

Imepilt's Newsgames as an Art Practice and Novel Form of Journalism

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The article studies the Estonian cross-media company Imepilt and its newsgames in both the Estonian and global contexts, and uses Imepilt's games as a starting point for discussing the present state of newsgames: their strengths and weaknesses, potentials and pitfalls. The case study compares the designers' experience in designing newsgames with some of the rhetoric that was used in discussing newsgames in earlier theoretical texts, and points out some inconsistencies and differences in newsgames' theory and practice. The genre of newsgames is also placed in a historical context and compared with earlier media, such as editorial cartoons.

Introduction

Video games have been used to simulate and comment on both fictional and real political and social situations for decades. In the course of this practice, mere fiction has occasionally had some real-life consequences. In Finland during the late Cold War era, in 1985, for example, the video game *Raid over Moscow* (Access Software, 1984), which described an imaginary nuclear conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States of America, incited a real diplomatic scandal when the Soviet Union's representatives filed a diplomatic protest charging anti-Soviet content in Finnish media.¹ The earliest example of a video game that, at least according to some definitions, could be labelled with the contemporary title 'newsgame' – *Save the Whales* (Atari) – described an actual environmental issue by making the player protect virtual whales from nets, harpoons and radioactive waste. It was also designed in the 1980s, but was not released until 2002.²

1 T. Pasanen, *Hyökkäys Moskovaan! – Tapaus Raid over Moscow Suomen ja Neuvostoliiton välisessä ulkopoliitikassa 1980-luvulla*. – Pelitutkimuksen vuosikirja: suomalaisen pelitutkimuksen julkaisu 2011. Tampere: Tampereen yliopisto, 2011, pp. 1–11.

2 I. Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007, pp. 89–90.

The early 2000s saw an increase in video games that addressed timely real-world events and issues. The major factor behind this trend was technological development: the Macromedia Flash and Shockwave multi-media platforms, which were created at the end of the 1990s, enabled designers to add animation and interaction on web sites and made the creation and distribution of simple browser-based web games a high-speed and low-cost process. One of the pioneers in the field was the creator of the term 'newsgame', the video game designer and theoretician Gonzalo Frasca (Powerful Robot Games), whose games about the war on terror – *September 12th* (2003) and *Madrid* (2004), which was created in 48 hours to commemorate the victims of the Madrid train bombing – have now become newsgame classics.

In Estonia, web games that focus on topical issues have a surprisingly long tradition. The earliest currently known game inspired by Estonian news of the day, *Appointing the Mayor* (*Suur meeriks löömine*), was released in 2000 by an anonymous author: it depicts two Estonian politicians, Edgar Savisaar and Jüri Mõis, fighting for the office of the Mayor of Tallinn (fig. 1).

Although the majority of anonymous newsgames in Estonia seem to address political matters or at least feature an image of a politician in a game, such as *Down with Savisaar!* (*Maha Savisaar!*, 2007)³, *Ansip, Stupid Chicken* (*Ansip, loll kana*)⁴ and *Ansip's Seed Determinant* (*Ansipi seemnemääraja*, 2012), some recent games have commented on lighter issues as well. The summer of 2012, for example, saw the release of the newsgame *Hussburger*⁵, which was inspired by a leaked internal e-mail of the Finnish fast-food chain Hesburger that warned its employees about worms in salads and instructed them to 'remove these foreign objects'⁶. The game *Hussburger* asks its player, 'the employee of the month', to pick as many worms as possible from a salad in 30 seconds. The logo in the background of the game is interchangeable to the logo of the Hesburger hamburger chain (fig. 2).

In 2011, Imepilt was founded by two Estonian freelance artists, Magnus Vulp and Almondi Esco⁷, for the purpose of 'introducing games as a new form of journalism'⁸. By the time of the writing of this article⁹, Imepilt's designers had created ten newsgames that all tackle current social and political issues; one of them – *Angry Kremilins* (2012), a parody of the *Angry Birds* game (Rovio Entertainment, 2009) that protests the sentencing of the Russian punk band *Pussy Riot* – has also attracted international attention.

What makes Magnus Vulp and Almondi Esco different from earlier newsgame designers in Estonia is that they have an agenda, they have been consistent in their approach, unlike previous anonymous newsgame designers, the members

3 The politician Edgar Savisaar (b. 1950) is the chairman of the Estonian Centre Party. He has served as the acting Prime Minister of Estonia, Minister of the Interior, Minister of Economic Affairs and Communications, and the mayor of Tallinn, the capital of Estonia.

4 The politician Andrus Ansip (b. 1956) is the chairman of the Estonian Reform Party. He has served as Prime Minister of Estonia 2005–2014.

5 *Uss* – an Estonian word meaning 'worm' or 'snake'.

6 L. Metsküla, *Hesburgeri salatis leidub ussikesi?* – Õhtuleht 24 July 2012.

7 The name Almondi Esco is a pseudonym of Sten-Aleks Pihlak. However, because all of Pihlak's creative work has been released under the alias, he will be referred to as Almondi Esco in the article.

8 <http://www.imepilt.com/#about> (accessed 20 March 2014).

9 The summer of 2013.

of Imepilt are reachable – they can be contacted through their web site – and their games’ artistic quality is superior to earlier Estonian newsgames that have popped up on the Internet every now and then. Magnus Vulp also has a certain theoretical preparation: he used his three games (*Alpha-Clerk*, *Talent at Home* and *Demagogue*) to defend his master’s thesis ‘Procedural Rhetoric in Art: Timely Games as Socially and Politically Engaged Art Practice’¹⁰ in the Estonian Academy of Arts in spring 2012.

The main research question of this article is: what can the story of the Estonian cross-media company Imepilt and the experiences of its designers tell us about the current state of newsgames, particularly in Estonia, but also on a larger scale? How do Imepilt’s experiences compare to experiences of other newsgame designers around the world? The other questions that accompany the main question are: what are the strengths, weaknesses, challenges and potentials of newsgames? What do game designers think can be achieved with newsgames and can those things actually be achieved? What is the relationship between newsgame theory and practice: do they support each other or are there discrepancies? As this article is the first comprehensive look at the company Imepilt, it also attempts to fill a small gap in the Estonian video game industry’s history.

