use of them. This has strong ramifications for political communication, and consequently for politics itself, as it understood in the form of the three-way flow of information and actions between public, politicians and the media/press.

It is in the convergence point of those two phenomena – proliferation of games and mediatization – that the topic of this work resides. My aim in the following pages is to explore the increasing role that modern game culture plays in shaping political communication and, following, actors’ participation in the political processes. The scope of this work is on Western liberal democratic regimes (as far as this generalisation is possible), in which ICTs – and games in particular – have advanced standing, while the public’s trust in political institutions continuously erodes. I argue that our society’s inherent ludic element is becoming more prominent due to greater proliferation of (mostly electronic) games and thus approaches from cultural studies of play and games may be utilized to understand contemporary political communication. I show how political engagement is shifting from the ideological to the casual, how politicians use game-like mechanics in their campaigns to influence and engage audiences and how the gaming skills of the younger generation are applied also to navigating public battlefields rather than only virtual ones. These new forms of engagement are dependent on actions more than words, evoking and harnessing impulsive bursts of productivity that serves certain issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Which in turn can be seen in lieu of the proliferation of surveillance in modern society and as “ quasi-democratic aestheticization of the surveillant Gaze” (S. Coleman, 2011, p. 47)

My thesis is divided into two parts: first, two chapters of theoretical background and the framework I use to analyse politics, then two chapters of case studies that support my hypothesis and showcase the resulting research framework.

I start by presenting a review of the two main perspectives being utilized, namely political communication and game studies. By presenting how the two relate, I argue that political communications should be conceptualized within the framework of mediatization, i.e. as a meta-process that moulds multiple social spheres to accommodate certain media logics. By acknowledging that digital video games are becoming most widespread medium, I claim that we must look for insights from play and game studies for reshaping our paradigms of what is the meaning of being political. I invoke sociologist and communication researcher Manuel Castell's (2006) concept of mass self-communication, claiming that the increasing convergence of traditional media with new media, together with global loss of political legitimacy, has led to media space becoming the social space where power is decided, with this space being increasingly playful. The examination of these spaces comes through the prism of Actor-Network Theory, which traces the flows of power and agency over work-nets of human and non-human actors. Thus I define political conduct through a conjunction of social practices and technological affordances. In an introduction to a most recent book on political communication Brants & Voltmer comment on this loss of legitimacy and say that "as readers, listeners and viewers learn to recognize the manufactured nature of news, cynicism and disillusionment with politics grows and with it a dramatic erosion of trust and political engagement" (Brants & Voltmer, 2011, p. 6). The word "users" is absent here, and I argue that it is mostly **users** who contribute to remaking the definitions of what it means to be engaged in a political and media process, and even more so **gamers**.

In the second chapter I present Jesper Juul's (2010) break down of casual games, and propose the term of "casual politicking" to describe the principle mode of engagement that this mediatized political landscape calls for. I model casual politicking after Juul's casual games characteristics and break it into four distinct facets. First, it relies on ICT platforms, predominantly on the Internet and mobile phone, to facilitate quick and instinctive access to political conduct via high-affordance and feedback interfaces. Second, it focuses on issue-networks

rather than ideologies, promoting momentary alliances and reconfigurable political networks over rigid structures of part-politics. Third, it is based on a perpetual paradigm, reworking those issues and ideas, minimizing the cost of each particular victory or loss. Fourth it is based on social connectedness underlining it all and creating playful ways to engage with political content.

I start the second part of this thesis with my third chapter which presents the *Anonymous* online collective as a locus for playful political engagement. My previous research has pointed out how the distributed and decentralized structure of *Anonymous* gave shape to its unique way of political engagement: one which allows the members of this disembodied collective to set course for action through *memetic* decision making – targets and operations are chosen if enough members considered them important, visible or funny enough. I suggest that this collective has a dual function toward its members, first, as an agenda setting apparatus, which identifies targets for political action based on their visibility and the perceived “fun-nes” of such engagement; and second as a means to carry out such action, while framing it each time in an attractive way resonating with issues relevant to those participating. Tracing their origins from the 4chan image board, I argue that *Anonymous* acts, in a way, as a media channel of its own, catering for audiences and adjusting its content while strongly relying on its ludic, funny and chaotic image to attract new participants. In the chapter I analyze two distinct episodes in *Anon*’s history: their action against the church of Scientology (dubbed “operation Chanology” by the participants) and their operation “Payback” for Wikileaks and Julian Assange. I conclude by suggesting that such fluid ludic political organization is a response to the rising costs of political participation in terms of knowledge, time and resources.

The fourth chapter focuses on the way mobile phones resonate with casual politics, and the benefits of applying game studies perspectives on technology, urbanity and space in this context. The chapter analyses three distinct smart phone applications (apps) with a political pretence. I trace the *Obama* ’08 campaign app, arguing that its approach of “micro-volunteering” allowed users to act for Obama in their own time and for their own merit, but also adds game elements to it, turning the process of recruiting supporters into a fun competition of sorts. Then, I proceed to discuss the Americans for Peace Now *Facts on the*

*Ground* app for charting settlements on the West Bank, and argue that while employing some design techniques that were intended to invoke casual politicking, the app fails by not providing the users a clear interface and way to convert information into action. Lastly, I analyze the *SOPA boycott* app and the way it allows political consumers express their view via altering buying habits. I summarize the chapter by noting the inherent ability of mobile phones to increase visibility of public processes, and how additional design features allow them to facilitate user action thought applications designed to accommodate casual politicking conduct.

My conclusion summarizes this work, as well as suggesting that we are moving towards a state of *gamocracy* – manner of political engagement characterized by ludic modes of action via interfaces that resemble modern age games, and incorporate gameful elements – leader boards, points, levels, cooperative problem solving and the like. I speak not only of gamification<sup>2</sup> of politics, but also on the politics of gamification – the underlying processes of the ludification of culture that bring about gameful elements into more and more non-games environments.

An ontological clarification is in order, seeing as my work employs perspectives from both social science and the humanities, and some of the topics approached here may strike different associations than intended.

This thesis is not about the so-called field of “serious” games, i.e. programs implementing game mechanics employed for purposes others than entertainment, specifically to teach, train or persuade (Michael & Chen, 2005). I will not follow nor document trends in the uses of serious games for political purposes, specifically the creation of targeted games by parties, candidates or news organizations with the aim to address, illuminate or persuade over political issues. Some excellent work is being done in the field by game critic and designer Ian Bogost (2006, 2007a; Bogost, Ferrari, & Schweizer, 2010) developer and scholar Gonzalo Frasca (2000, 2001, 2007) and others. My interest lies in the ludic

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<sup>2</sup> Gamification is a charged term, as some game scholars see it as a legitimate cultural and business trend while others see it as a hyped buzzword that fails to recognize the futility of adding game elements to something which is not a game. I see it in line with Detering and his colleagues (2011) view, and consider it a logical continuation of games becoming the predominant cultural medium. For an opposing opinion, see Bogost’s (2011) essay on how gamification is in fact “exploitationware”.

elements as they appear outside of formal games, embedded in cultural practices of design methodologies, which themselves do not constitute games.

Additionally, the notion of games is used in political sciences, and occasionally in the study of political communication in the set of *game theory* – a mathematical and statistical discipline attempting to foresee the behaviours of players in complex systems (Aumann, 2008). Since I work from cultural perspective, I do not employ this meaning of games. Game theory is used for military, economic and diplomatic attempts to predict outcomes of situations based on the choices each participating actor have<sup>3</sup>. As prospective as it might be, this thesis will not discuss the potential influences of growing ludic culture on the way game theory is practiced and understood, although I believe it is a viable field of inquiry for social sciences and science and technology studies in particular.

Finally, this is not about exploring the emergent social (self-)governmental structures of online collectives in multiplayer games and virtual (synthetic) world. I concentrate on how the ludification of politics has repercussion for news readers, parties and voters, not on how those issues are resolved within commercial multiplayer structures, which – despite their similarity to the public sphere – are not one. Attempts to chart the possibility of online worlds as simulations for new types of engaged citizenry have been around from the early days of computer mediated communication MUD and MOO studies and up contemporary anthropological forays into MMORPGs (cf. Childress & Braswell, 2006; Dibbell, 1993; Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Steinkuehler, 2004). While certainly an important aspect to consider, this work centres on exploring the results that arise from previous such research in the actual political conducts between citizens, journalists and politicians.

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<sup>3</sup> With the most famous example being the prisoners' dilemma, in which two participants in a stand-off scenario will choose the middle-grounds (neither best nor worst) option if lacking communication between themselves.

# Part I – From Media Effects to Game Mediatization

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## **Chapter 1: Political Play and Games**

We live in a mediated and mediatized world. Images are created and destroyed in an instance; the news cycle is now measured by minutes, if not seconds. New actors pop up constantly in the previously stable media landscape: the internet and the web changed drastically what it means to produce and consume information. Mobile phones, wireless networks and the myriad content platforms built upon the physical infrastructure only make things more confusing. Terminology is problematic: can we still talk of mass-media or, as Van Dijk (2005) maintains, since we no longer live in mass – but rather in networked – society, has mass-media become an obsolete term?

In parallel, video games are carving their spot under the sun of mainstream media, becoming widespread through convergence of platforms and technologies (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Moore, 2011). The field of game studies which has risen around them is multifaceted and conflicted, hailing from computer science, cultural, play and HCI studies. How should we then treat games within the communications discourse and how do they affect media landscapes? How shall we, as academics, analyze the gameful element of the political activity enabled by mobile technology such as the Obama 2008 campaign application? If I want to discuss the changes occurring at the intersection of games and politics, I need to attempt and answer some of these questions. In this chapter I show how through mediatization, digital games may exert growing power on the interplay of citizens, journalists and politicians. I start with a quick foray into the history of political communications, and later move on to play theory and the role of games in modern media and culture.

### ***Political Communication***

As discussed next, I view video games as a rising communication medium and thus tie them in with the grater research of political communications prevalent through the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The birth of the mass media developed alongside the emergence of the mass society. As cities grew and new technologies increased the power of the middle class, mass media supplemented interpersonal communication to provide news, entertainment and socialization for the masses (McQuail, 2010). The political elites were quick to embrace the

(then) new media. It seemed that newspapers, radio and later television were the perfect means of carrying messages, informing the public and perhaps even manipulating it. The quickening pace of changes in society and media landscapes has led to a rising fear of the media machine, promoting it in popular imagination to the height of all-powerful propaganda device.

For a short time, such view affected the research paradigms of the 1930's. With the fragmentation of society and loss of previously traditional communal ties, mass media was seen as the new voice of authority. Sociologists and communication researchers spoke of the stimulus-response or the "hypodermic needle" theory (Bineham, 1988), presenting mass-media as coercive device for implanting messages and ideas, from which there is little defence (O'sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, & Fiske, 1994). This first era in communication research which gained prominence and was later named *strong effects paradigm*, didn't last for long.

Anecdotal evidence and distrust of a model which seemed too simplistic had awoken a strong empirical research movement which culminated in *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). This research into the 1940's USA presidential campaign showed how socio-economic status, previous voting patterns, community groupings and numerous other variables contribute to the way people are exposed to mass media, process it and influence (or not) by it. Thus, the minimal effect paradigm of communication research was born, finding later support in such theories as the two-step flow of communication (J. Coleman, Katz, & Menzel, 1957; Katz, 1957; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006), which singled out opinion leaders in relevant communities as gatekeepers and interpreters of the information processed by the media. Such research was still trying to explain in what ways the public is affected by media and what it means in turn for political participation, but from a more critical and reserved point of view. By late forties, two prominent sociologist, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton have published their seminal paper on political communication, in which they underlined the possible uses of mass media for political action, claiming that a successful mobilization of audiences via media campaign is far from obvious and requires: (a) strong media presence (preferably monopolization of media voice), (b) channelling and playing to current base values rather than attempting to modify them and (c) only affective by a follow-up face-to-face

contact, as in the case of local chapters and home gatherings during election campaigns (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948).

The minimal effect paradigm held its ground for about thirty additional years, until research into the way contemporary media cultivates social perception, and observed direct responses to prolonged media stimuli has rendered it unfavorable. The most prominent harbinger of this change was the *cultivation theory*, resulting from George Gerbner and Larry Gross' longitudinal qualitative and quantitative study of US television, suggesting that television influences audience's perception on mundane topics over time in a subtle way (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). In a public climate where media dominated, advertising companies were kingmakers and spin doctors ruled political campaigns, the strong effect paradigm returned to communications research.

Two of the most important theories for my notion of casual politicking emerged during that time: agenda-setting and framing. McCombs and Shaw (1972) published their groundbreaking research on what they dubbed *the agenda-setting effect*, pronouncing that the till-then overlooked power of media lies in its ability to set the agendas for the public and political establishment, elevating certain topics into the spotlight while diminishing others. Or as they quote in the opening pages of their work: "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*" [emphasis original] (Cohen, 1963, p. 13). Agenda setting findings vary in terms of strength, directedness and homogeneity of effects, but it is generally agreed that there is some diffusion of topics highlighted by the media into public concerns, which in turn affects the attention given to those issues by public officials, who consequently try to attract the media's attention with topics fitting their own interests, and so ad infinitum.

The second theory, framing, developed through application of the psychologist's Erving Goffman (1974) frame analysis theory. Goffman suggests that our daily experience is organized through series of "frames", or referential models with which we approach each situation. We are using different "keys" to refer from frame to frame, depending on our heuristics and predispositions. Such frames might include for "play" or "rehearsal" as opposed to "serious situation", with a person keying in between understanding an argument in the frame of a

theatre play or an argument in the frame of observing an occurrence on the street. Framing as media theory (Entman, 1991, 1993; Iyengar, 1994) build upon this and suggest that the media presents certain aspects of stories to their audiences, in a way that influences the broader context within which the stories are understood. These aspects may include words, photographs or interviews emphasizing certain things, but also elements such as the colour chosen for the graphics or the visual arrangement of material on the page or the screen. Just as Barthes (1978) used the photographic advertising image to expose the hegemonic ideologies behind it, so framing theory uses topics' salience and discrepancies in news coverage of events to underline how this hegemonic message pertains in modern media. Word choices, placement of photographs or even the colours used on a page or during the newscast invoke certain referential frames with the audience. For example, communication researcher Robert Entman has examined two similar aerial tragedies, the shooting down of a Korean civilian plane by the soviets and the shooting down of an Iranian liner by US troops. He showed how American press has framed one case as a tragic mistake (using words such as "tragedy" and "plane passengers", p. 7) and in another as a deliberate crime ("attack", "victims" and portraying the plane in a crosshair).

Agenda setting and framing theories are considered the cornerstones of modern political communications and were featured in numerous researches over the past decades. Yet they represent a research paradigm no longer fully relevant to modern media networks. Explaining public opinion in those terms was possible in a world where Time magazine and the five (six-seven-eight) o'clock news were viewed by the majority of potential audiences, or at least by enough people to constitute a constituency. This is certainly not the media landscape as of now, and we must re-evaluate our understanding of how the public is informed and mobilized. Manuel Castells (2006) speaks of a networked society, where mass communication is changing into mass self-communication, dominated by flatness of networked internet peer to peer communication, rooted in social media sites, email, online games and micro-blogging rather than by the hierarchies of traditional media. Similarly to Jenkins (2006b), he suggests that various forms of economic and technological convergence occur when old institutions try and adapt to new realities by making use (and in some cases, purchasing) new forms of mediated communication and those organizations

which are built upon it. Castells' emphasis, however, is different. His view of convergence leads to a new reality in which power is decided predominately within media space, following the loss of political legitimacy of traditional institutions on the one hand and the rising capacity of mass self-communication to facilitate projects of personal autonomy and social movements on the other.

In other words, while the popular claim elevating the media to a level beyond this of any other institution may be exaggerated,<sup>4</sup> there seem to be further and further enveloping of different spheres with mediated communications. This, in turn, affects how those spheres behave and what sort of discourse arises there. This is the process of **mediatization**. In mediatized society there are no impartial mediators or unifying yet detached "zero institutions".<sup>5</sup> Convergence brings to mind a technical term, a process of integration, and one which is rather one sided: from many to one. Contrarily, mediatization implies elasticity and reciprocity: the web affects political discourse as much as corporate mergers affect televised content distribution methods. It stems from globalization anthropologist's Arjun Appadurai views of constantly shifting and changing *scapes* (ethnoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes and ideascapes), various geographies which are *leaking through each other* - thus creating a global blur of cultures and images. Building on the notion of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983), Appadurai raises the importance of the so called *imaginary spaces* as global social practice, which weaken the nation-states and lead to the creation of deterritorialized communities of immigrants and "nation-want-to-be's". Such modern practices, I argue in response, have inherent resistance to

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<sup>4</sup> My random conversation with a dental hygienist has recently sparked a sudden exclamation about how "the media is stronger than the atom bomb" followed by strongly argumentative beliefs on the place of news people at the top of societal hierarchy. This personal anecdote underlines the prominence of media in popular perception, documented in such researches as Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence.

<sup>5</sup> Zero institution is a concept incorporated by Žižek from Levi-Strauss' works, to describe "empty signifier with no determinate meaning, since it signifies only the presence of meaning as such, in opposition to its absence: a specific institution which has no positive, determinate function—its only function is the purely negative one of signaling the presence and actuality of social institution as such, in opposition to its absence, to pre-social chaos." (Žižek, 2006, p. 1558). For example in a village populated by two distinct subgroups sharing antagonistic views, the mere belonging to the village tribe is zero institution. Jodi Dean (2003) suggests consequently that the entire Internet can be theorized as a zero institution, a pre-social structure signifying a beginning of a constructive process. I disagree with this view completely, as mediatization confers the very real politics, beliefs and ideologies into the Internet, which no longer constitute a thing of its own, but rather a continuation of "real life" by other means.

classic agenda setting and framing effects of the media, by being dispersed, multi modal and constantly reconfiguring.

So understanding mediatization requires us to accept the distribution of power over the fluid and non-hierarchical nature of post-modern globalized societies. Castells claims that these networks should not be understood as virtual, but rather as “a composite of the space of flows and of the space of places”<sup>6</sup> (Castells, 2006, p. 250). Sociologist and mathematician Friedrich Krotz suggests treating mediatization as a *metaprocess*, rather than limiting it to a certain culture, place or period of time (similar to and intertwined with globalization, individualization and commercialization of culture). He explains that as the social functions of media expand, especially with relation to ICTs:

*the construction of knowledge about the world and its meaning is changing. The same is true for people’s identities and social relations, as well as the way in which institutions and organizations conduct themselves, and for culture and society as a whole... understanding of the social and cultural changes of today as metaprocesses, and the specific analysis of mediatization can help to develop a general frame for much research in Media and Communication Studies and even some other disciplines. (Krotz, 2007, p. 259)*

The question remains, though, of how mediatization can be utilized for our understanding of the changes in political communications, and specifically for further exploration of the ludic element in political culture. Communication scholar Winfried Schulz (2004) attempts to reconceptualize mediatization as an analytical frame. Unlike Krotz’s metaprocess, Schulz recognizes distinct facets of mediatization in the form of four ongoing processes:

1. Extension - media extends the range of communication available to us, bridging over distance and time, as in the case of most mass media.
2. Substitution- moreover, media substitutes some of our social practices, for example, having telephoned or text based conversation instead of face to face meeting.
3. Amalgamation - further still, some of the substitution occurs in a climate of merging media (what Jenkins and Castells refer to as

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<sup>6</sup> The spaces of flows – the reconfiguration of spatiotemporal perception over global economies and ICTs, characterized by flow of information. The spaces of places – the more traditional perception rooted in the “everyday lives” and embodied experiences of certain locales.

convergence). This leads to amalgamation of the media as it pervades multiple spheres of life. Listening to a radio talk show while driving or having a romantic date in the movies are examples of this.

4. Accommodation – finally, all media behave according to certain *media logic*. This does not assume deterministic effects, but simply takes into consideration such variables as production values, formats and the political economy consideration of certain media and communication channels. This means that as various media extend, substitute and amalgamate various spheres of life, those spheres are further infused with such media logic (for example, the televised nature of many western political deliberations, aiming for shorter and more visual presentation).

This breakdown of mediatization presents clear vectors of possible exploration, but I see a potential problem with its methodological implications. First, Schultz's approach seems to be somewhat rooted in technological determinism, a mostly outdated perspective on the way (media) technology have certain necessary influences the society into which they are introduced (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967; Meyrowitz, 1985, 1995). From the classic conception of media as extension of man, borrowed from Marshall McLuhan (1995), and to the emphasis of media logic as predominant factor of influence, Schultz disregards understanding media as culture, rhizomatic with the practices of the participants in the media process, and interprets it simply as transition of information. Returning to Goffman's cultural frames, this view of mediatization is flawed, as it casts out the individual situated to understand media interaction according to different sociocultural keys. It is closer to media effects research focusing on the potential of television or the web for changing certain ideas or perceptions, than to my understanding of mediatization as a complex dynamics which includes "media" as diverse as computer games, instant messaging practices, Facebook courtship and twitter news following. My view is closer to the one formed by the European Communication Research and Education Association's temporal working group on mediatization, which states in its objective that

*...media are not given but are objectivations of human agency. Therefore, mediatization research does not investigate a certain 'medium as a message', but tries to reflect the characteristics of various media in their relevance for*

*communicative action and consequently for our social and cultural construction of reality. (ECREA, n.d.)*

Similarly, media culture and communication theorist Andreas Hepp criticizes Schulz as being overly functionalist, pointing that his breakdown implies the existence of a common media institution, which exerts functions upon other societal institutions in a quantifiable way. Hepp agrees with Schulz's four facets of mediatization, but argues that they present a problematic research methodology, focusing on certain manifestation of the mediatization process, but losing the greater scope and the ability to take into account the multiple media **logics** (rather than **logic**) that influence and permeate the social spheres. Hepp goes back to Krotz's conceptualization of the metaprocess, yet suggests infusing it with elements of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory.

The ANT perspective (Latour, 1987, 2005a; Law, 1992) is additionally valuable since its scope aims for exploration of social processes involving the conjunction of humans and technology, as I show in my case studies in the second part of this thesis. It argues that in order to understand modern society, a researcher must follow the work-nets of human and non-human actors (or rather, actants) through cultural-material artefacts, referred to as chains of associations. We can thus facilitate meanings by tracing and relating the different actors one to another. Agency is distributed across multiple actants, and when observing a soldier in a war, for instance, we cannot discuss her actions through cultural or psychological prism alone, but also through the material and semiotic relations of the objects she possesses, such as her weapon or the communication technology that connects her to her unit and what those technologies "want" or "do" as actants:

*Action is not a property of humans, but of an association of actants [human or nonhuman agents]...Provisional 'actorial' roles may be attributed to actants only because actants are in the process of exchanging competencies, offering one another new possibilities, new goals, new functions. (Latour, 1999, p. 182)*

Thus it is possible to locate the underlying currents in the decision making processes and learn about the constructions of symbiotic human-technological relations in society. Hepp notes that ANT is trying to find the "golden path"

between technological and social determinism, by treating things as actants too (Latour, 2005a, p. 71), eventually presenting technological endeavours as “coagulated actions” (Hepp, 2011, p. 13) of human and non human actants. In this perspective, Hepp argues that mediatization should be viewed as a metaprocess, however this while realizing that media are not a transparent instance of communications but an institutionalized sociocultural process, consisting from the coagulated actions of press institutions, governmental actors, the technologies that allow them, along the relevant idiosyncratic uses of them by the users (viewers, participants) in each case. This conceptualization of mediatization is built not on specific media logic, or even logics, but on “the moulding forces of the media” (Hepp, 2011, p. 14).

My thesis attempts to do just that: by tracing specific manifestations of the mediatization (meta)process, I aim to show how the moulding forces of various modern media congregate and operate within the greater socio-political spheres. One can no longer talk of unidirectional effects on the public, as in the case of agenda setting and framing, but on how the media penetrates, infuses and resonates along with various other social practices. Thus, as mediatization implies, the continuous growing entanglement of additional spheres of life with specific media logics leads to the hybridization of communicative and cultural practices. I suggest that those communicative practices today are becoming *predominantly ludic*. In the next part I outline the idea of play and how it came to dominate modern media.

### *Play the Game*

The main actor of the mediatized sphere is not the reader, the listener or the viewer. It is the **user** or perhaps even the **gamer** that we must regard (and which is insufficiently addressed in current political communications research). This is not because newspapers, radio and television will die, as “old media are not being displaced. Rather, their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies” (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 14). No, the focus here is that the principal moulding force of the media which affect our current cultural landscape is that of the ICTs and, embedded within it, this of the game. I follow game researcher Joost Raessens’ (2006) suggestion that games and other digital technologies facilitate playful goals and identities, leading to “ludification of

culture". My assumption is beautifully summarized by Eric Zimmerman, prominent game developer and theoretician, who gave an interview for Jesper Juul's book on casual games:

*As digital technologies and networks of information, the Internet, computers, mobile technologies, more and more pervade our lives, [and] the ways in which we socialize and flirt and communicate and learn and work and do our taxes and engage with our government and manage our finances, and many, many other important aspects of our lives, the more I think our culture becomes primed for play and particularly, games as the dominant form of leisure. Because games are the form of culture that is most intrinsically related to those things, to systems, technology, information, and mediated communication. It wouldn't surprise me [if ], just like society in the twentieth century gave rise to cinema . . . and television, in this newer century where information technology is now being supplanted by ludic technology, . . . play becomes a more dominant paradigm for culture rather than the moving image. (Juul, 2010, p. 215).*

Two terms that Zimmerman mentions are crucial for our further discussion: play and games. At first, it seems that those concepts are as foreign to the sphere of political communications as can be. Moreover, for those outside of cultural studies domain those two may sound similar, especially given their semantic approximation in mundane speech. Additional confusion can be caused by the fact that in many languages "games" are just grammatically modified form of play or vice versa.<sup>7</sup> Yet the distinction is important, and so is the stemming term *ludic*. In this section I will first give a brief history of those definitions and then proceed to explain why those terms are extremely relevant to our discussion of mediatization.

Johan Huizinga (1970) is mostly responsible for the proliferation of "ludic" in the current multidisciplinary research discourse. In his *Homo Ludens* published originally in 1937, the Dutch historian and anthropologist has made a remarkable claim pertaining the element of play. Although some forays into the concept of play, or playful activity were made in academic circles for quite some time, it

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<sup>7</sup> In Russian, for instance, the word "игра" [igra] means a **game**, "играть" [igrat'] is the verb from which means **to play** (a game, an instrument, in theatre etc.) and "игрушки" [igrushki], a shortened "cute" form translates as **toys** – three distinct words in the English language with different meanings and connotations, all stemming from the same source in Russian.

was mostly focused on limited psychological or biological implications of play, such as the discussion of play as developmental need of animals or children (Fröbel, 1826). Huizinga has suggested a revolutionary notion: play is present in most areas of human activity. It is the basis for law, politics, religion, commerce, war and most other human endeavours. One can argue that Huizinga's definition of play was rather wide or even universalistic:

*Summing up the formal characteristic of play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress the difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (Huizinga, 1970, p. 32)*

As many pointed out before, this definition is too inclusive, and thus can be indeed applied to most if not all imaginable activities. Likewise, additional fallacies can be argued with, such as the totality of play, the disregard for material gain (gambling was and continues to be a very strong and engaged form of play, as well as to some extent is the stock market) or the fact that games are “not serious” – as anyone who participated in a heated sports match can validate. Still, this definition, and the text from which it came, summarizes that playful activity is far from being only the domain of the young, and is in fact abundant in all spheres of life. Huizinga builds his argument by finding the play element in ancient Greek and Indian mythology, riddle-games of ancient civilizations, medieval tournaments and carnivals and beatification process of Christian saints. In a book which is considered a direct response to *Homo Ludens*, the French sociologist, critic and philosopher Roger Caillois (2001) refined Huizinga's definition and offered a separation between ludic activities centred on competition (which we would probably associate with games) such as sports or gambling, and activities of free play, such as theatre, music or carnivals. He introduces the idea of play as a *voluntary activity*, and ties playing with make-believe – which lacked in Huizinga's original definition.

From those two pioneers, play has been taken further by biologists, sociologists, psychologists, historians, mathematicians and designers. In

particular, it was examined by game designers, a profession that bred with the growth of leisure time in post-industrial societies and the culture built around table-top and computer games. They took specific, practical interests in the notion of play, trying to understand how play is present in games and what sorts of rules and guidelines should games follow in order to contribute to them being an enjoyable playful activity. As digital (and to somewhat extent, tabletop) games have become distinct cultural artefacts, academia took interest as well. In 2003 the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) was established and its first conference took place, further demarking games from play. The field of game studies (Aarseth, 2001), while not as historically developed as that of play, is gaining momentum as well, while combining classic notions of play with modern reiteration taken from the fields of HCI, interactive design but also cultural analysis rooted in film and television studies.

What about politics, then, in the context of both play and game studies? Play scholars have definitely taken interest in it from day one. Huizinga treats play and the contest derived from it as a significant factor in both law and war at the start of his book, while concluding it with an eulogy for the play-form in contemporary politics, lamenting the disappearance of the noble play of wars, alliances and betrayals (in accordance with 'the game') of the 18<sup>th</sup> century which has been diminishing ever since. A more contemporary (and less insubstantially gloomy) perspective may be found in the works of one of the world's chief play theorists Brian Sutton-Smith (2005). Analyzing the various ways in which play has been theorized and discussed over the years, he identifies seven predominant rhetorics (construction of narratives in the form of arguments) emerging in literature and popular discourse since the early 1800s. For example, the *rhetoric of play as progress* is applied to biological, psychological and developmental discussions about the value of playing activities in children, while *rhetoric of play as fate* is applied to gambling, but also towards mundane affairs based on religious beliefs or superstitions. The primary rhetoric that concerns our case is the one of *play as power*. Sutton-Smith traces its origins to the ancient discourse on wars and contestation, winning and losing as forms of personal success in politics, commerce and the like. According to him, this rhetoric, although of diminished power in modern conceptualizations of play, is (one of the) deeply rooted in a cultural sense. The fact that so many of our

contemporary political jargon rests on metaphors of contestation, race or a game is not a trivial thing, since metaphors – as Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) remind us – are more than just words, and our experience in the world are shaped and framed by the signs we use.