The study is limited to one company, Imepilt, within a certain time frame: from the founding of the company in 2011 till now. It also focuses on a certain geographical location, as the company is based in Estonia and run by two Estonian designers. However, newsgames are distributed over the Internet, and the Internet was not designed to recognise national boundaries (even if, especially in legal matters, these boundaries still exist in a way). Imepilt has sought cooperation with both Estonian and international media outlets and has designed games that deal with current events in Estonia, as well as with international news. Its international reach is curiously illustrated by the fact that when Imepilt’s web game *Angry Kremfins* started to spread online and gain attention, the designers gave eight interviews (one to the international news agency Reuters, for example), but the only longer article that has ever been written about the company in the Estonian media was published in *Äripäev* (*Business Day*), which is the only Estonian newspaper that has cooperated with Imepilt so far. Furthermore, the published article clearly served (at least partly) the newspaper’s self-promotional purposes: the title of the article is ‘The News about Estonian Video Game Spread around the World by *Business Day*’.¹¹

One reason that Imepilt can be considered noteworthy is because companies that have specialised in creating newsgames are still quite rare, even on a global scale. The most well-known newsgames companies so far are Gonzalo Frasca’s *Powerful Robot Games*, Ian Bogost’s *Persuasive Games* and, according to some opinions, Paolo Pedercini’s company *Molleindustria*. Despite *Molleindustria*’s indisputable position on the scene of serious games, I would define it as an ‘activist games’ company, because its main focus is not reflecting on news, but opposing mainstream

10 M. Vulp, *Protseduurne retoorika kunstis: päevakajalised mängud kui sotsiaalsete ja poliitiliste protsessidega suhestuv kunstipraktika*. Master’s Thesis, Department of New Media of the Estonian Academy of Arts. Tallinn, 2012.

11 I. Kald, *Uudis eestlaste arvutimängust levis Äripäevast üle maailma*. – *Äripäev* 11 September 2012.

ideologies, corporations etc. There are already a fair number of news outlets that have experimented with newsgames, e.g. *Wired* magazine, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, CNN and *El País*. However, newsgames still do not enjoy an established position in the news media. The ongoing research project 'The Impact of Gamification on Journalism' in Jyväskylä University, which is studying newsgames of the Nordic countries, has so far found only a few games in the whole region (in Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland).¹² Imepilt's two designers have produced an even larger number of games, without a budget, in two years' time.

Theory and methodology

This study is mainly descriptive as opposed to prescriptive: it is knowledge-producing and aims to understand the nature of the phenomenon instead of improving its performance.¹³ The chosen qualitative descriptive approach of the article is a case study, 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not really clear.'¹⁴ Therefore, it should be a suitable approach for an article that aims to study a currently active Estonian cross-media company in the global context of newsgames. As it is recommended to use multiple sources of evidence in case studies¹⁵, the data for the research was collected from documents (newspaper articles etc.), in-depth semi-structured interviews where, occasionally, the interviewee was also asked to 'propose ... his own insights into certain occurrences'¹⁶ (the key informants were Imepilt's designers Magnus Vulp and Almondi Esco), and analytical game playing: 'utilitarian playing [that] involves making notes and relating games to wider contexts of historical, conceptual and social ranges of thought that constitute game studies and game cultures in their reflexive form.'¹⁷ The article also contains a critical literature review. Data from newsgames, interviews and documents is compared with previous scholarly writings about newsgames. The aim of this comparison is to evaluate some theoretical statements' validity in practice and to find out if the practical experiences of Imepilt's designers form an isolated, a 'specifically Estonian', case or correlate with the experiences of their colleagues in other countries.

The theories that are referred to and used in the article are Jay David Bolter's and Richard Grusin's remediation theory, and Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric.

12 M. Siitonen, J. Varsaluoma, I'm so going to nuke Helsinki - Newsgames in the Nordic Media Landscape. - Proceedings of DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies, lmc.gatech.edu/~cpearce3/DiGRA13/papers/paper_322.pdf (accessed 20 March 2014).

13 S. T. March, G. F. Smith, Design and Natural Science Research on Information Technology. - Decision Support Systems 1995, vol. 15 (4), pp. 251-266.

14 R. K. Yin, Case Study Research: Design and Methods. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2009, p. 18.

15 R. K. Yin, Case Study Research, p. 41.

16 R. K. Yin, Case Study Research, p. 107.

17 F. Mäyrä, An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture. London: Sage, 2008, p. 165.

Newsgames

Newsgames form just one genre in a diverse cluster of ‘serious games’: games whose ‘chief mission is not entertainment’.¹⁸ Serious games include, among others, (video) games designed for teaching and learning, training, advertising, campaigning and spreading political propaganda. There have been several attempts to find the most accurate definition for ‘newsgames’, but in this article I have chosen to rely on Ian Bogost’s, Simon Ferrari’s and Bobby Schweizer’s definition of newsgames as ‘a broad body of work produced at the intersection of video games and journalism.’¹⁹ This description is inclusive rather than exclusive and, as we will see later in the article, acknowledges different characteristics, types and purposes of newsgames. However, even though newsgames form a separate category within serious video games, they may share common features with ‘activist games’: games that aim to draw people’s attention to social issues or humanitarian causes and, because the subject of a newsgame can often be political, they may also be approached as a sub-category of ‘political video games’. However, as Miguel Sicart has put it: ‘Newsgames are a type of political games that do not have as the main goal to transmit a political idea, but to simulate certain aspects of news as relevant for an intended audience. That simulation can be political, but does not need to be.’²⁰

Especially in the early days of newsgaming, the word that was often used to explain the games to wider audience was ‘caricature’ (or ‘cartoon’ in the U.S. tradition). Gonzalo Frasca has described his games as ‘kind of a half-breed between political cartoons and games’.²¹ His webpage newsgaming.com introduces newsgames with the phrase: ‘simulation meets political cartoons’.²² The choice of the word is not random. In his PhD dissertation *Play the Message: Play, Game, and Videogame Rhetoric*, Frasca describes the design process of the election video game *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game*, which he designed with Ian Bogost for the U.S. presidential primary campaign in 2003:

Following the remediation theory developed by Bolter and Grusin ..., we believed that a new game genre should borrow from previously existing genres that the audience was already familiar with. This is why the look of the Dean game tried to emulate the visual identity of the U.S. political cartoon tradition. [...] The game’s visual aspect was consciously created in order to evoke something else from the player’s cultural knowledge.²³

18 B. Sawyer, The ‘Serious Games’ Landscape. Paper presented at the Instructional & Research Technology Symposium for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Camden, USA, 21 March 2007

19 I. Bogost, S. Ferrari, B. Schweizer, *Newsgames: Journalism at Play*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010, p. 6.

20 M. Sicart, *Newsgames: Theory and Design*. – Entertainment Computing – ICEC 2008. Eds. S. M. Stevens, S. J. Saldamarco. Berlin: Springer, 2008, p. 29.

21 C. Boyd, *Games Blur News and Entertainment*. – <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/3653294.stm> (accessed 28 August 2013).

22 [newsgaming.com](http://www.newsgaming.com/). – <http://www.newsgaming.com/> (accessed 28 August 2013).

23 G. Frasca, *Play the Message: Play, Game, and Videogame Rhetoric*. PhD Dissertation, IT University of Copenhagen. Copenhagen, 2007, p. 109.

According to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, the course of history has shown that all media have always refashioned, i.e. 'remediated', earlier forms of media, and that the same process is happening in the era of digital technologies, which further aims to 'improve' old media: 'New media are doing exactly what their predecessors have done: presenting themselves as refashioned and improved versions of other media; digital visual media can best be understood through the ways in which they honor, rival, and revise linear-perspective painting, photography, film, television, and print.'²⁴

However, over the course of time – after the first phase of defining newsgames as 'remediated political cartoons' – the emphasis of describing newsgames shifted from pointing out the similarities with previous media to emphasising the differences. A good example of this is the first chapter of Bogost's, Ferrari's and Schweizer's book *Newsgames* (2010), which stresses that, unlike print articles, newsgames make people experience the story: 'Unlike stories written for newsprint or programs edited for television, video games are computer software rather than a digitized form of earlier media. Games display text, images, sounds, and video, but they also do much more: *games simulate how things work* by constructing models that people can interact with, a capacity Bogost has given the name *procedural rhetoric*. This is a type of experience irreducible to any other, earlier medium.'²⁵

Despite this shift of emphasis in some recent texts, moving from the latest U.S. newsgame theory to the latest Estonian newsgame practice reveals that the idea of defining newsgame through an earlier, familiar medium still has an appeal. When, in December 2011, Imepilt had the opportunity to publish their game *Clerk's Christmas* (*Riigiametniku jõulud*) in the online version of the newspaper *Äripäev* (*Business Day*)²⁶, they introduced it as an 'interactive caricature'²⁷. The reasons behind Imepilt's choice of terminology are complex and will be looked at more closely later on.

From a journalistic point of view, the term 'newsgame' is actually rather inaccurate in describing Gonzalo Frasca's or Imepilt's games, because traditionally the normative content of news has been 'objective information about issues of public importance'.²⁸ Frasca's games, on the contrary, are meant to be seen as 'half-breeds between political cartoons and games' or, in Bogost's terms, playable editorial cartoons.²⁹ This means that, similarly to cartoons in newspapers, these games 'contain the editorial stance of their authors';³⁰ they are opinionated or even attempt to persuade a player, and are therefore not objective, as news should be.

24 J. D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000, pp. 14–15.

25 I. Bogost, S. Ferrari, B. Schweizer, *Newsgames*, pp. 5–6.

26 *Äripäev* (*Business Day*) is a newspaper that specialises in business-related content. It was founded in 1989 and is owned by the Swedish media group Bonnier. The paper is published five times a week. In recent years, its circulation figures have been between 10,000 and 15,000.

27 Interaktiivne karikatuur: Riigiametniku jõulud. – *Äripäev* 22 December 2011.

28 B. McNair, *News and Journalism in the UK*. London, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 68.

29 Ian Bogost Teams with Students for his Latest Book, *Newsgames*. Georgia Institute of Technology, Newswise. – <http://digitallounge.gatech.edu/gaming/index.html?nid=62215> (accessed 19 October 2010).

30 M. Mateas, M. Treanor, *Newsgames: Procedural Rhetoric meets Political Cartoons*. – *Proceedings of DiGRA* 2009, <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09300.09505.pdf> (accessed 20 March 2014).

There are other problems and controversies. If newsgames deal with the news, does that mean that they should also be as disposable as yesterday's newspaper? According to Miguel Sicart, who proposes a normative view of the genre, ephemerality is one of the main characteristics of newsgames. He writes: 'Newsgames are designed to accompany a specific piece of news. This implies that newsgames do not have the intention of surviving in the collective memory for a long time, nor do they have a replayability requirement. Newsgames illustrate and comment on the news, and are as perishable as the news itself.'³¹ Stressing this (assumed) quality of newsgames, he goes as far as to claim that Frasca's iconic *September 12th* is not a newsgame at all, because it covers a 'general political topic' – the war on terror – instead of a single news piece.³² Even though I agree that many newsgames are ephemeral and perishable, I fail to see why Sicart wishes to exclude from the genre games that have resisted the passage of time, i.e. why should ephemerality be an inevitable quality of a newsgame? If Gonzalo Frasca's games are approached as a modern interactive 'remediated' form of editorial cartoons, it may be possible to find some useful parallels to his games in the history of political caricature.