In their cornerstone book on game design Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) try to reconcile various play theories with our modern understanding of digital games. They analyze several authors and underline what makes game a game. This is an important transition, from the sometimes abstract theoretical constructions of the play concept to the very structured understanding of games as they appear today. They note that as digital technologies, computers and video games develop, a new definition sneak into the field: that of **games as systems** (Crawford, 1982). Consequently Salen and Zimmerman suggest, in an accepted and widely cited definition<sup>8</sup>, that a game is **“a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome”** (p. 80). A more elaborate definition is proposed by Juul (Juul, 2003, p. 35): “A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable”.

What I find interesting about those supplementing definitions is that they could as easily apply to modern political process, especially when such occurs in a mediatized environment. Elections are a simple example. The players and the rules are there, while the results are certainly quantifiable. Regarding the artificiality of the conflict, this is mostly a question of worldview, though the occasional critical Marxist would probably claim that it is so, distracting the voters from the real struggle. But even as we turn away from this very obvious example (after all, election campaigns have long become synonymous with ‘games’ or ‘races’), the elusive association remains. The ‘system’ in the definition contributes to it greatly. ‘System’ (together with ‘network’ or ‘algorithm’) is the organizational metaphor of the network society (Castells, 2001, 2006; Galloway, 2004; Van Dijk, 2005). It reminds us of computers, communication infrastructure, logical patterns and mathematical topographies – all those things that are not traditionally associated with politics. Only they are now. Perpetual campaigns,

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<sup>8</sup> A quick search for the exact phrase match yields 43,200 results on Google.

media monitoring, polling and calculated political advertising are all part of news management strategies undertaken by contemporary establishments (R. Brown, 2011). Journalistic practices are becoming similarly systematic, quantifiable and algorithmized via web metrics, ratings, subscription figures and opinion polls. As noted above, digital games do seem to be the cultural form most associated with our digitalized-networked age. But what are the characteristics of this cultural form?

### *Digital Games as Procedural Form*

Digital games are *ergodic*, a term coined by game studies pioneer Espen Aarseth (1997). Ergodic is derivative from the Greek words for ‘work’ and ‘path’. Ergodic texts are those that require non trivial effort from the reader to traverse them. Aarseth argues that games, being a subset of such texts, encourage the player to develop a unique connection with the narrative, by grounding it in the non-diegetic actions they perform, such as movement, experimentation with possible solutions, etc.<sup>9</sup> Aarseth insists on equating all forms of cybertexts with one another, criticizing the notion of scholars at the time to focus on describing the affordances of certain medium. In doing so however, he commits to a strongly functionalist view, rooted perhaps in his comparative literature background and disregarding – just as Schulz did - the *social and cultural* implications of different types of media use. His cybertext theory, while offering some valuable insights into engagement with non-linear media, nevertheless practically takes the reader (player) out of the equitation, likening an experimental book of combinatory poetry with a popular X-BOX console title. This is the game studies equivalent of unidirectional media logic over complex moulding forces of the media. We must keep in mind that games are systems manifesting computerized networked spaces of possibilities that react *according to the player actions*, and are therefore situated within the sociocultural context in which they are played. Such systems are meaningful, since the rules embedded in them are virtual but the outcomes and reactions for the players are real (Juul, 2005) and so they can “have ethical affordances because they are designed and

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<sup>9</sup> Games provide certain infatuation, which some relate to Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow , or a mode of activity performed in immersed, energized and creative way at the upper limit of the performer’s ability and interest. Game research has focused on these modes as immersion, incorporation or involvement and explored it from literary, cognitive and philosophical perspectives. (E. Brown & Cairns, 2004; Calleja, 2007a, 2007b; Mangen, 2008; Ryan, 2001; Thon, 2008).

experienced by moral agents immersed in specific cultural situations and times” (Sicart, 2009, p. 41). In other words, through improvisational interaction with a representational system of rules, players develop meaningful relationship with the game, based on their acquired conceptions and exhibit behaviours which can be viewed as ethical.

Those relationships develop through what theorist and designer Ian Bogost names *unit operations*. Bogost’s (2006) ontology suggests a unit-centred rather than system-centred analysis of cultural artefacts. He proposes a post-structuralist approach of deconstructing those artefacts, but not according to traditions of genre, narrative or ideologies. Instead, Bogost builds on Alan Badiou’s notion of the *situation*, derived from the mathematical set theory. Badiou, and Bogost after him, considers things to exist and operate in relation to the arrangement of objects around them. A situation is “a set of *specific* elements arranged in a certain way” (ibid, 12). Similarly, a unit operation is a unitary step in a procedural system, which can be understood only in relation to the other units in the system. *Unit analysis* is a deconstruction of a cultural form in accordance with its unit operations, for example in viewing “Terminal” as a film about the process of waiting rather than its storyline which tells the story of a passenger stuck in an airport because of a political-bureaucratic gray area. Although in Bogost’s view unit analysis can be applied to any form of media, digital games are the most susceptible to such analysis due to their essential property of *procedurality* (Murray, 1997) or the ability to quantify real-world behaviours and transform them into executable, reacting and manipulatable computerized scenarios. Elsewhere he explains:

***Procedure** usually conjures notions of officialdom, even bureaucracy. In common parlance, a procedure is a static course of action, an established way of doing something. Likewise, procedure and the law are often closely tied... In computing, procedurality refers to the core practice of software authorship. Software is comprised of algorithms that model the way things behave. To write procedurally, one authors rules that generate many instances of the same type of representation, rather than authoring the representation itself. Procedural systems generate behaviors based on rule-based models; they are machines capable of producing many outcomes, each conforming to the same overall guidelines. Procedurality is the inherent value of the computer, which creates meaning through the interaction of algorithms. This ability to rapidly execute a series of rules fundamentally separates computers from other media” (Bogost, 2007b).*

Even though unit operations are based on hermeneutic-ontological perspective, this approach can be viewed as the philosophical double to Latour's ANT sociology, as it implies similar notions of reassembly and reconfiguration in relation to texts and objects, in the same way that ANT views social processes. In terms of political communication both ANT and unit operations privilege analysis of the framing attempts of a distinct political message rather than a model of how 'the entire' party/parliamentary system generates messages. To follow the discussion on mediatization, unit operations approach tries to locate the sporadic compilations of the moulding forces of media in a localized context, in order to try and discern the macro effects. As game studies show, games create a very different cultural experience than any other form of media, exactly because of how they are geared towards unit operations, since it allows players to find meaning in reconfigurable-ergodic multiple playthroughs. A game, Bogost argues, is built around the *simulation gap*, or the break between what the game tries to codify in its capacity of a simulation of a real world, versus what is known to the player about the world that doesn't conform to this simulation.

Unlike other forms of media, games allow players to experience the outcomes of their actions, but only within the parameters codified by the game's rules, which might collide with the player's subjectivity. For example, a player engaged in a first-person shooter (FPS), confronts the notion of the genre (moving and shooting enemies, 're-spawning' after death, etc.) with what he or she knows on the realities of armed conflict, or his or her personal history. A US soldier playing such game while resting on a tour duty in Afghanistan will perceive it differently than an Afghan refugee girl playing it in London. It doesn't matter whether such FPS might be of 'realistic' nature depicting modern combat (like the *Call of Duty* franchise) or an over-the-top fantasy shootout. Each of those hypothetical players might internalize differently the various in-game unit operations, such as the types of weapons available, the presence (or lack of) non-combat non playable characters in game space (and the ramifications of targeting them), who are the 'good guys' and 'bad guys' in the game and so on. The simulation gap is a conceptual device to understand interaction of any player

with any game – from *Sim City*'s claims on urban planning and social dynamics to *Tetris*' hidden meanings of spatiality, gravity or entropy.<sup>10</sup>

Because of the simulation gap, games possess *procedural rhetoric* (Bogost, 2007a) – the ability to persuade a convey meanings by designing a game in a way that will let the player fill the simulation gap in a way that will correspond with designer's intent. One often cited example is *Madrid*, a game designed by Gonzalo Frasca a day after the 2003 Madrid terrorist attacks. In this browser game, a group of mourners stand in the dark holding candles while dressed in t-shirts commemorating different cities to fall victims to terrorist attacks. The player is required to click on the candles' flames, kindling them and filling the 'light meter' at the bottom of the screen. The only sound being heard is the howling wind and the lights flicker and diminish quickly, making the task Sisyphean and futile. This is a game which was done quickly, and therefore is simple. But its procedural rhetoric is present and when the subjective players encounter it they may interpret the game as the futility of the fight against terrorism, of the need to remember no matter how hard it gets or on how similar trials bring different people together. Even this highly abstract form of gameplay carries within it the procedural messages of the game media.

To recap, playful behaviours are embedded in our cultural approach to many social spheres, including that of politics (which is linked with the rhetoric of play as power). Modern video games are an emphasized form of this cultural phenomenon, as they allow player to engage with simulated, procedural systems of rules, which simulate and represent reality in an exploratory way. An important characteristic of video games is their ability to convey messages through leaving a simulation gap, to be filled by the players' subjective understanding of the actions they perform. This can be used to facilitate new kind of engagement with political material, one based on action rather than on

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<sup>10</sup> I do not suggest that all video games should be analyzed for latent ideological / narrativistic messages. However, if and when games analyzed, this should be done from the player (simulation gap) perspective. For instance, a popular casual game *Angry Birds* features a series of level in which the player must topple structures using different kinds of "birds" as slingshot projectiles in order to hurt the enemies of the birds – the pigs – after the latter have stolen the birds' eggs. Even this limited type of simulation and its discrepancy with the subjective players' knowledge can lead to interesting results. A simple example is teachers using the game's aim-and-launch mechanic to pique children's interest in the principles of gravitational mechanics. In a more complex example, this game can be read as promoting conflict as the only way of solution or the mutual destructiveness of war – all in lieu of what the game's rules (the inability to engage in diplomacy, awarding points for additional collateral damage). My partner refuses to play *Angry Birds* since according to her it is "full of hate".

verbal or image-based persuasion. In the last part of this chapter I will claim that the mediatization process currently occurring renders play substantially more dominant in political communications.

### *Talking Points and Experience Points*

And so, the political becomes increasingly mediatized, while alongside games become a rising new medium, which embeds in itself characteristics, associated with the network society as a whole (such as interactivity and procedurality). Yet the question remains: can we align those two media-cultural phenomena under the same theoretical roof?

It is my understanding that not only we can, but rather we must if we want to create a comprehensive framework for a contemporary and apt conceptualization of media and media effects. The interactive and immediate nature of the future mediatized environments will be much more playful than that dominated by the television or newspapers, and their audience's approach to media will resemble modern gamers more than modern readers.

The statistical data alone are impressive. The global game industry's estimated worth today is \$74 billion with a forecasted growth of \$100 billion by 2015 (Stuart, 2011).<sup>11</sup> Games are the most popular category of downloadable applications on smart phones with 64% phone owners played a game in June 2011 and 93% said they are willing to pay for games (Nielsen Wire, n.d.). The growing penetration of social networks and consecutive growth of games based on them is likewise impressive with a predicted growth from \$1bn in 2010 to \$5bn in 2015 (Parks Associates, n.d.). Popular social game producer Popcap has carried out a consumer survey which indicated that almost a quarter of social game players in the US and UK do so regularly (at least once a week) with the average demographical player being a 43-year old woman. Similarly, Entertainment Software Association (ESA), the U.S.-based umbrella organization of game developers has summarized the 2011 average gamer (of all platforms and genres) as a 37 year old, with a breakdown of 58% male and 42% female players (Entertainment Software Association, 2011). The same research indicates

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<sup>11</sup> Estimation is difficult due to such factors as multitude of platforms, markets and modes of distribution (freemium, mobile in-app purchase and the like). Thus, research firm Avista Partners claimed that the industry is worth \$100bn already by 2010 (Alexander, 2010).

that 33% of respondents (households with consoles or PCs used for games) identify playing games as their most favourite entertainment activity. In terms of profits, number of player and momentum, the game industry demonstrates an impressive climb into the mainstream of entertainment. Furthermore, as many pervasive online games and other “synthetic worlds” (Castronova, 2005, p. 4) are themselves becoming fields of economic and political interests, where concepts of sovereignty, labour and flows of capital are being explored in relation to their physical counterparts (cf. Castronova, 2001; Malaby, 2006, 2007; Terranova, 2000; Yee, 2006).

But the reasoning for incorporating games into the mediatization process goes deeper than the financial ramifications of the games industry or specific games’ attributes as economies. In recent years, game scholars observed the continuous ludification of culture (Raessens, 2006; Jahn-Sudmann & Stockmann, 2008; Pargman & Jakobsson, 2008; Roig, San Cornelio, Ardèvol, Alsina, & Pagès, 2009), specifically exhibited in the trickling of digital games outside of the boundaries of the home and arcade parlor and into broader cultural forms. From a separated, dedicated activity associated with certain gender and racial group (Flanagan, 2009) games have grown into a mainstrimized media consumption practice, to the point that “games have become so successful in ‘colonizing’ the sphere of everyday activities that playing them becomes transformed into a mundane act, comparable to watching television (to kill time) or cooking (to fill one’s belly).”<sup>12</sup> (Pargman & Jakobsson, 2008, p. 234)

Only consuming media is never a mundane act, as communication scholars have argued for the better part of the previous century. Those who strive to understand the future of political communication should look into gamer psychology and communities for insights. Prominent communication researchers Bennett and Iyengar (2008) suggest that the changes in the audience fragmentation, media authority and news consumption leads to a change in the way audiences form opinions and interact with political processes. According to them, communication research continues to be “adrift theoretically, seldom looking back to see where foundational modern theory needs to be adapted and, in some cases, overthrown, in order to keep pace with the orientations of late

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<sup>12</sup> Arguably, Pargman & Jakobsson are relating here to an ethnographic study of hardcore gamers, but as discussed in chapter 2, those definitions become blurred: “casual” players occasionally spend growing amounts of time on games, while “hardcore” players switch to “casual” games due to lack of time.

modern audiences, and new modes of content production and information delivery” (ibid, p. 713). They argue for a return of ‘minimal effects’ era in research, concentrated on the diminishing power of the institutions to dictate agenda, alongside the growing significance of choice media consumption and the ability to surround yourself in an ‘echo-chamber’ of reinforcing political attitudes or distance yourself from political discourse and conducts altogether. They lament the fixation on “debates over ‘minimal effects’, ‘agenda-setting’ and other findings-driven controversies in political communication” (p. 709) and instead propose focusing on developing a theoretical framework “that may reconcile the paradox between the growing centrality of media in governance processes and its shrinking credibility and attention focus in the lives of citizens, particularly given the waning of mass media influence in the lives of most citizens” (p. 714). Following, I suggest that using games studies as a new multidisciplinary perspective offers fresh paradigm on how games and play related activities shape modern citizens' engagement with mediatized political institutions.