In the Estonian context, for example, it would be fair to say that the large majority of editorial cartoons that have appeared in Estonian newspapers have indeed vanished from people's memories into the depths of time. However, not all historical caricatures and caricaturists have shared the same fate. The best example of a not-to-be-forgotten Estonian caricaturist is possibly Vello Agori, alias Gori (1894–1944), whose sharp satire on politicians, the *nouveaux riches* and social inequality in the 1920s and 1930s speaks to today's audience quite the same way as to Gori's contemporaries (fig. 3). The proof of that assertion is the fact that nowadays Gori's caricatures are not only used as illustrative material for history lessons, but are also occasionally reprinted in Estonian news media.³³ Interestingly, there does not seem to be any contradiction between Gori's work's general timelessness and its timeliness during the period between the two World Wars, when his caricatures were shown in exhibitions all around Europe.

Compared to Miguel Sicart, the authors of the book *Newsgames* have different views on the timeliness of newsgames. Instead of calling for a 'more focused approach' (i.e. a more exclusive approach) to defining newsgames, they have divided the 'broad body of work ... at the intersection of video games and journalism' into smaller categories. Their first category, 'current event games', includes the subcategories 'editorial', 'tabloid' and 'reportage' games. According to their classification, current event games are '...short, bite-sized works, usually embedded in Web sites, used to convey small bits of news information or opinion. They are the newsgame equivalent of an article or column.'³⁴ 'Editorial games are current event games with an argument or those that attempt to persuade their players in some way'; 'Tabloid

31 M. Sicart, *Newsgames*, p. 28.

32 M. Sicart, *Newsgames*, p. 28.

33 R. Ubakivi, Eesti vajab kontraeliiti. – Eesti Ekspress 7 February 2011; Ü. Vooglaid, Poliitiline tegevus eeldab teadmisi, oskusi ja kogemusi. – Kultuur ja Elu 2010, no. 1, pp. 14–19; M. Väljataga, Keda solvab Kulka? – Eesti Ekspress. Areen 7 August 2008.

34 I. Bogost, S. Ferrari, B. Schweizer, *Newsgames*, p. 13.

games are playable versions of soft news – particularly celebrity, sports, or political gossip; and reportage games ‘strive to emulate factual reporting, producing the video game version of a written article or televised segment’.³⁵ Additionally, they introduce the categories of ‘infographic’, ‘documentary’, ‘puzzle’, ‘literacy’ and ‘community’ newsgames, but because Imepilt’s games fall mainly into the first category, I am going to focus primarily on current event and editorial newsgames in this article.

This categorisation places Gonzalo Frasca’s *September 12th* in the group of ‘editorial games’, despite the fact that it comments on the war on terror, ‘a general political topic’. Regarding the issue of timeliness, the authors refer to Michael Mateas and Mike Treanor, who have stated: ‘We contend that the ephemerality of a newsgame is a matter of content and not a matter of form. [...] However, like all good political cartoons that are tacked to cubicle walls, the statement of *September 12th* has lasting significance that will maintain its meaning as long as the issue (its content) is still relevant to people’s lives.’³⁶ The ‘global war on terrorism’, which inspired *September 12th*, has not ended, nor has Frasca’s game’s underlying message, ‘violence only begets more violence’, which will be discussed below, lost its relevance. It seems fair to suggest that in the same way that selected editorial cartoons may speak to universal audiences with timeless messages, so can editorial games. Interestingly, I have not come across many cases where someone has suggested looking at newsgames from the perspective of art as embodying both, the sense of timelessness and the temporal, is often a characteristic quality of artworks.³⁷

Procedural rhetoric

The book *Newsgames* uses Gonzalo Frasca’s game *September 12th* as an example to explain the concept of procedural rhetoric. Both the concept and the game are important in Imepilt’s case, because they have both played a role in the company’s design process. Magnus Vulp wrote about procedural rhetoric in his master’s thesis *Procedural Rhetoric in Art: Timely Games as Socially and Politically Engaged Art Practice* (2012), where he also described the game *September 12th*. In an interview, Almondi Esco claimed that there was ‘a whole range of things that influence and inspire me’, but the only game he specifically named as a role model was *September 12th*: ‘an awe-inspiring example of the possibilities of hiding the message in a game engine’.³⁸

September 12th was the first game of the Uruguayan-based game studio *Powerful Robot Games* (2002–2012), which was run by Gonzalo Frasca. The name of the game invokes the attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. The game was

35 I. Bogost, S. Ferrari, B. Schweizer, *Newsgames*, pp. 15–16.

36 M. Mateas, M. Treanor, *Newsgames*.

37 One such case is the game *First Person Victim*, which ‘uses interactive drama and tragedy to create awareness about the consequences of war’ (A. Whitacre, *First Person Victim*. MIT News, <http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2011/first-person-victim.html> (accessed 21 October 2013)).

38 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013. Original Estonian language e-mails are in the possession of the author.

released some months after the start of the Iraq War in 2003, and therefore gained considerable attention in media and scholarly circles.

September 12th begins with instructions that state: ‘This is not a game. You can’t win and you can’t lose. This is a simulation. It has no ending. It has already begun. The rules are deadly simple. You can shoot. Or not. This is a simple model you can use to explore some aspects of the war on terror.’³⁹ The game simulates a missile attack on an anonymous Middle Eastern village. At first glance, it resembles a regular strategy or action video game that encourages the player to shoot at targets. In this case, the targets appear to be terrorists who, clad in black and holding weapons, stand out from the crowd of civilians. The assignment seems to be simple and straightforward. However, there is a delay between the mouse click that ‘fires’ the missile and the time when the missile actually reaches the village, so that when it finally hits the ground, it blows up buildings and random passers-by instead of the initially targeted terrorist. Citizens who pass the site of destruction cry, mourn the dead and turn into terrorists themselves. If a player chooses to continue the game, ‘collateral damage’ will destroy the village in few minutes and its ruins will be crawling with terrorists. As said in *Newsgames*: ‘The only way to win [the game] is not to play it in the first place. [...] It is an argument against “tactical” missile strikes, conveyed in game form. And its opinion is clear: terrorism cannot be attacked surgically, and violence begets more violence.’⁴⁰

According to Ian Bogost, computational processes, especially video games, are unique among other media as they do not merely deliver rhetoric through visual images or text but persuade the user through rule-based representations and interactions. In his theory, this form of persuasion is called ‘procedural rhetoric’. He defines rhetoric as ‘the study of persuasive expression’⁴¹ and procedurality as ‘a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes’. Procedural rhetoric is, therefore ‘a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created’.⁴² The fact that video games are intricate rule-governed systems makes them suitable for representing and simulating other complex systems: ‘only procedural systems like computer software actually represent process with process’.⁴³ However, while procedural systems are able to simulate how things work, they can also ‘make claims about how things *don’t* work’.⁴⁴ In *September 12th*, ‘the rules depict the impossibility of achieving a goal given the tools provided’.⁴⁵ Bogost has named this unwinnable game condition the ‘rhetoric of failure’. As games are usually expected to be winnable, the rhetoric of failure can be used to produce a crisis in the player that should lead her ‘to subjective insights’⁴⁶ or closer to the intended procedural message of the game.

39 *September 12th*. newsgaming.com, <http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm> (accessed 30 August 2013).

40 I. Bogost, S. Ferrari, B. Schweizer, *Newsgames*, p. 11.

41 I. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, p. viii.

42 I. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, pp. 2–3.

43 I. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, p. 14.

44 I. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, p. 85.

45 I. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, p. 88.

46 I. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, pp. 85–87.

Bogost's theory's focus on game rules and lesser attention on, or even occasional downplaying of, the importance of the game's representative layer and the role of the player have led to criticism.⁴⁷ In this article, Imepilt's games are mainly analysed in terms of procedural rhetoric, but their visual and textual rhetoric will be dealt with as well.

Imepilt

Imepilt (the name of the company could be translated into English as 'Miracle Picture') started out solely as a newsgames-creating company, but has recently changed its profile. Now it introduces itself as a 'crossmedia innovation company founded by two "inventorholics" in an attempt to cope with their stubborn desire to utilize every form of artistic expression known to man'.⁴⁸ Besides newsgames, it also produces web series: short videos that comment on current news and political events through sketch drawings and simultaneous voice-overs. One of their web series, *Business Day's Story-Telling Pencil* ('Äripäeva jutupliiats'), was commissioned by the financial newspaper *Äripäev*.

The two-man company was born out of a friendship (Magnus Vulp and Almondi Esco went to the same school as children), Vulp's failed attempt to create an educational mathematics game, which did not get funding but gave Esco the idea of producing video games for the first time ('before that ... I had not played a video game for over ten years'⁴⁹), and Vulp's master's thesis supervisor Oliver Laas's suggestion that, instead of a maths video game, Vulp could try his hand at games with social content.⁵⁰ The proposal also resonated with Esco, who had worked in *Äripäev* as a journalist and cross-media projects developer, was 'used to the thought of combining news portals with new media', and was captivated by the idea of 'topical games'.⁵¹

When designing a newsgame, the two 'inventorholics' brainstorm the idea of the new game together. Subsequently, Magnus Vulp works with the game's engine, animation and sound by using game development programmes, such as GameMaker. Almondi Esco writes the script of the game, is responsible for the marketing, and acts as the CEO of the company. Neither of the designers really knows how to programme (Magnus Vulp: 'I am not a programmer. I am interested in the end result, not in the beauty of the code'⁵²), which is a problem for a 'zero budget'⁵³ company, because it means that its designers occasionally need to find resources to hire a programmer in order to complete their games. In Vulp's words, he 'has earned

47 M. Sicart, *Against Procedurality*. - *Game Studies* 2001, vol. 11 (3), http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap (accessed 30 March 2014).

48 Imepilt, <http://imepilt.com/#about> (accessed 30 August 2013).

49 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

50 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

51 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

52 Interview with Magnus Vulp, 3 May 2013. The transcript of the Estonian-language interview is in the possession of the author.

53 Interview with Magnus Vulp, 3 May 2013.

200 Euros with his games in the last two years, but spent 1500 Euros on them'.⁵⁴ According to Vulp, the company does not have a grand strategy – they do things that they enjoy and find interesting – but from the very beginning ‘there was an idea to earn money with [the product]’.⁵⁵ While initially Imepilt’s designers seemed to concentrate more on the Estonian market, now they have become decisively more internationally oriented.

Imepilt’s newsgames

I would divide the web games that have been published on Imepilt’s website into three groups. The categorisation is partly chronological and partly thematic. Also, there are other ways of categorisation.

1. The first games on Imepilt’s website, focusing on Estonian current events: *Clerk’s Christmas* (Riigiametniku jõulud), *Langinator* (Langinaator), and *Delicious Building Lot aka Fight for EAA* (Magus krundike ehk võitlus EKA eest).
2. Games for Magnus Vulp’s master’s thesis: *Alpha Clerk* (Alfaametnik), *Talent at Home* (Talendid kodus), and *Demagogue* (Demagoog).
3. The latest games, attempts at international breakthrough: *Angry Kremllins* (Vihased kremlistid), *Estonian (aff)Air* (Eesti (t)Õhk), *The Assangenist*, and *Whac-A-Kim*.

Imepilt’s newsgames were presented to the public for the first time in December 2011, when ‘the interactive caricature’ *Clerk’s Christmas* was published in *Äripäev*’s online version, together with a short introduction on the game’s topic. The game is meant to illustrate the reckless spending of the government’s budget surplus at the end of the fiscal year. The player has a limited time to select between different, mostly ridiculous money-spending possibilities (‘in-service training in Hawaii’ etc.). The game is unwinnable, i.e. an example of the ‘rhetoric of failure’, and ends with the statement: ‘Because you were not able to spend the budget, there will be budget cuts and no money left to pay your salary.’ The game can be classified as an ‘editorial game’. It is not designed ‘to accompany a specific piece of news’, but does aim to ‘participate in the public debate’⁵⁶ and ‘convey an opinion’:⁵⁷ a budget surplus is spent on trivialities. Even though *Clerk’s Christmas* cannot be connected to a particular news story, the game’s release was still appropriately timed, because it was published at the end of the year, when the subject of the game was most topical (fig. 4).