A good example of combining game studies with social sciences is Marcus Schulzke’s analysis of games from the collective action philosophy of Alexis de Tocqueville. He suggests that in post-modern societies, where social capital is declining and the public becomes disengaged (Putnam, 2000), video games present a space where “associational life” (Schulzke, 2011, p. 355) can be built. In Tocquevillian terms, association life is one of the most important aspects of democratic society, as it trains collaborative, leadership and critical skills and empowers citizens to form groups, which are stronger than the individual. While local sports club or a local charity organizations may be more efficient in creating association life, “in an age of declining participation in traditional organizations, games hold more promise of promoting positive self-concept than other digital media because they have feedback mechanisms that reward good performance. They can increase efficacy by giving players challenges to overcome and allowing them to reshape a digital world through action. While this is a benefit primarily associated with multiplayer games, it holds true for single-player games as well.” (Schulzke, 2011, p. 362). Games are meritocratic spaces, where similar minded individuals come together and are judged solely on their skills, building confidence and self-efficacy, which in turn improves chances of participatory activities offline as well. By learning to understand what games

mean in the larger context of society, we can create a new multidisciplinary theoretical framework which accommodates their unique distinctiveness as media and culture.

Fact of the matter is that digital games are slowly becoming the *lingua franca* of ICT-using audiences, unifying across age groups, gender and income differences. Games and game elements are being heavily incorporated as design methodologies in computerized fields as distinct as advertising, education and corporate training, resulting in the paradigm of “gamification” – the inclusion of game elements in on-game systems (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011; Deterding, Sicart, Nacke, O’Hara, & Dixon, 2011). The topic of games as a widespread cultural phenomenon is thoroughly explored in *A Casual Revolution* by Jesper Juul. He combines ethnographic study of players, interviews with developers and comparative analysis of the game industry, and stresses that the abundance of *casual games* has made the format accessible and accepted, over multiple platforms and devices and today “To play video games has become the norm; to not play video games has become the exception” (Juul, 2010, p. 8).

The casual game is an important paradigm shift in video gaming culture, which highlights both producers’ attempt for addressing wider audiences and audiences’ growing familiarity with the digital game interface. Juul notes that from a market perspective, the modern ‘hardcore’ game industry (which is aimed at dedicated players who can devote time and effort into complex game learning curves) has reached saturation. Still, the inclusion of simple digital games in a variety of products (from watches to movie players) made basic games as *Solitaire* or *Mine sweeper* into a common past time of millions. Since hardcore games are difficult to get into for casual players, while casual games are accessible to all, many game developers attempt to “casual-ize” some of the game features, leading to hardcore games having more simplified controls or the inclusion of mini-games as part of the main game. Coupled with intuitive control of consoles like the Nintendo Wii or music games from *Guitar Hero* or *Rock Band* series, and the popularity of Facebook and the social games played on top of it, digital gaming became accessible and acceptable.

British journalist and academic Tom Chatfield (2011) has recently published *Fun Inc.* (subtitled “Why Games are the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’s most Serious Business”), a book that vividly presents the emerging paradigm of all-encompassing video

games. It is an interesting book, combining evaluations of changing game demographics, account on genre developments, the use of 'serious' games for training and education purposes, speculative suggestion on the merging of games with other perspective technologies (such as pervasive sensor networks) and forays into the recently popular discussion of positive psychology associated with game-like reward systems pioneered by Jane McGonigal (2011) and popularized in recent business approaches of gamification. Although it contains some research, the book is not purely academic and appeals to popular readership. Together with a more personal and literary oriented *Extra Lives* (Bissell, 2010) it joins the growing body of popular authors that aim to acknowledge the economic and cultural **significance of games while addressing the general crowd**. They believe that, love them or hate them, games are here to stay.

And so we arrive at the concluding point of this chapter. In this thesis I strive to perform a similar move, by outlying the significance of digital games in political communications. I view the proliferation of digital games as an indication of the ludic attributes of our culture, previously identified in play studies. As (casual) games become the lingua franca of the digitally engaged, certain modes of behaviours associated with playing games are becoming dominant. Mediatization theory suggests that politics is affected by the moulding forces of the media, and while the theory initially pinpointed television as the medium "to blame", later replacing it with the web and associated ICTs, I suggest that **games, and even more so casual games**, are the direction mediatization theorists should be looking upon. Game studies and political communications were rarely combined until now, and I hope to provide additional food for thought by creating a new conceptual framework for studying topics of engagement, participation and information transmissions which traces the forms of *ludic political communications*. I suggest this form is present both in top-bottom and bottom-up relations between the public, media and governing officials. I call this form "casual politicking".

## **Chapter 2: Casual Politicking**

If we want to deduce how ludification of culture moulds political processes through mediatization, we must locate the points of similarity between the two meta-processes. In order to define casual politicking, I focus on Juul's (2010) breakdown of casual games elements, being the most widespread and mainstream form of gaming, with his exploration of casual gaming presenting the largest academic work on the field to date. I synthesize several of the characteristics that he lists into four distinct categories, which I compare to four trends that comprise casual politicking.

First and foremost is the concept of 'juiciness' applied to the design patterns of these games. Juiciness is embodied in the visceral interfaces that prioritize immediate visual and audible gratification, intuitive control, simplification of tasks and clear definition of goals. Usability is a major component in juicy design.<sup>13</sup> Games in general have outstanding interaction design methodologies, communicating the objective via tutorials and gameplay rather than through external training. Unlike other kinds of software, casual games are developed for quick and easy play, aimed at non-technical audience, in a context where complex instructions are impractical. Juicy interface values simple controls with immediate feedback, often in non-diegetic form as in text that appear on the screen congratulating player on successful action or objects carrying animation regardless of their actual in-game status. Second characteristic is interruptibility, namely designing the game in such manner that play session requires little effort. Casual games are designed to be played in short bursts. Be it a social network game, which runs server-side through the website interface and requires no save/load functions or a console game which breaks play into small segments (levels, missions, mini-games), such games allow users to adjust the playing time toward their schedule and not vice versa.<sup>14</sup> Then, those games exhibit a forgiving attitude toward mistakes. This is not to say the games are not hard, but they are designed in a way that will absolve the players from repeating large portions of

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<sup>13</sup> Although Juul separates juiciness from usability, the former is reliant on the latter, as a usable and intuitive interface will determine whether the juicy elements will become apparent. For my discussion it is sufficient to include both terms under one category.

<sup>14</sup> "Casual players" can still spend long hours on games. Juul's survey indicates that 14% of casual players dedicate more than 40 weekly hours to playing games. Similarly, almost third of US baby-boomer gamers spend 20 hours playing a week (Pearce, 2008). The game simply allows for shorter individual play sessions.

game play in case of mistakes. Finally, all casual games exhibit a tendency to involve social connection as part of the game design, either by making the game multi-player or by promoting features such as leader boards and providing bonuses for inviting friends and family.

Similar principles can be applied to the tracing of casual politicking. It is an engagement mode with political affairs, favouring casual, emerging and self-organizing modes of conduct, rather than on contingent rigid structures. It relies on four key aspects, which resemble casual gaming operating principles (table 1). First, it facilitates ICT platforms which exhibit interface and affordance equivalents to the juiciness elements of casual game design. Then, it relies on issue-centred rather than ideology-centred conduct, which when coupled with ICT platforms generates for audiences the interruptible political mode. Audiences follow and connect with those issues that are relevant to them, contributing according to their time and resources in each case. Following so, they exhibit perpetual engagement which resonates with the low price of failure: fluid and continuous engagement with issues on the side of politicians and audience alike allows for a quick recuperation in case of failure, while avoiding major disappointments and sense of setback. Lastly, just like in casual gaming, sociability is the driving force of casual politicking. This is reflected by involving networks of like-minded people in the political process, heavily relying on the social capital aspect of the action rather than on the perceived outcome.

In the rest of the chapter I will explain those four aspects and their place within the larger theoretical framework of contemporary political communication.

Table 1: Comparison between involvement principles underlying casual gaming and casual politicking.

<b>Causal gaming</b>	<b>Casual politicking</b>
Juiciness: rich visceral interfaces for immediate gratification.	ICT platforms: accessible, reliable and highly visualized interface for immediate information and engagement, incl. a high level of affordance.
Interruptibility: Intended to be played in short bursts, minimal save/load compatibility.	Issue-centered: engagement for the shorter political/media attention span.

Forgiving attitude toward mistakes: a game may be hard, but failure does not result in massive setback.	Low price of failure: perpetual processes minimize each engagement's cost.
Socially-driven: existing ties are important part of the play experience	Socially-driven: existing ties and networks are important part of the participatory experience.

### *ICT Platforms*

Casual politicking wouldn't be possible without modern ICT networks. This relates not only to the way we interact with information, the shortening news cycle or the immediate response times, but to the nature of current internet-based telecommunication structures and the web applications built on top of them. Game scholar Alexander Galloway (2004) suggests that *protocol* is the management style and control method of the distributed computer networks. By this he means that not the information itself matters, but rather the technical rules and guidance that configure the way in which information flows. Protocols are the regulations which are external to information and indifferent to content. Modern organizational structures are protocological, in a way that they strive to include all other bodies in their domain. Unlike previous modes of control, protocol can only be resisted from within as to not be part of the protocol is not to exist.

Galloway argues that protocol is enforced independently of governmental, corporate or scientific establishment, by evolution of independent open standards in environment of independent software and hardware vendors. Contemporary technologies are built on inclusion – every single device is compatible on it basic level with information transfer from other devices, which makes twitter streams, news feeds, forums posts, IRC channels, Facebook messages, SMS, VoIP and so many other forms of communication necessary for casual politicking to be so ubiquitously available. A definite requirement for casual politicking is that the decision makers, media and public share the same discursive space and technologies, on increasingly similar terms. We no longer conform to the A.J. Liebling's famous maxim that "freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one", as the traditional authority system experiences loss of control and contestation from newly emerging information structures. Rather, it is protocological, since "*Protocol is synonymous possibility.*"

From the perspective of the protocol, if you can do it, it can't be so bad, because if it were bad, than it would have been outlawed years ago by protocol" (Galloway, 2004, p. 168)<sup>15</sup>.

Moreover, this ubiquitous access to information is provided via constantly simplifying and homogenizing access to digital data. This is done through better understanding of computer mediated usability (Nielsen & Pernice, 2008) as well as growing distribution of mobile wireless devices, which become embedded in the urban experience, manifesting a renewed connection between the city, its inhabitants and the information they produce/consume (de Souza e Silva, 2006; Mitchell, 2003; Nunes, 2006). For the first time in history, mobile communication means that both the carrier of information and the information itself is mobile – creating a possibility for the individual to be on the move while translating and receiving large quantities of data (Poster, 2004). Casual politicking requires fast and simple access to data, and the ability to communicate it while being on the move, often involving swarming (dispersed, self-organizing) modes of operation. The theory of technological affordances (Gibson, 1977; Norman, 1988, 2002) suggests that agency is resulting from the conjunction of sentient (human) actor who pursues a goal and the perceived qualities of objects in his immediate vicinity that allow him to perform an action. Digital interfaces are often built with affordance design principles in mind, to hint, guide and drive users. Contemporary digital interfaces create affordance for fast two-way communication, location-based action, viral news consumption and the like.

This occurs in an atmosphere of “post-broadcast democracy” (Prior, 2007), where citizens have growingly selective interface with news media. Those who are interested in political information, tend to be more partisan and devote more of their time for search and consumption of politically oriented news material. Others have the opportunity to avoid the consumption of political news altogether, occupying themselves with entertainment content, which increasingly include video games, as I've pointed out throughout this thesis. This leads to widening the gap between involved and uninvolved citizens, as knowledge is

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<sup>15</sup> Galloway summarizes protocol beautifully: supposedly two town share the same speeding problem. On one of them implements cameras and fines to deal with speeding drivers, while the other installs road bumps. Although the first solution invokes technology and legislation, it is in fact the second which is more protocological, as it embeds the desired solution within the rules of the system itself – the driver desires to slow down, in order to avoid damaging the vehicle.

prerequisite for public participation (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). International communications scholar Robin Brown (2011) suggests in a comparative research that this leads to the rise of a more partisan media system, and in return diminishes the effectiveness of news management strategies, requiring the political establishment to resort to alternative methods of influencing and mobilizing the public.

To sum up, ICT platforms allow casual politicking practitioners to create interfaces for quick information and mobilization, which requires no previous knowledge or training, and which – unlike previous media – can be translated into coordinated action in digital and/or physical space. For me, this opens the opportunity for both governments and citizens to engage in interruptible, issue centred political conduct.

### *Interruptible Issue-Networks*

Just as game designers tend to create gradual experiences, which allow players to choose their level of involvement, casual politicking is all about selective level of participation, according to the individual's abilities, desires and availability. The prime promise of this type of engagement is that of choice – for the individual, the politician and the media. Actors in mediatized environment are constantly exposed to a multitude of topics, interpretations, focuses, analysis, framings and counter framings. Bennett and Iyengar (ibid.) summarize several existing political communication researches and suggest that there is a shift in the direction of information flow: from what the media wants to tell to the citizens, to what the citizens demand to know from the media. This leads to modular approaches to communication efforts, in which participants choose the level of engagement with certain issues.

The marketplace of ideas has become more than just a metaphor. In a choir of global distractions, the active (or rather, Žižekian (2007) “interpassive”) citizen has an abundance of choice to select from on the wide spectrum of issues: economical, human rights, environmental and others . As any marketer will tell, a good way to highlight your product is by easing access to it. Consequently, many organizations focus on certain issues, rather than on ideological bundle, “selling” certain ideas or beliefs, while constantly framing and re-framing those issues, in order to take advantage of momentary alliances, public opinion shifts,

beneficial media landscape and the like. This notion follows from the work of Amsterdam University researchers Richard Rogers and Noortje Marres, who developed and implemented a digital humanities tool named “issue crawler” which follows web URLs according to certain keywords, tracking the amalgamation of issues between different web sites (Marres, 2006; Marres & Rogers, 2000; Rogers, 2002). What emerges from their researchers is the reflection of how politics works in the networked age: unsurprisingly, via networks. Rogers and Marres name them “issue networks” after the term coined by political scientist Hugh Helco in 1970. While Helco and others used this term to name a derogatory practice of civil society organizations of combining forces on certain issues for purely populist goals, Marres argues that they are in fact positive framework, through which we can examine the activism and decision making mechanisms. Contemporary politics, in Latourian terms, is a network of punctualisations, that involves governmental bodies, bureaucratic structures, corporations, NGOs, private initiatives, technologies, press organizations and many other types of actors. The fact that they are associated via the same network does not mean they collaborate on it, as the issue network perspective underlines the way seemingly unrelated bodies become antagonized over certain topics.

For example, we may examine the recent dispute over ACTA as an issue network. ACTA (Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement) is an agreement signed by a large number of nation-states which contains dubious paragraphs in regards to intellectual property and privacy of citizens<sup>16</sup>. The struggle over ACTA involved (and continues to do so) such diverse actors as, for instance, US-based digital advocacy group EFF (Electronic Frontier Foundation) and a Bulgarian music licensing company Prophon (Novinite News Agency, n.d.). Examined through traditional political science perspective, those two have nothing in common. They are separated by an abyss of national border, language, geographic distances and ideologies. They are not antagonistic; they simply do not exist on the same scale. But through ACTA, EFF and Prophon suddenly

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<sup>16</sup> Providing full account of the event is impossible within the paper scope, as it is an intricate matter concerned also with the political climate associated with it. This climate includes, for example, previous US attempts for similar legislation or continuous European debate over the “three-strikes” laws for disconnecting suspect file sharing individuals from the web. Suffice to say that ACTA raised a few eyebrows in what appeared to be a non-legislative attempt to enforce common supra-national guidelines in regard to sensitive issues which are still being disputed.

appear on the two sides of a barricade that did not previously exist. Through the Issue networks perspective one is able to track down those fluxing alliances and rivalries, augmented by the issue crawler and similar tools which can trail this flux through web rhetoric.