Langinator and *Delicious Building Lot* are games that are torn straight from the headlines. *Langinator* is a reaction to the opinion of Rein Lang, the Estonian Minister of Culture (2011–2013), that Estonian libraries should not use state and taxpayer money on ‘distributing mass culture’. His example of mass culture was the

54 Interview with Magnus Vulp, 3 May 2013.

55 Interview with Magnus Vulp, 3 May 2013.

56 M. Sicart, *Newsgames*, p. 27–28.

57 I. Bogost, S. Ferrari, B. Schweizer, *Newsgames*, p. 6.



1.

A screenshot of earliest known web game about current events in Estonia, *Appointing the Mayor* (2000). The building at the back is Tallinn's Town Hall.

Varasem teadaolev Eestis ilmunud videomäng päevakajalistest sündmustest „Meeriks löömine” (2000) kujutab Tallinna linnaapeakandidaatide Edgar Savisaare ja Jüri Mõisa vahelist võitlust.



2.

A screenshot of the newsgame *Hussburger* (2012) - a reaction to the news about worms in Hesburger's salads. The player is given 30 seconds to remove the worms and put them in a paper bag that reads 'children's meal'.

Anonüümsete autorite mäng „Hussburger” (2012) loodi pärast seda, kui meedias levis uudis Hesburgeri salatitest leitud ussikestest. Mängijal on ussikeste salatist eemaldamiseks aega 30 sekundit.



3.

The meaning of Gori's caricature from the first half of the 20th century, *The Two Faces of Democracy*, should be apparent to anyone who is familiar with contemporary class differences and social inequality. The text under the picture reads '...and I cannot even buy acetic acid.'

Art Museum of Estonia, G 22463.

Gori 20. sajandi algusest pärit karikatuur „Demokraatia kaks palet” peaks kõnetama ka praegust klassivahede ja sotsiaalse ebavõrduisega kokkupuutunud publikut.

Eesti Kunstimuuseum, G 22463.



Clerk's Christmas. The player needs to choose which applicant will get the money. The amount of money that needs spending can be seen at the lower left corner of the screen. The partially visible portrait on the wall depicts President of Estonia Toomas Hendrik Ilves (2006-...) whose trademark bow tie is easily recognisable.

Mängija ülesandeks on otsustada, millise rahataotleja soov täita. Kulutamist vajava raha summat näeb ekraani vasemas nurgas. Kuigi seal on portree on osaliselt „kaadrist väljas”, on selge, et see kujutab oma kaubamärki – kikkilipsu – kandvat President Toomas Hendrik Ilvest.



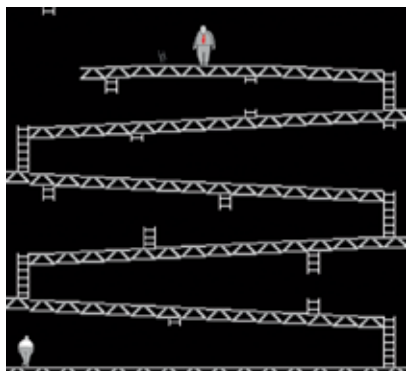
Langinator (on the left) and *Delicious Building Lot* (on the right) are depicting well known public figures Rein Lang and Signe Kivi who regularly appear in the news media.

„Langinaator” (vasakul) ja „Magus krundike” (paremal) kujutavad tuntud avaliku elu tegelasi, kelle tegemisi meedia sageli kajastab.



Talent at Home (on the left) and *Alpha Clerk* (on the right) simulate state's strategies of keeping its people from leaving the country and competition for power in public sector in a somewhat satirical manner.

„Talendid kodus” (vasakul) ja „Alfaametnik” (paremal) on üsnagi sarkastilise alatooniga simulatsioonid, mis näitavad avalikus sektoris toimuvat võimuvõitlust ja seda, milliste strateegiatega abil riik oma kodanikke riigist lahkumast hoiab.



7.



A screenshot of Imepilt's game *Angry Kremlins* (2012). The player has to use slingshot to launch authorities at rebels and stop Pussy Riot from rioting.

Imepildi mängus „Vihased kremlistid” (2012) heidab mängija linguga Pussy Rioti bändiliikmete pihta kõrgeid võimuesindajaid, et punkarid mässamise lõpetaksid.

8.



There are many *Whac-A-Mole* type games in the Internet, some of which are politically themed. Unfortunately they rarely have something relevant to add to ongoing political discussions. Imepilt's game *Whac-A-Kim* (on the left) encourages players to whack North Korea's leader while North Korean game (on the right) wants video game players to whack South Korean politicians.

Internetis leidub mitmeid „Whac-A-Mole”-tüüpi mänge, millest osad on tehtud ka poliitilistel teemadel. Kahjuks on sellistel mängudel aktuaalsete poliitiliste sündmuste kohta harva midagi sisulist öelda. Imepildi mäng „Whac-A-Kim” laseb mängijail haamriga taguda Põhja-Korea juhti, samas kui parempoolses, Põhja-Koreas toodetud mängus, saab samal viisil kolkida Lõuna-Korea poliitikutid.

romantic novels of Barbara Cartland⁵⁸. As a result of the media stir that was caused by the statement, sales of Cartland's books in Estonian book-stores jumped and the tabloid *Õhtuleht* (*Evening Paper*) gave Lang the nickname *Langinator*.⁵⁹ The player's task in the game is to keep Barbara Cartland's pink books away from the library visitors by hitting them with grenades; not hitting quality literature (white books) gives extra points.

Delicious Building Lot aka Fight for EAA deals with the problems around the new building of the Estonian Academy of Arts (EAA). Construction of the building should have started in 2010 but was postponed for multiple reasons. According to the common, although unconfirmed, public opinion, the construction plans were sabotaged by real-estate developers who wished to buy the attractive building lot in Tallinn's city centre and use it for commercial purposes. The player controls the figure of the former Estonian Minister of Culture (1999–2002) and current EAA rector (2005–...) Signe Kivi, who has to dodge building blocks and destroy the business warlocks before they manage to 'build a shopping-mall on EAA's building lot' (fig. 5).⁶⁰ The game's visuals, especially the appearance of the business warlocks, seem to be an homage to the Estonian artist Jüri Arrak's cult animation *Suur Tõll* (*Toell the Great*, 1980).

Games that were created by Magnus Vulp for his master's thesis *Procedural Rhetoric in Art: Timely Games as Socially and Politically Engaged Art Practice*, which was defended in the Estonian Academy of Arts' Department of New Media in 2012, differ from other Imepilt's newsgames in terms of their elaborated theoretical background. The central idea of the thesis is to use the games to introduce the concept of procedural rhetoric in the Estonian art scene. The thesis, however, was not particularly well received by the Master's Council and was awarded the lowest passing grade, *approbatur*.⁶¹ In the opinion of the reviewer Varvara Guljajeva, the defendant had done too little theory and background research and the thesis was 'too much dedicated to the practical part, which is well realised'.⁶² According to the thesis's supervisor Oliver Laas, however, the reviewer 'missed the main purpose of Magnus' written work: opening up the background of the games'. In his opinion, '[i]t was a pity that instead of concentrating on the work's main focus – the procedural rhetorical messages of the games – the council remained in the somewhat safer and more comfortable zone that dealt with questions of visuals and form. It is possible that this slight perplexity about Magnus' work influenced the final assessment of the council.'⁶³

The games in this group are conceptually stronger than some other Imepilt games, because they use procedural rhetoric in order to simulate the actual

58 R. Sikk, Lang: mina riigi raha eest massikultuuri ei levita! – Eesti Päevaleht 3 November 2011.

59 The name is derived from the science fiction character Terminator.

60 Imepilt, <http://imepilt.com/eka.html> (accessed 30 August 2013).

61 The possible assessments for a master's thesis in Estonian Academy of Arts are 1) *cum laude* (approved as excellent with honors) 2) *optime approbatur* (approved as excellent) 3) *approbatur* (approved) and 4) *non approbatur* (not approved) (The Statutes for Defending Master's Theses of the Estonian Academy of Arts, 2006).

62 V. Guljajeva, Evaluation of Magnus Vulp's Master's Thesis. Manuscript.

63 O. Laas, E-mail interview, 8 July 2013. The original Estonian-language e-mails are in the possession of the author.

structures and mechanisms of society. Possibly the best example is the newsgame *Talent at Home* (*Talendid kodus*), which incorporates several procedural messages. The game's idea is based on the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry's programme 'Bring Talent Home' ('Talendid koju', 2010–2012), which was promoted by President Toomas Hendrik Ilves. The campaign attempted to stop or slow down the brain drain of young, educated Estonian professionals to other countries by inviting them to move back to Estonia (fig. 6).⁶⁴

The backdrop of the game is a map of Estonia, which is surrounded by a propaganda strip.⁶⁵ The map is covered with different characters; some of them symbolise 'regular Estonians', while others symbolise 'talent': more qualified workers. As long as a character stays within the boundaries of map of Estonia, it pays taxes. However, when it becomes discontented and crosses the Estonian border, the character and its tax money are lost forever. The talent pays more taxes, but also becomes dissatisfied faster than the regular Estonians. In order to stop the characters from moving abroad, the player needs to use propaganda by promising 'more jobs', 'recognition', 'economic success' or 'advance in salary'⁶⁶, but not all propaganda types work on all types of talent. The correct propaganda token must be placed on a propaganda strip so that it blocks the path of the disgruntled citizen. However, the effect of propaganda is temporary and the token vanishes from a strip after a while. When the number of characters on the map has fallen very low, a player can use one of two campaigns – 'Welcome to Estonia'⁶⁷ or 'Maternity Benefits' – to produce new taxpayers. Using propaganda costs money, which is taken from the national budget, which is collected from taxes. Inviting in migrant labour ('Welcome to Estonia') is, for example, cheaper than gaining new citizens through increased maternity benefits. The game does not have an end, but 'the player may find herself in a situation where the state's budget is depleted and all taxpayers have left the country. In this case, the game can be considered lost'.⁶⁸

The game makes multiple procedural statements, i.e. statements that are expressed through game mechanics: Estonia's population drops due to emigration, the state is unable to control all its citizens, its control mechanisms are only partly effective and their use is limited by the size of the state budget. A rather cynical message can be read into the game's proceduralism: instead of using taxpayers'

64 The programme 'Bring Talent Home' got a lot of coverage in the press, but articles that addressed the campaign were often critical, suggesting that the people behind the programme should put more effort into creating better conditions and quality of life for Estonian citizens, instead of trying to incite patriotism. Furthermore, the programme actually offended many emigrant working-class Estonians, who felt that the slogan was only directed at white-collar workers and saw it as a message that they were not welcome to return home. As a result of the programme, 743 expatriate Estonians uploaded their CVs onto the programme's web portal, of which 27 people actually found jobs in Estonia and moved back. (K. Traks, „Talendid koju!” projekt tõi Eestisse tagasi 27 inimest. – Postimees 18 October 2012.)

65 M.Vulp, *Protseduurne retoorika kunstis*, p. 21.

66 M.Vulp, *Protseduurne retoorika kunstis*, p. 22.

67 'Welcome to Estonia' is a brand that was designed in 2002 and was supposed to advertise Estonia and Estonian products abroad. The brand's development costs were 13 million Estonian Kroons (over 800,000 Euros). However, the brand has not been used very much, and has become an object of ridicule and, for some people, a symbol of wasted tax money.

68 M.Vulp, *Protseduurne retoorika kunstis*, p. 31.

money on improving citizens' quality of life, the state and its governors use it on empty promises and campaigns of questionable value.