Critical theorist Jodi Dean (2003) articulates Roger and Marres' issue networks in terms of *neodemocracies*. She argues that rather than viewing the internet as re-emergent version of Habermasian public sphere, by following the constantly re-formatted issue networks we arrive at a state of perpetual contestation. Neodemocracies revoke the underlying principles of consensus via re-presentation central to parliamentary democracy, focusing on fleshing out the inherent class, race and gender schisms in society. The issue network, Dean accents, is a way to re-imagine the notion of democracy, break away from existing "fantasy of unity" and prioritize dedication over all-inclusive participation:

*Not everyone knows. Not every opinion matters. What does matter is commitment and engagement by people and organizations networked around contested issues. (Dean, 2003, p. 109)*

While agreeing with Dean's general interpretation of issue networks, I find her conclusions misplaced. Roger and Marres' advice to "follow the issues" does not nullify the need for popular support of the same issues, nor propels those dedicated and engaged around certain issues into position of power over the less engaged. The success of centrist parties, which position themselves as having good management methods rather than strong ideologies (commitment to issues), indicates this. Instead, the appeal of issue network approach is in tracing the way certain issues manage to gather previously uninvolved participants and harness they collective power (as electorate, activists and so on). It is the principle that lies in the foundation of military and government strategies theories of David Ronfeldt and John Arquilla – that of the *swarming* as technique for the future. They argue that networks operate best in swarms, where multiple autonomous nodes in a decentralized network work together towards common goal, while adjusting their modes of operation on the go and independently from each other (Ronfeldt & Arquilla, 2001). This brings us back to casual politicking – by locating those currently interested in an issue and providing them with tools for rapid (swarming) engagement with it, interested parties can mobilize massive

support. The issue-centered nature of this new mobilization mode does not connote it to be predominantly a tool of resistance, since powerful players can benefit from aligning themselves with certain issues as well.

Rather than Dean's ideal view of neodemocratic civil-society empowering resistance issue networks, the current state of affair is more in line with another of Ronfeldt and Arquilla's (2007) theoretical constructs, the *noöpolitik*. It is based on French theologian and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's popularized concept of the *noosphere*, which was coined in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and gained prominence after his death. The noosphere (from Greek "noos" - the mind) is the evolutionary advance of human consciousness, to the point of encompassing global matters. In more modern reiteration, the term presents an alternative to such terms as cyberspace or the infosphere, in order to denote the fusing of geographic, political and informational affairs of the contemporary condition. Ronfeldt and Arquilla use the term in offering an alternative view to *realpolitik*, the politics based mainly on hard economic and military power. Noöpolitik focuses on the global flows of ideas and suggests tapping into the soft power of attraction and persuasion, favouring cooperative solution rather than viewing politics as a zero sum game. As active advisers to US officials, Ronfeldt and Arquilla show how issue networks can be used as a diplomacy tool. They stress out how by connecting to NGOs and similar entities governments may tap into academic, activist, and other knowledge networks. This is not, however, the old diplomatic practice of coercion in the form of seemingly independent organizations, operating on a leash from the white house or the state department. Noöpolitik is

*less about control than "decontrol" — perhaps deliberate, regulated decontrol — so that state actors can better adapt to the emergence of independent non-state actors and learn to work with them through new mechanisms for communication and coordination (ibid).*

Casual politicking is about how noöpolitik can also be shaped internally by governmental, media, and NGO actors, connecting them with external global fluid networks while engaging citizens via convenient interfaces. Ronfeldt and Arquilla disregard the role of the citizens comprising the nodes in those networks, and so an addition to noöpolitik is required to further understand my framework, found in the notion of *dingpolitik*, the politics of things, expressed by

Bruno Latour. Latour's (2005b) critiques political sciences for being too long preoccupied with the way to conceptualize the re-presentational procedures in debating around issues, rather than the issues (things) themselves. He argues that recent political contestations around topics like global warming or the war in Iraq has rendered the classic agreements on the rules and boundaries of debate null. If Ronfeldt and Arquilla would envision the state as an entity connecting to existing issues via established external civil society actors and utilizing those issues for their own ends, Latour argues that often one of the major concerns lies even in locating the locus of the disagreement, and subsequently "bring[ing] into the centre of the debate the proof of what it is to be debated" (Latour, 2005b, p. 8). When undisputed facts are becoming a rare commodity, Latour suggests recognizing the inherited biases of the stakeholders, switching the political debate from facts to assertions, from *matters-of-fact* to *matters-of-concern* (Latour, 2005b, p. 9).

Overall, the disjointed nature of issue networks, coupled with the affordances provided by modern ICT allow the various casual politicking practitioners to engage with selected issues and provide their followers (but subsequently, also opponents) with rapid means of interfering with decisions makers and media agendas.

### *Perpetual Gamefulness*

In an aftermath to Foucault's dissection of the pre-modern and modern societies of punishment and discipline, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, noted that the post-modern is the society of control. The defining moment of move from enforced discipline to embedded control (to which Galloway gives the name protocol) is the perpetualness:

*In the disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything--the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation. (Deleuze, 1992, p. 5)*

When taking into account the mediatization perspective, the reciprocal shifting nature of both politics and media should exhibit a tendency toward perpetualness and against closure. Television, as opposed to the narrative film

already set breaches in the traditional Aristotelian narrativistic structures by establishing arcs-based stories and the cliff-hanger ending. Games, as a medium which is performative as it is narrativistic, show the potential to continue collapsing closure into perpetualness, in line with the Deleuzian prognosis.

The roots of serialization are in the desire to generate captive audience and maximize profits. In capitalist culture industry narrative is not only a *production*, but a *product* as Rolan Barthes (1975) asserts, reminding us to look into the economy surrounding content production, and not only the content itself. Television scholar Robert Hagedorn (1995) suggests that serialization is the ultimate development stage for media. From the penny-press to the day-time soap operas serialization has served three goals for the distributors of content:

- *self promotion* - the nature of serialized content is to promote its future instalments;
- *product (or rather producer) promotion* – the ability to insert cross-promotional material from other serialized material into the content (in a form of advertising, reference or cross-appearance
- *medium promotion* (the platform on which the serial is released) itself. By creating serialized content, the publishers, though competing against each other, promote their medium as a whole.

Games however are different from previous media in the fact that they elevate serialization into a meta-condition of the entire medium. Game researcher David Nieborg (2011) identifies mainstream top-selling (“Triple-A”) games as “unfinished commodity” (p. 36), arguing that by utilizing “branched serialization” (p. 38) publishers turn the singular game into perpetual release cycle, generating constant additions to the original game content in the form of smaller and cheaper *paid-for download packs* or more content filled and expensive *expansions*.

Casual games show even stronger “unfinished” characteristics, as the casual game revenue model resembles a service rather than a product. First, they are developed on the basis of existing and well know genres and mechanics (Juul, 2010) to appeal to a broader base as possible. Then, the game is often ‘freemium’, meaning that it is free to play but allows for additional (usually small) payments to unlock layers of the game previously inaccessible or speed up game progress.

The design of such games often presupposes the introduction of additional goods, and thus the game is intentionally left incomplete, with more features added as the life cycle of the game continues. Those changes are negotiated via monitoring the audience response, as they become active critics of the gameplay experience and often attempt to undermine the established rules, creating a player-vs-developers dichotomy. Much of the freemium content is “vanity items” which have no real gameplay value, and many vanity items are seasonal, such as Christmas decorations or clothing for the player’s avatars or virtual domains (Fields & Cotton, 2011), tied to the players’ real-world time. Casual games companies often compete with one another by copying successful game elements, and due to the mostly online distribution and much shorter development cycle, audiences occasionally move en masse to a more successful clone of an older game, forcing the latter’s development to embark on a new fast-paced development and marketing campaign. Modern digital games industry lack structure, closure or pattern. Outspoken media critic Neil Postman (1986) once blamed the televised medium for conveying a sense of ultimate stasis, as no matter what content is shown, it is still broken into structured units with programming following pre determined paths of time and length. Games as a medium are the exact opposite of it. The industry is also much more unpredictable than any previous culture industry and is thriving on it, with delayed release dates, lack of season, breaks or sweeps. Games are thus a fitting medium for Deleuzian never-finishing condition, prevalent in the societies of control.

The same perpetualness has not passed over the realm of politics. With the growth of mass self-communication and the lost of legitimacy politicians have further moved into methods of *perpetual and horizontal campaigning* (Manin, 1997; De Beus, 2011). Contrary to focusing messaging to the public during election time, mediatized politics constantly strives to present a vivid spectacle<sup>17</sup> to the ever hungry press, and the judgment of their constituents. Political communications researcher Jos De Beus highlights that the rising class of charismatic leaders, who distance themselves from larger party structures, has hastened the destabilization as they mould the party and governmental

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<sup>17</sup> Manin uses the metaphor of the theater to describe post-modern politics: the politicians perform, the citizens watch, the journalists review.

apparatus into unending campaigning machines to ensure favourable reiteration of relevant issues to the public. Quick succession of events and diminishing demarcations between local, national and global issues create multiple opportunities for such campaigns

Casual politicking requires fuelling the perpetual media cycle and engaging practitioners in a way gamers play (and play with) modern games. Games are ergodic, replayable and situated within larger culture of customs and practices. As in other media forms, the context of playing the game and who it is played with changes how the game is perceived. But unlike other media, the technological affordance of games allows multiple participants to engage with content repeatedly under similar conditions, by themselves or through collaborative effort. In this context, a single play through has a diminished significance opposed to the broader game capital and meta-game practices such socializing or asking other player for help (Consalvo, 2007; Corliss, 2011; Shaw, 2010; Steinkuehler, 2004). In games, as Simon, Boudreau & Silverman (2009) have shown in their exploration of *Everquest* players, performance is never calculated simply as a momentary score of kill points, but is instead a confluence of game mechanic, personal track in relation to others, online social experience and offline understanding of the play context, over a period of time. As political information (e.g. votes or budgetary expenses) becomes increasingly quantifiable, a shrewd politician should ask herself whether there are lessons to be learned from the statistics-heavy arenas of online battle grounds.

To conclude this point, such concepts as media cycles become much weaker in casual politicking. There is always audience, there are always issues. Web and mobile provide access to events in real, not pre-allocated time, rather than in accordance to traditional news time frames. In the end, seemingly limitless access to various types of information means that those who want to be “infotained” with political conduct will do so, and singular events lose their significance in the perpetual attempts of framing and re-framing events by the parties in question.

### ***Sociable and Collaborative***

The last defining characteristic of casual politicking is the tendency to orchestrate political action as social and collaborative. Now, to say that politics is social is like stating that fish feel the need for water. What I mean by this fourth characteristic is that modern politics is reliant on social elements as they

understood today in the popular discourse, as a design principle or technology powering many of our mediatized environments – from news to entertainment to education. Social elements, which are often tied to the “web 2.0” concept (O’Reilly, 2005) include reliance on sharing and crowdsourced elements, distributed and decentralized models, platforms rather than services and the like.<sup>18</sup> **Ludification** of culture is a definite component in the **socialification**<sup>19</sup> of the ICTs. Following, the social component of causal politicking is reliant on playful and subversive massive engagement with political content and stands in direct relation to the collapse of traditional representative parliamentary democracy and the rise of issue networks.

As information becomes entangled with content and the protocological structure of the established order guarantees that the question in regard to data is not whether it should be retrieved but rather could it, media changes its role. More and more communication outlets consciously define themselves aligned with certain political and/or economical actors ideologies (R. Brown, 2011). In this environment, framing information becomes a game of sorts. Individuals and groups such as the soon to be discussed Anonymous are approaching the glocal media spaces as puzzles: what is the given information, what is hidden, what is the bias of each source, how can we deconstruct, recombine, supplement the news provided in order to make sense of the world? This approach is inherently social and ludic, and many online news communities act in fact as current affairs “fans”, in the way Jenkins (2006a) explains fans: inquisitive, critical, fanatical and collaborative. Communications scholar Jason Wilson has performed a study on high profile Australian political “tweeter fakes” – people using the micro-blogging service to satirize (through acknowledged impersonation) public figures. In his approach, he suggests that in post-broadcast democracies, only a minority is strongly engaged with news content consumption, however:

*Just as Jenkins’s Star Trek and Doctor Who fans used those texts as the raw material for their own creativity, so contemporary political fans use the texts*

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<sup>18</sup> For a broader discussion of the term and the associated practices, please refer to Kylie Jarret’s (2008) critical paper on web 2.0 terminology.

<sup>19</sup> If we allow gamification to exist as a term, socialification should get its fair chance too. By that I mean that in the similar spirit (and often as a marketing ploy) digital products feature elements that allow users to share and distribute them more easily among their online social network members.

*produced by journalists and politicians in the elite public sphere as material for their own creative appropriation. (Wilson, 2011, p. 449)*

When materials generated by the politicians and the media become source of fascination, alongside the collaborative and generative tools allowed by the internet (Zittrain, 2008), practices of political fandom emerge. Those social practices are often playful, since they require a re-negotiation of what is understood of public participation, consciously assuming roles other than of the passive news consumer. Various actors, from the public sector to NGOs, contribute to such forms of engagement, by providing online spaces in which participants can discuss and collaborate on news events. Some examples include the British governments' *Digital Dialogs* platform (Chadwick, 2008), the Guardian's crowd-sourced platform for investigating scanned expenses receipts of parliament members (Morris & Rogers, 2009) or an Israeli NGO's reimagining of the Knesset (parliament) records into a more readable format which allows users to highlight, comment, discuss or ridicule protocols of meetings and legislation (Grimland, 2011).

The social aspect of casual politicking becomes more apparent when considering the trend of gamification, or what Deterding et al. (2011) define as "gameful design" or "gameful interaction" after McGonigal (2011). They identify it as design approach rather than a technology and define it as "the use of design elements characteristic for games in non-game contexts" (p. 5). Here, gamification is classified as part of the growing ludification of culture, alongside the trends of pervasive and location based games. Unlike those trends, however, gamification extends game **elements** onto **non-game** domains, rather than extending the game itself on new playfields, as in the case of mobile gaming. The social aspect is a major component of gamification techniques, as the introduction of leader boards or point into an online system is often recognized as basic (and often, crude) attempts at gamification. Many of the ICT platforms for political engagement feature those elements. For instance, the Guardian offers score boards for the most active "information scanners" as well as a ranking system by other users for rating the significance or newsworthiness of the system uncovered (McGonigal, 2011).

To conclude, in this chapter I have presented the concept of casual politicking, which is the central component of my thesis. I suggest that

mediatization moulds political processes and many similarities can be found between modern politicking and digital games as an increasingly growing and dispersed medium. To show it, I have synthesized the main characteristics of casual games, as the most widespread form of gaming, and compared it with four trends in political conduct. First, we have the similar reliance on ICT platform with the affordance and “juicy” interface which allows direct interaction with minimal learning and maximum feedback. Then, we have interruptible modes of play that resonate with the move from ideology-based to issue-based politics and the switch to operation through issue networks. Third is the perpetual nature of engagement, both as a defining characteristic of games (with casual games in particular) and modern modes of campaigning, information flows and action. Lastly, all those elements are tightly tied in with social playful practices that favour collaborative (and somewhat subversive) engagement and include subjects in the practitioner’s social network. Through those four twin categories we can assemble a framework through which we can further trace the manifestation of casual politicking in the case studies to follow. The next two chapters present these examples, in the cases of Anonymous, and political smartphone applications.

## Part II – Case Studies

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## **Chapter 3: Anonymous, or the Business and Pleasure of Hactivism**

Anonymous (Anon, for short) is a gathering, a culture and a brand. It is a (mostly) online gathering of individuals with no common denominators besides the fact of being part of Anon. It is also an idiosyncratic culture that should be understood from an anthropological point of view and which is based on such different origins as the techno-libertarian value foundations of the internet alongside practices of trolling and griefing. Lastly, emerging from the culture is the Anonymous brand, a simulacra of (miss)conceptions on their nature as a collective, hackers or activists, their image in the eyes supporters and opponents and their (supposed) ties with such entities as the occupy movement or the revolutionaries behind Arab spring. Leaderless and decentralized, Anon is all this and more.

As a phenomenon it is also notoriously difficult to describe or explain. As I have argued elsewhere (Gekker, Forthcoming), from an ANT perspective Anonymous resists punctualisation (Law, 1992), i.e. the seemingly monolithic appearance of multitude heterogeneous participants and the links they create when reduced to a single process or organization. Luckily, my goal in this chapter is in situating Anon as a casual politicking practice and not delving in depth into its structure or motivations. And while the former cannot be achieved without some of the latter, the focus here will be analytic rather than descriptive. Latour warns against “applying” ANT to particular case studies, insisting that if a “description needs an explanation, it’s not a good description” (Latour, 2005a, p. 147). I’ll attempt to navigate this slippery slope, and provide in my tracing of Anon (and the following case studies) the basic structures of actants and the networks created among them, noting occasionally how these features fit (or don’t) within my understanding of casual politicking. Again, I do not argue that casual politicking is an ideology or organizational structure that unifies certain cases under the categorization. Rather, it is a set of practices and observations, organized under one framework aimed at helping to understand changes in contemporary political conduct.

Anon emerged from the web-culture that surrounded several popular websites, the chief of which being “4chan” image board and its notorious /b/

section. 4chan is a forum-like website, where socialization is facilitated by exchange of images and comments via threaded discussions. The posting occurs through a submission form, which requires no registration and makes posting alias optional. Most users tend to ignore the alias field, resulting in posting under the default “Anonymous” moniker and subsequent threads upon threads of Anonymous posting while other Anonymous replying, with no differentiation whatsoever (figure 1). In theory, the number of participants in a thread with an  $n$  posts may vary between  $n$  and one, as it is entirely possible to post something and then reply to yourself ad infinitum. This results in a confusing, almost schizophrenic image of a vast collective talking among itself. As cultural scholar Jana Herwig (2011) notes in her account of 4chan, the website promotes different notion than of traditional online anonymity. The traditional techno-romantic notion of online anonymity was consistent with adopting nicknames, aliases and identities which could be radically different from the physical identity of the users behind them, yet mostly consistent and recognizable. Back then on the internet, to cite the oh-so-quoted cartoon, no one knew you’re a dog, but the nickname “not\_canine\_80” could have been a recognizable signifier on several web localities. 4chan, on the contrary, promotes a sense of identity-less, rather than anonymity.

In addition, the website does not have an active archive, thus posts rise and disappear into oblivion according to the interest they provoke. Consequently, the only way to preserve threads is by taking screenshots and saving them on individual hard-drives, to reproduce in later time on the boards, this time with an added layer of signifiers.



Figure 1: Suicide, God, Lols: A typical 4chan thread

### Memetic Leadership

This structure leads to what I call memetic evolution of leadership. Memes, as Dawkins (1976) describes them, are the cultural equivalents of genes, spreading ideas, words, fashions and the like through natural selection. Lacking identity and/or memory, the only way to gain prominence on 4chan is by being considered worthy by a large enough number of participants to save and repost your image, often after modification of sorts. This result in memes in their web interpretation – jokes and funny images, spread virally online. It also stands in the basis of Anon culture, where lack of permanent central leadership renders operations possible only by accumulating a critical mass of willing participants. Anon ethos also means that it is practically impossible to verdict whether someone is part of the gathering or not, since proclaiming your membership in Anon entitles you being Anon member, a modern digital speech act (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1970) requiring little more than identification and desire to join. Eventually, you sweep support for actions if enough people consider your proposal to be “Anon” enough.

Anon is one of the best examples of casual politicking. Initially Anonymous’ main scope was somewhat nihilistic (as in the above screenshot), focusing on idiosyncratic in-group humour alongside trolling and griefing – practices of

annoying and harassing others online for fun (or “for the lulz<sup>20</sup>” as the unofficial Anon motto goes). The ubiquitous “I did it for the lulz” had become the *raison d’etre* of the gathering (and continues to be so to an extent). But in early 2008 something changed. A video of actor Tom Cruise was leaked online and then removed by the Church of Scientology which filmed it for internal purposes. The church claimed copyright infringement and threatened with legal persecution any website hosting the video. Some Anonymous members (anons, non-capitalized) took notice. Discussion on 4chan and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels associated with the gathering have begun, where through memetic evolution a view was formed that the church of scientology transgressed the unofficial online code of conduct (or “the rules of the internet”) and must be acted upon. The decision making process in this case is neatly tied to the technological component that facilitated the communication.

The unique interface of IRC allows to structure conversations with ease via servers and channels. The act of creating a new channel is as simple as typing the channel’s name through the chat’s interface and each new channel manifests an ad-hoc leader which the others on the IRC network can choose to follow (or not). Hacking anthropologist Gabriela Coleman notes that while Anonymous as a whole continued to focus on general lulz, some members have become continuously interested in the anti-Scientology movement, which have led to the brunching out of additional servers and channels and created de-facto parallel structure named “Anonnet” which focused on engagement against Scientology (G. Coleman, 2011; G. Coleman & Ralph, 2011). Following so, those nodes have organized themselves to conduct online and offline “trolling” actions against the church, termed “Project Chanology” (a portmanteau of “Scientology” and “4chan”). Unsurprisingly, Chanology acts were called “raids”- a term most strongly associated with the online MMORPG culture, where player band up to defeat a prominently powerful opponent.

Anon raids, which spread across dozens of cities in North America, Europe and Australia, included pranks in the form of ordering pizza for the church’s learning centres, sending fax pages consisting entirely of black ink, phoning and

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<sup>20</sup> LOL means Laughing Out Loud, a common acronym in online lingo. Lols or lolz came to mean laughs or pranks. Lulz, a further memetic mutation, and while it is conceptually interchangeable with the previous terms, I would argue that the accepted meaning is more self-centered, apotheosizing the joke or prank as a mean to its own end.

emailing relentlessly to disrupt the church communication lines. Eventually it has led to a series of masked protests in front of Scientology centers, where anti-Scientology slogans coexisted peacefully with 4chan memes and speakers blasted out the infamous “Never Gonna Give You Up” by Rick Astley<sup>21</sup>. Over time, the rhetoric of these raids has gradually changed from protesting Scientology’s censorship practices to protesting the church and its alleged cult-like functions itself. While eventually, many Anons have moved on to fresh targets, some have stayed and become involved in a continuous struggle against the Scientologists. Or, as an Irish Anon told Coleman (2011): “I came for the lulz but stayed for the outrage”.

Tasting for the first time involvement in political action, Anons have undergone a transformation. While lulz were still a major concern for the gathering, they become growingly involved with topics of copyright, online legislation, intellectual property and freedom of speech. In September 2010 new network of Anonymous nodes have risen from 4chan and into a distinct IRC node labeled “AnonOps” (G. Coleman, 2011; G. Coleman & Ralph, 2011). The new larger structure, while sharing some of ideologies, tactics and members of Anonnet, was an independent one and had other targets in goal: the record industry and the campaign it waged at the time against The Pirate Bay bit-torrents web site and their digital piracy mantle. Operation Payback was initiated, implementing what late came to be known as Anon’s weapon of choice – massive distributed denial of service attacks (DDoS) perpetrated by hundreds or thousands participants from across the world.

But halfway through Operation Payback, Jullian Assange’s Cablegate affair has risen to prominence, with a largest cache ever of US diplomatic documents released on whistle-blowing website Wikileaks, resulting in persecution of Wikileaks’ leader Assange and other involved, which included the closing of the organization’s accounts and prevention of money transfers to the website by the likes of Visa, MasterCard and PayPal. Operation Payback had adjusted its course, with the Anons hive-mind finding Cablegate a more burning issue than digital piracy (Correll, 2010). In contrast to earlier operations, this time Anonymous targeted rather mainstream organizations and corporations, which

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<sup>21</sup> which by that time has already become an internet phenomenon and was predominantly associated with the act of “rickrolling” – the meme of tricking someone to click on a link only to direct him to a high volume version of this song.

led to a higher visibility and drove scores to participate. According to Coleman (2011), during operation Payback one of the most populated IRC channels in history was recorded, with more the seven thousand participants log into the central AnonOps channel, nevertheless maintaining the consistency of targets for the attack via polling, collaborative document writing etc. This incident can be seen as the beginning of “hacking-as-leaking” phase of Anonymous political activism (G. Coleman & Ralph, 2011) in which hacks began to commence for purposes of disclosing information, often perpetrated against institutions like major financial and governmental agencies, and subsequently position Anon as a politically driven entity. Alongside high-skilled hacking operations, anons have continued to rely on their ability to implement large networks of volunteers in DDoS attacks. During Operation Payback the LOIC tool was introduced, gained prominence and since then is being gradually replaced by the HOIC (an advanced version) – which allows anons to slow down or temporarily block from the web such websites as Visa, MPAA, Croatian government or the US department of justice.

### *Tools of the Trade*

Let us examine those tools more closely. The Low / High Orbit Ion Canon is, in effect, a packet launcher, similar to software intended to test the robustness of websites. On command the tool fires continuous streams of request (a larger number with HOIC) towards a designated IP address (which can be set remotely via inputting a certain IRC channel instead). The interface is simple (figure 2), no previous skills are required, and the language is consistent with the general lulz spirit (as in the “IMMA CHARGIN MAH LAZER<sup>22</sup>” firing button). By “firing their lazer” a user de facto becomes a part of a willing human botnet, participating in attack selected by the previous memetic natural selection of the Anonymous hive-mind.

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<sup>22</sup> Another famous web meme: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/shoop-da-whoop-i%E2%80%99m-a%E2%80%99-firin%E2%80%99-mah-lazer>

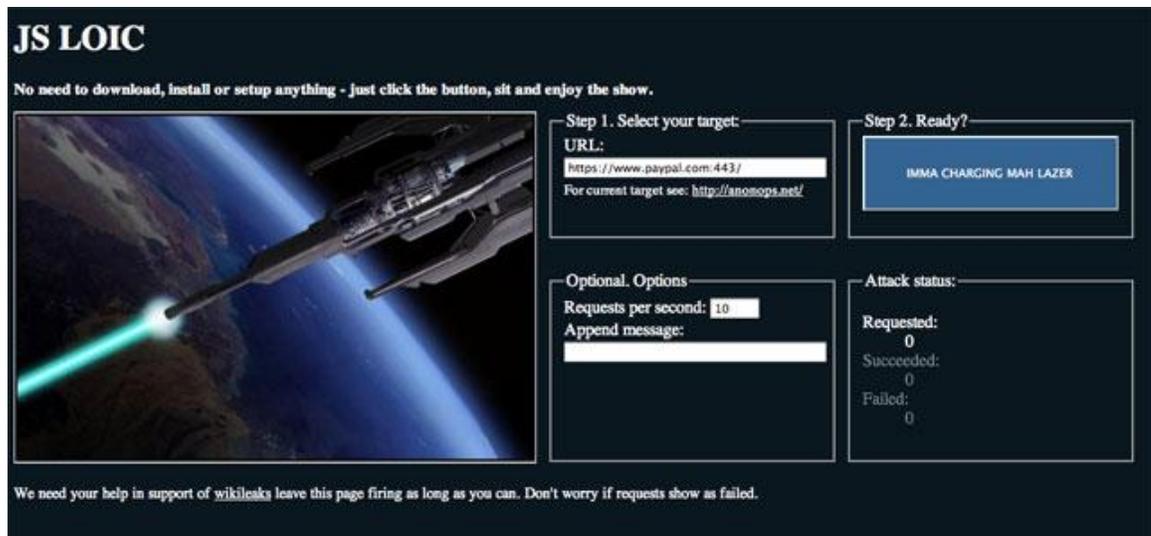


Figure 2: Web (java script) version of the LOIC. No installation required.

For many technically skilled individuals, those attacks seem ridiculous. They dismiss anons participating in DDoS attacks, referring to them as “script kiddies” – a derogatory moniker for those who picked some pre-made software (scripts) and fashion themselves “true hackers”. They may be right, but they miss the point. The fact that LOIC/HOIC attacks **require no previous technical knowledge** has been noted before, by Anonymous themselves and by others. It is the tool’s selling point rather than its downfall. I argue that what is more important is that DDoS-ing as part of Anon requires no previous **political knowledge** as well, and that is what makes it into such an appealing tool, embedded with the affordance of political action by its creators.

The Anonymous gathering serves in this case as a framing and agenda setting apparatus for its members, bringing to their foci the perceived transgressions against the collective ethos and an immediate, easy to use method of joining in and changing (or at least, participating in an attempt to change) this situation. It allows individuals disappointed in the traditional methods of challenging power to express themselves through new methodologies, which incidentally require little previous knowledge (thus circumventing the growing “knowledge gap”). It employs strong social foundations (‘social’ as defined previously), relying on sweeping, viral effects of membership across similar target groups, enabled by colourful strong image of the organizations, alongside its amorphous demarcation - which allows each to find her or his place.

To compare let us take a quick look at lulzsec (Lulz Security), an off-shoot of Anonymous consisting of a small group of highly technically skilled members. Emerging at about the same time as Operation Playback commenced, the organization had a hierarchical command structure and specific goals. It perpetrated high profile hacks such as those of the HBGary security company, in which it leaked thousands of embarrassing to the company emails (which had ties to several high profile governmental and financial structures), resulting in the dismantling of HBGary (Cook & Chen, 2011). Eventually, most of (supposed) lulzsec members were apprehended by law enforcement agencies and the organization ceased to exist (Lee, 2011). While it is agreeable that lulzsec failure lays in the organizations' traditional structure vis-à-vis leadership-less and identity-less Anonymous, the reason goes deeper. Lulzsec failed to constitute a political action or attract followers, alternatively indulging in its own image as modern age Robin Hood-esque elite hacker group. It did not provide a call for action for its followers, nor allowed participation below a certain skill level. It was, in a way, a very traditional entity - a rogue one - but traditional nevertheless, similar to many dissident/terrorist/crime groups, but painted in the lulz aura borrowed from their Anonymous origin.

To conclude, those two operations of Anonymous network(s) showcase how casual politicking is manifested and played out. What we have here is a group of geographically dispersed individuals, connected by a loose network of common culture and enabled by distinct technological platform(s), who have swept each other into action on topics disputed for several decades- the legal status of Scientology (Urban, 2006) in one case, the freedom of information and intellectual property in the other. When looking at those platforms, a distinct "juicy" quality arises, reflected in the colourful Anon language ("We are legion. Expect us.") and the immediate gratification a user gets from immersing oneself in the IRC channels or using the LOIC. Anon does not rely on traditional participatory democracy practices - one does not have to register or maintain membership in order to be (and more importantly, feel) part of societal renegotiations. Participants can also choose their own battles, switching between issues in the spirit of *dingpolitik* - focusing on the things that appeal to them and not on in what way they are represented to handle these things. It is also being perpetually reinvented, to address new topics and provide it supporters with

new tools, such as more secure “point-and-click” hacking tools that aim to mask the attacker’s identity and provide customizable methods for different websites in the form of executable add-ons (Gallagher, 2012).

In a relatively short period of three to four years, Anonymous as a politically active entity managed to gain the admiration of many young people around the world, while antagonizing existing commercial and governmental structures.<sup>23</sup> General Keith Alexander, head of US National Security Agency had recently warned that Anonymous may attempt to disrupt electrical networks and cause power breaks (Gorman, 2012). While this is a usual rhetoric in the constant cybersecurity debate, several factors should be noted. First, Alexander listed Anon as a “stateless group” a term often reserved by security officials to terrorist or organized crime groups; and second, the official noted that while having limited damage, the attack would “sow alarm, especially if Anonymous took credit publicly”. Faceless and leaderless, capable of sweeping popular public support, Anonymous is nevertheless a very real player in world political arena, and it is here to stay in one form or another.

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<sup>23</sup> Not all governmental structures though. As Anonymous imagery dominated recent Eastern European Anti-ACTA protests, members of Polish parliament left-wing Palikot’s Movement party donned the trademark Anon-associated Guy Fawkes masks during session, to express they disdain for the trade agreement (Norton, 2012). Since it occurred during the final stages of writing this thesis, this event cannot be given the full scope of attention, but it is nevertheless a good example of causal politicking: an existing political movement joins forces with internet enabled public outrage over a specific issue, while making use of popular counter-cultural symbols to attract followers.

## **Chapter 4: Applied Politics**

One thing that casual politicking perspective continuously points out is that contemporary political networks (in their Latourian meaning) prioritize action over knowledge. The different actants in the network drive for operational rather than discursive conduct, elevating clicks, shares, votes, protests, demonstrations or any other active support. This is neither good nor bad thing. As previously argued, the strengthening dichotomies over various issues alongside with increasingly partisan media, limits the role of words, and thus favours direct engagement with things. A successful translation of resistant networks into coherent ones require providing the tools for re-arranging users, information and other actants into mobile, swarming support nets. This chapter explores this issue of mobility through the prism of casual politicking, showcasing how engagement with political smart phone applications can be understood as ludic.

I suggest that one of the chief areas of application on such techniques occurs on mobile devices, especially those with geolocative functions, which can be translated into maps. The mastery of space is a central concept for the video game medium. Unlike television, which according to Marshal McLuhan (1995) diminished the spatial separation between places, creating the famous “global village”, the chief principle of video games is in opening different (virtual) localities. Whether by exploration, contest or (as in the case of many casual management titles) cultivation of distinct spaces, the player positions himself vis-à-vis others human or computer participant. This mastery of space notion becomes ever so relevant when looking at (predominantly younger) mobile users media consumption patterns. To show this, I will firstly briefly discuss the theoretical role of space and the playful qualities of certain spaces, then proceed to showcase how they manifest through casual politicking in the case of three mobile applications.

### ***Reconstruction of Space as Political Acton***

According to Henri Lefebvre, space is a socially constructed notion. A Marxist thinker, Lefebvre’s infatuation with geography and urban planning has led him to try and correct what he has seen as Marxism’s bias towards time (Elden, 2007). In his writings we can find close echoings of the principles behind the later ANT framework, as he rejects the neutrality of space as just the place

where events occur, and instead views it as a convoluted flux of physical objects (maps, buildings), people who make decision about those objects, and the meaning those objects are conveying to others. For him, each society produces its own space and the fact that unlike in pre-industrial societies, urbanity made space scarce and tied to social status (access to green areas, size of living accommodations) is significant for understanding how contemporary society functions. A social space is not *socialized* space – it didn't exist before as a natural space, but was produced by social forces. Lefebvre suggests that space is manifested in a triad of three types of “spaces” which he approaches from a phenomenological perspective: first, there is “conceived space” – the geometrical abstract space, as form of mental constriction – one never encounters space in structured Cartesian-Kantian terms until actually thinking about it (for example, in planning or using a map). Then, there is “perceived space”, the physical and “real”, where the reference point is not the zero point of the Cartesian grid but the individual’s body itself. Together, those two they create “the space of the lived”, an almost Latourian amalgamation of architecture, planning, social practices and phenomenological perceptions. One example is the cloister – where the altar is just a block of stone without the plethora or religious traditions and personal beliefs of those who populate the space around it.

Building on Lefebvre’s space of the lived, Adriana de Souza e Silva and Larissa Hjorth suggest that a specific category of social spaces – “playful spaces” (de Souza e Silva & Hjorth, 2009, p. 5) - exists in urban environments. Seeing the city as a playful space helps us to understand the transition that mobile phone technologies had brought to it. In her previous work, de Souza e Silva (2006) conceptualized the mobile urban experiences as hybrid space, debunking the dichotomy of virtual and physical. Following both Castells and Lefebvre, she proposes that the use of mobile devices within urban settings creates a mobile network of people, constantly connected to the net and other users. This allows the creation of “digital” communities but based on physical proximity, and reformats the perception of the city into forms of playful engagements and *ad hoc* social links. De Souza e Silva and Hjorth encompass the mobile phone component into their concept of playful space, but argue that the cities have always acted as such, regardless of technological platforms. Using mobile devices only highlights the predominant playfulness of this environment.

Moreover, the (mediatized) process of the ludification of culture is tied to the multidirectional flows of mobility and urbanity (Castells, 1992). From the arcades and home computers, games have spread first to mobile consoles (from the legendary Gameboy and to modern iterations, such as the PSP) and currently to mobile phones, digital media players (MP4) and even watches. Christopher Moore states that we **no longer need to consciously take games with us**, and instead *play* has become an ever-present intermediary across multiple (ANT) networks, organizing ludic experience between converging private and public spheres of work and play.

Mobile devices therefore play an increasing role in the ludification of culture and, coupled with their centrality as communication and information providers (further shortening the news cycle), are of high significance to the remaking of politics. I am of course by no way not the first to note this. Mobile communications, text messages and applications were instrumental in the success of Barack Obama's 2008 campaign (Kiyohara, 2009; Pick, 2010) and similar lessons were successfully implemented in public health messages in the US (Abroms & Craig Lefebvre, 2009). I do however wish to point out an interesting angle unexplored in previous scholarly work, to the best of my knowledge: the correlation between the rise of political mobile location-based applications and the spread of video games in society. Game rewards are always tied to space, whether by uncovering new areas for the player to explore, by allowing the player to set her own goals in relation to a game's affordance or by challenging her to stay in the gamespace as longer as possible, overcoming difficulties (Gazzard, 2011). Mobile devices, when presenting their user with locative information, **become symbolic maps of the users' lived space**.

Digital maps are different from paper ones, in a sense that they co-produce physical reality rather than simply representing it (Lammes, 2009). Those maps are being constantly co-created by multiple actants that include the user, the makers of device and the providers of the database (such as Google maps, and its API through which an application is built). In a sense, by injecting additional factors into the work-nets produced by the mobile user in the mobile environment, **a politically motivated agent may attempt and challenge user's preconception of space and thus stimulate action**. Just as television-politics influenced the way people talked about political affairs and the way it was

situated in the home space, location-based gameful politic influences the way individuals take political action. Though perhaps over-simplifying, saying that the mobile political application gamifies one's lived space is not so far from the truth. It helps *translate* initially resistant actants of voters, technology and politicians into functional networks. To demonstrate, let us examine several smart phone applications, noting their success and failure in relation to their end goal through the prism of casual politicking.

### *The Obama '08 App*

The official Barack Obama 2008 mobile application (app) for the iOS and Android mobile operating systems is a brilliant example of casual politicking in action. Unfortunately, the app was removed from respective stores shortly after the elections, and so I will resort to analyzing it through other accounts as well as an online review video ("Obama '08 iPhone Application Review," 2008).

The app was released due to a collaborative effort of ten volunteer coders, who had decided to donate (their) time and skills in order to support their presidential candidate (Pick, 2010; Sagolla, 2008). It is remarkable that this app is an example of casual politicking from its very inception, as it came to be through the configuration of dispersed knowledge-specific Obama supporters, who used contemporary ICT platforms to coordinate the effort and contributed each according their time and ability. The developers acknowledged their own emergent method of contributing to the campaign and stated that same principles guided the features they've implemented, stating that "The app was designed as a means to donate your time in discreet segments — we call it 'micro-volunteering'" (Sagolla, 2008).

The application includes seven main functions (figure 3) and the donate button, which played an important part in Obama's unique campaign funding method of numerous repeated small donations. The main functions are as follows:

- Call friends – links the app to user's phone book, sorting their contact list according to US states (with emphasis on contested ones) and prompts the user to call contacts and discuss their upcoming votes. This most innovative feature allows users to track their call efforts, post notes in relation to each friend, and eventually compare their statistics to nationwide lead callers. In effect, this function alters the friendly discussion about politics, turning it into

quantifiable and more importantly, comparable effort statistics. While its developers may have not thought of it at the time, this function was probably one of the first attempts of gamification in politics, as it tried to engineer human action by adding a goal centred, fun and gameful element to a non-game system.

- Get involved – gives contact details to the nearest campaign headquarters using geolocation.
- Receive updates – allows signing up for email or text message updates.
- News – shows a selection of campaign related news. Screening allows switching between local and national news, based on geolocation or ZIP code.
- Local events – prompted Google maps mash up showing the local Obama-centered events and promoted integration with the phone’s GPS for driving instructions there. Also prompted to share the events with their local friends via email.
- Media - led to a depository of images and videos related to the campaign.
- Issues – generated a “cheat-sheet” of election issues, broken down by categories such as *Foreign Affairs* or *Energy-Environment*. Inside each category a list of stances and quotes was presented, to give idea on the candidates approach but also to make use during debates with others.



Figure 3: Obama '08 app home screen

We can clearly see that the majority of functions are tied to the users' lived space, their phenomenological relation to places and people around them, as represented via the technical interfaces of their devices. The developers' idea of micro-volunteering resembles the assumptions behind my concept of casual politicking, as it acknowledges the limited resources available for contemporary political active individuals and the need to drive them for action via allowing them to perform a translation of their mundane actions into larger political context. The map in this case serves as a playground-actant that unifies the abstract space of the political contestation with the specific electoral realities of the user and her environment.

Thus we have an app that came into existence by a way of fun social and casual (in terms of time allocation) collaboration. It allows those who use it to organize themselves (independently or through Obama's local headquarters) to participate in the broadening of the network. The people using the app do it of their own volition, contributing themselves as additional nodes to Obama's network and gaining in return perceived benefits of connectedness. Some features, such as the leader-board caller functions, appeal directly to the users' sense of competition, whether among themselves or in the greater context of the presidential race: talk to your friends, as the winning conditions of this race can be quantifiable, and each call matters<sup>24</sup>.

### *Facts on the Ground*

An interesting case, which seems at first to coincide with casual politicking, but eventually fails to do so, is the Americans for Peace Now (APN) iOS app *Facts on the Ground* (FOTG), that monitors the construction and expansion of Jewish settlements and outposts in the west bank.<sup>25</sup> The intended goal of the

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<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note the progress of this leader-board approach towards the 2012 presidential elections. The current campaign offers supporters to create their own customizable fundraising page, further increasing the campaign personalization, and potentially fostering a internal competition in terms of design, operation and success metrics of each page. It remains to be seen whether such distributed approach will be effective in the long run, and calls for an additional research during and after the upcoming elections.

<sup>25</sup> APN is the sister organization of Israeli-based movement which promotes ideology of territorial concessions towards the Palestinians. The history of the settlements is tied heavily to this of the Israeli-Arab conflict (Rowley & Taylor, 2006). For current analysis of the actants in the networks it is suffice to say that "the settlements" are an umbrella term for Israeli settlements beyond the "green line" – the borders of 1967 cease fire line with Jordan and Egypt. They vary greatly in their ideological mark-up, size and location – some are recognized as more radical and nationalistic ("outposts"), erected in the heart of predominately Palestinian territory, while others were built as part of urban sprawls adjustment to the

application is to provide geographic and demographic facts, by showing an objective, mapped representation of the situation. It has some attempts at what I earlier called gameful or juicy interface – procedural process of interaction (layer selection, zooming in) which results in immediate feedback. In fact, it almost seems as the app takes upon itself the *SimCity* game series approach to depicting urban reality, through stripping down the complexities of life and space to the grids and zoning of urban planning. This is not surprising in view of the (digital) ludification of culture, as maps have always been central to games, allowing players to create stories by interacting with mutable (instead of fixed) and transformable maps (Lammes, 2008).

As critical geographers note, maps are not facts but more of propositions or assertions intended to serve the worldview of the mapmaker (Wood, 2010). Therefore, the app is a rhetorical tool, aiming at convincing of certain facts through a juxtaposition of graphic information, in a closed-garden environment of the application (as it does not provide any external links). In this sense, the app succeeds in involving the users in exploring the ebbs and flows of territorial contestation, even if the interface might confuse at times. The issue-centred nature of the app deliberately allows it to focus itself on a certain aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, excusing itself from other facets. This can prove efficient as the settlements are highly disputed and present an easy to rally supporters unaware (or not carrying) for the broader picture and the complex interwoven nature of the claims from both sides.

The app (figure 4) was commissioned and constructed by Alipes CME, a “full-service, digital-media strategy and integration firm” (Alipes CME, n.d.). The app itself is a digital map, presenting data which were gathered by both government and activists<sup>26</sup> (who oppose to some policies of this government), analyzed and overlaid on a map. A US public relations company is charged with producing an iOS application which will convey the data. This is the company’s only commission related to non-US politics (Alipes CME, 2010). The app is based on third party software- Google maps. The communication with the company is done via the NGO’s sister organization, originally focused on fundraising. The

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green line, and are consensually recognized by some as places that will remain under Israeli jurisdiction in any future peace agreement.

<sup>26</sup> Peace Now employs teams of field researchers, who monitor and report on the current state of the settlements. They also use official Israeli records for supplementing their own data (APN, n.d.)

chain of association thus involves political activists, fundraisers and PR people, aiming at presenting geovisualization of politically charged information.



Figure 4: The apps initial interface, and zoomed-in view of Yitzhar settelment, with and without name tag

FOTG is a map-based database of the west bank and the settlements erected on it. It allows viewing the mapped geographical data and viewing population growth for each settlement, and contains no accessible information on shrouding cities and towns, Israeli and Palestinian alike. Functions include pinch-and-zoom browsing of the territory, tapping on settlements for additional info and toggling several layers of data. The developers thus keep strict control over the displayed information. Krygier and Wood (2005) suggest that one of the main principles of spatial arrangement on maps is defining clear boundaries between the different objects. The principle is not observed in the app, as municipal borders (of settlements) routinely mixed with demarcations of military or political zones of control. Additionally, some zones lack proper labelling, and on a higher zoom in level the map and the layers seem not to overlap as they should. For users without proper training and background, the map may be more confusing than clarifying, but **the action of using the app itself** is intuitive which leads to a ludic exploration of the territory from a “god’s” point of view, so familiar for contemporary gamers.

Where the app fails though, is in its ability to kindle action. It is a fun interface to play with and explore APN assertions on the west bank situation, but with no possibility to transfer the knowledge into engagement, FOTG resembles

more of a map editor than an actual game. In video games, a map editor is often a supplemental piece of software provided with the main game, to allow users expand and enrich the game content, using similar tools to those used by the game designers themselves. In some cases, game designers even base the appeal of the game on the content creation supplement, thus ensuring continuous game shelf life without additional expenses (Sotamaa, 2010). In this sense FOTG feels like a map editor without a game to provide this map to. The tech-savvy user, moulded by the mediatization forces of video-games-(and related technology)-heavy existence will understand the language of the application, know how to operate it, explore the spatial implications of the zones projected for them, but will have no further use for it. She cannot input any information, as there is no way to connect it to her subjective experience and it even lacks any geolocation functionality. Unlike the aforementioned Obama '08 app, it cannot connect the user to local headquarters, it does not facilitate information transfer to others and there is no intrinsic motive to use the application, to explore the map and to engage with it, as a score count or statistics of usage.

To sum, the app is an example of attempted casual politicking – allowing the supporters of APN with means to be informed about a specific issue via accessible and flashy interface, but fails to provide continuous engagement with the issue, as well as the motivation do so. Some reasoning behind the failure may come from the top-bottom design approach involving the long chain of associations, instead of the bottom-up volunteer approach that created the Obama app, thus less in-line with present mediatization moulding forces.

### ***SOPA Boycott***

This app was created by two Canadian students, Christopher Thompson and Chris Duranti, in about 20 hours from the inception to the initial version (Gillmor, 2012). SOPA is one of the scary acronyms (together with PIPA and ACTA) that threatened the imagination of web dwellers in the months of February-March 2012. SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) was a US legislation aimed at hardening the line against unlicensed distribution of copyrighted content. The law was widely seen as being promoted by the music, film and game industry via generous lobbying investment, and in response Thompson and Duranti

decided to retaliate with a strike at the source of this lobbying money – the revenue stream of the companies in question.

Boycott SOPA works in a very straightforward and simple way: the user operates any camera-equipped Google Android device to scan a barcode of any product. The app uses an open-source barcode decoding software to compare it to SOPA affiliation database, kept online by the measure’s opponents (Santo, 2012). The app flashes a green check mark and a matching message if the product is unaffiliated with SOPA-supporting company, and a red X if it is. Simply put, it facilitates consumer boycott on products of companies promoting the act (figure 5).

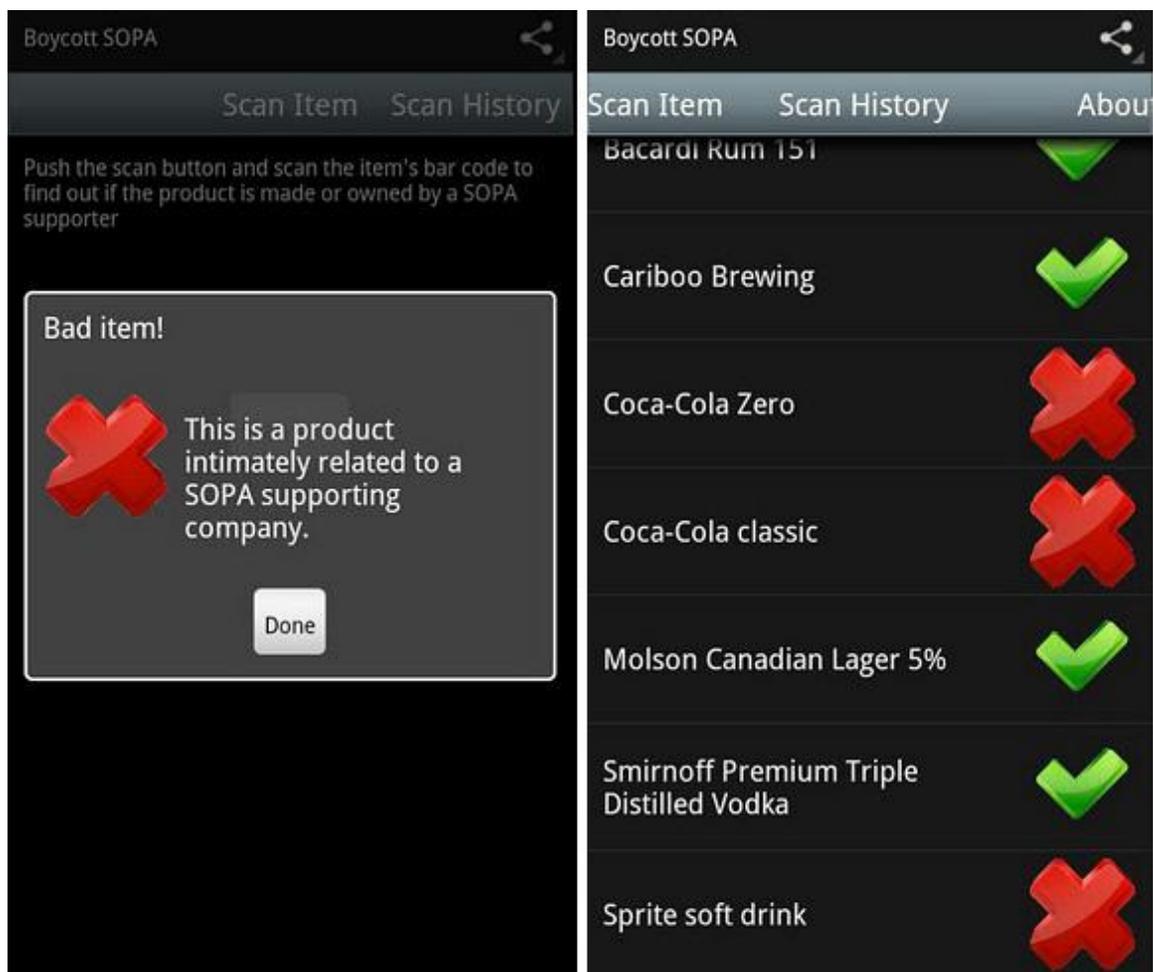


Figure 5: Boycott SOPA after scan and while presenting recent scans

When examining the chain of associations that led to the creation of the app, two key aspects should be noted. First is the open nature of the Android platform which, unlike that of the competitors allows uploading apps to their

application depository (the Marketplace) without prior approval by Google. The app was available in timely fashion for the protest's climax. Second, the collaborative technological nature of the anti-SOPA community proved to be catalyzing factor in the distribution and acceptance of the app. As the Guardian's columnist Dan Gilmor notes: "Ideas are easy. Getting things done is the hard part. Thompson and Duranti have done what a lot of us have only talked about – including a message thread on Reddit where they saw the idea and only built the app when no one else did – and I'm glad to see it" (Gillmor, 2012). The community formulated the idea, some members create the actual app, and it was fast spread (17,000 downloads in the first week) on the network.

Additionally, the users immediately recognize the transformative potential of the app to the field of political consumerism, asking for the feature to manually select which companies to boycott no longer being constrained to those corporations which support SOPA. This follows the realizations of many consumers about the political ramifications of their purchasing habits, and the resulting consolidation of (often younger) consumer who use their buying power to support or punish corporations in accordance with their business practices (Micheletti & Follesdal, 2007; Stolle & Micheletti, 2005). Janelle Ward (2011) suggests that political consumerism occurs on two levels: first the *socially conscious consumer* adjusts her lifestyle choice to reflect on the perceived unjust conduct of certain corporations; then, the *critical citizen-consumer* who through her experience with corporate marketing and branding becomes more aware of the larger political implications, embracing a more traditional political identity. The topic of political consumerism is broad, and just as controversial as the associated "leisure politics". A deep discussion of it is not possible within the scope of this thesis, but I will point out that some principles of casual politicking are evident in this political consumerism- oriented application. Namely those are the prioritization of action and its alignment with the tools available for the individual – shopping habits, free time – and the resulting feeling of self-efficacy vis-à-vis the powers that be.

### ***Visibility***

One trait which unifies all three discussed apps is their compatibility with mundane activities of the user. Indeed, the mobile phone has become such an integral part of the everyday experience, that considering future form of political

communications without including any reference to the device would be a folly. Consequently, the sporadic, less-than-full attention given to the mobile phone should inform also the patterns of its use as an engagement tool.

On the very basic level, all the aforementioned applications promote the realization that action is possible on a routine scale. Your phone is a piece of technology that is always with you, and it gives you the ability to **do** something about the situations you encounter, even if only taking a picture of it. Stephen Coleman (2011) says that visibility is “the weapon of the witness. To see exercise of power is the first step towards holding it to account” (p. 46). Wiesslitz and Ashuri (2011) in their study of the Israeli activist group *Mahsom Watch* propose a new category of citizen online journalism, naming it *moral journalist*. Those are individuals who use modern recording and transition technology to **witness** events that constitute, from their perspective, flawed social reality – in an attempt to change it. A logical continuation of this perspective would suggest that any phone-equipped citizen can become a moral journalist with a press of a button. In this chapter, I have shown that by adding several more buttons and creating certain (ludic) functionalities (both social and technological), the aforementioned citizen may become a more proactive agent of change, something that established political structures will undoubtedly will try to utilize.

## **Conclusions: from Gamepocalypse to Gamocracy**

If there is one aspect that characterizes the process of writing this thesis in retrospective, it is distraction. The plethora of activities provided by my trusted laptop expanded in the past years to include voice and chat communication, multiple kinds of news, streaming video and of course – games. Often, when encountered with an impasse in my argumentation, or rewriting a particularly stubborn paragraph for the third time, I found myself longing for just a quick... something else. As Nicholas Carr (2008) noted before me, my attention span seemed to shrink and I was more likely than before to switch activities. In comparison to the straining, challenging and often tedious process of writing, so many other possibilities were just an alt-tab away. Stronger methods of self control were required; my self-discipline tested each time anew.

This global distraction is what makes the casual politicking perspective possible, welcomed and frightening all at the same time. Those who lament superficial nature of (mostly young) mass audiences' engagement with politics should remember that many more fail to care or engage with it altogether. Casual politicking is a way to examine how those with little time and effort are enlisted to join the ranks and support an issue they find dear to their heart, as how politicians bridge the widening representational gap with dwindling followers. Some may criticize the practices behind casual politicking and some may praise them. My goal here however was to present the topic outside of normative debate: we move towards these practices whether we want to or not, and it is our duty as scholars, researchers, activists and citizens to understand them.

I started off by suggesting that the rising pervasive medium of video games, coupled with the process of mediatization in multiple social spheres calls for a new approach for political communication. This approach I find in play and game studies, discipline dedicated to exploring the ludic aspects of life. Answering to Bennett and Iyengar's call for new paradigms in communication research I suggest that by looking at the engagement patterns and media practices related to digital games – and causal games in particular – we can begin to understand future political actors-networks.

In my second chapter I have presented the bulk of my argument, which I call casual politicking. Building on Juul's characteristics of the causal game, I outline four parallel modes of engagement with politics. Those are reliance on high-affordance and feedback ICT platforms, focus on issue-networks rather than ideologies, perpetual reworking of issues and ideas – minimizing the cost of each particular victory or loss and the social connection underlining it all and creating playful ways to engage with political content.

In the second part of the thesis I used Actor-Network tracing to present the case studies that support my hypothesis. In chapter three I showed how Anonymous serves as a method for agenda-setting, framing and providing action tools for those lacking technological and/or political background. The fourth chapter examined three smart phone applications which attempted to turn the user into a highly mobile and versatile node of burst-like political conduct, noting how their varying degree of success based on the principles outlined before.

The mediatization process of digital games on multiple platforms will lead to a growing numbers of people to whom digital games are as natural media environment as television was in the past decades. The change will be initially felt the most in western liberal countries, where the need to take on those audiences will lead to new modes of civic engagement. **Politicians, parties and decision makers will cater to the voter not only by appealing to his or her greater ideologies and beliefs, but by providing interfaces for quick engagement with current issues, allowing for negotiation of public needs in a creative, multi-participatory ways.** These conceptual modes of governance resonate with Dean's *neodemocracies* – centered around conflict and contestation in digital space – or Latour's *dingpolitik* – focusing on the issues in need of resolution, rather than on the way to achieve representation. I however would like to name them *gamemocracy*, since the central modus operandi of actors engaging in this form of governance are playful, while the (digital) interfaces manifesting it will resemble contemporary games rather than any other modern-day media. In my thesis I hoped to lay down the theoretical-examinational construction which will allow a further exploration of gamocracy and its attributes.

The ludic element has been present throughout the entire thesis, altering between embedded cultural form and explicit artefacts and phenomena. In the annual Game Developers Conference of 2010, game designer Jesse Schell gave a talk in which he outlined his vision of this continuous process of ludification (and especially gamification) of society. It is not so farfetched, he argued, that the future will feature gameful elements **everywhere**: in our taxes, health insurance, cars, social interaction and so on. He calls it the “gamepocalypse”, a term which registers the concern he has for this state of affairs, although both he and some of his supporters noted the positive opportunities of this situation. This future is however uncertain, with others pointing out the backlash of people from the gameful systems, and the hyped nature of the gamification field, which may subdue the enthusiasm for implementing such design mechanisms in additional societal systems.

While gamepocalypse may be a contested vision, gamocracy is quite certainly upon us. It will not necessarily happen in the way Schell envisions it, with leader boards for best performing politicians, graphic interfaces through which parliament members could battle opposing factions or “political experience points” with which you could “level up” for voting or participating in referenda (although those are some interesting experiments). It will however, prioritize the aforementioned modes of engagement so characteristic for games and their audience: playfulness, immediacy, casual and burst-like activity. This will result in a need for a new research framework from cultural studies and humanities to supplement traditional tools of communications. Such framework will focus on the citizen not only as a sender or receiver of information, but as a subject embedded in a ludic culture whose motives in the political realm may rely on the notions of fun and play no less than on ideological rational choice.

There is a fine tradition in multiplayer digital gaming. Whether one wins or loses it is traditional to end the game with a short “gg” prior to departure from the shared space. It is a courtesy rule, observed in casual servers as well as on professional tournaments where pro e-sports player combat over fame and fortune. It stands for “good game”, and it is the epitome of the positive in game culture: winning or losing, we’re all here to play, to learn, to relax and to challenge ourselves. As gamocracy mark its rise in the global political landscape

via millions engaged in different forms of casual politicking, only thing left to ask for is a good game.

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