The other two games are also simulations of recognisable processes and patterns in society. The games have a strong editorial stance and the player may or may not agree with the opinions they convey. *Alpha Clerk (Alfaametnik)* is a remake of the classic arcade game *Donkey Kong* (1981). It depicts the process of climbing the career ladder in the public sector (in theory, the game can also simulate the power struggle in corporate environments). The player's task is to avoid the obstacles in the game, seize the position of 'alpha clerk' and then keep this position by eliminating competitors by bombing them with paper clips and document files. The game has a certain similarity to another 'serious' remake of *Donkey Kong: Gotham Gazette's* game *Donkey Con*, which represents the election-time power struggle between incumbent politicians and their challengers.

Similarly to *Alpha Clerk*, the game *Demagogue (Demagoog)* is more of a social comment game that focuses on an ongoing issue than a game that addresses a 'specific news event'.⁶⁹ The subject of the game is electioneering. The player controls a politician, who has to hit voters with appropriate election promises. Like *Talent at Home*, *Demagogue* is quite an elaborate game: there are three difficulty levels, three distinct types of voters and, on the highest level, there are nine different election promises that must be matched with voters. The game is won if the player gains the required amount of voter support during the given time-frame and gets elected.

In the last group, there is only one game, *Estonian (aff)Air (Eesti (t)Õhk)*, which is in Estonian and deals with Estonian current events; the remaining three are in English and comment on international news. *Estonian (aff)Air* is a newsgame reaction to the Estonian national air carrier teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. The company Estonian Air is depicted as a hungry monster that is fed money by the Minister of Economic Affairs and Communications Juhan Parts. The game's procedural rhetoric is somewhat confusing: if Estonian Air is fed cash, it flies, but if the player accidentally feeds it a skull and crossbones symbol, it crashes. There is no explanation for the skull and crossbones symbol; it may possibly represent the lack of state funds to save the company.

The game that brought Imepilt into the spotlight of international media, although only briefly, was *Angry Kremlins (Vihased kremlistid, fig. 7)*, an anti-Kremlin remake of the best-selling Finnish video game *Angry Birds* (Rovio Entertainment Limited). The game was released in summer 2012 as a protest to the sentencing of the members of the feminist-punk band Pussy Riot, who performed the critical 'Punk Prayer for Putin' in Moscow's Christ the Saviour Cathedral in February 2012. According to an article in the French news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP), the game had been played approximately 50,000 times within a few days of uploading it on the web; the majority of players were from Russia and the Baltic states.⁷⁰ A year later, the designers confessed that they 'have difficulties with exact statistics' about

69 I. Bogost, S. Ferrari, B. Schweizer, *Newsgames*, p. 22.

70 Estonian IT Buff Launches Game to Back Pussy Riot. – AFP 24 August 2012.

their games, but estimated that all their games together had received about 500,000 unique clicks⁷¹, 'of which 90% belong to *Angry Kremlins*'⁷². Before *Angry Kremlins*, Imepilt's most popular game had been *Clerk's Christmas*, which received approx. 2000 unique clicks during its first week online.

The game is very simple: it mimics the *Angry Birds*' video game, which lets the player use a slingshot to shoot different birds towards pigs that are stationed in various structures. Unlike *Angry Birds*, *Angry Kremlins* only has one level. In the newsgame version, the birds of the Finnish game are replaced with the heads of the Russian President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill I of Moscow and, instead of pigs, the player aims at the members of Pussy Riot, whose heads are covered in red balaclavas. From the procedural aspect, *Angry Kremlins* is, once again, rather confusing, because nothing in the game explicitly implies that it is a protest: angry officials who attack Pussy Riot are in the position of Rovio's birds, who, in the original game, are rather positive characters, and Pussy Riot takes the place of pigs, who are more or less negative characters in the *Angry Birds* game. Furthermore, after the player has successfully destroyed the structures that shelter Pussy Riot, the game congratulates the player for defeating 'those riots'. The game's comical visual style hints that the game can be interpreted ironically, but in theory it could be perceived as support for Putin and the Patriarch.⁷³

Angry Kremlin's popularity can be explained by certain of its game elements, but also by the fact that it reached some key people who helped the game to go viral. The game was mentioned in the social networking site Twitter 1400 times, most notably by the Russian activist and opposition politician Ilya Yashin and *The Economist* journalist Edward Lucas. The designers believe that Yashin's tweet played a pivotal role in catching the attention of international news media: *Spiegel Online*, *The Moscow Times*, *Bild*, *YLE*, *Helsinki Sanomat*, *International Business Times* and others.⁷⁴

Imepilt tried to repeat the success of *Angry Kremlins* with their next game, *The Assangenist*, which also addressed a subject that made headlines all around the world: the Wikileaks founder Julian Assange's diplomatic asylum in the Embassy of Ecuador to the United Kingdom in London, but the game did not arouse much interest. I agree with Almondi Esco, who suggested that one reason why the game dropped off the radar, while *Angry Kremlins* got so much attention, was that 'it missed the element of popular culture' that would have 'accelerated' the distribution of the game.⁷⁵ The fate of Imepilt's following newsgame, *Whac-a-Kim*, was even worse.

71 A unique click denotes the number of individual users who clicked a link, an Internet banner or, in this case, a web game, regardless of how many times they clicked the particular link within a certain period of time.

72 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 3 September 2013.

73 The video game *Do not Let Pussy Riot into the Cathedral*, which actually does support Vladimir Putin's and Patriarch Kirill's viewpoint, was released in summer 2013 at a Russian Orthodox youth festival in Moscow. It encouraged players to kill cartoon versions of Pussy Riot with an orthodox cross before they entered the church. Some online news articles saw the game as a follow-up to Imepilt's *Angry Kremlins* game.

74 I. Kald, Uudis eestlaste arvutimängust levis Äripäevast üle maailma.

75 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

Whac-a-Kim is based on the mechanics of the popular arcade game *Whac-A-Mole*. The player must whack North Korean leader Kim Jong-un with a baseball bat before he pushes the red button and 'nukes the world'.⁷⁶ The game is one of the simplest and definitely the crudest of Imepilt's works and falls into the group of political video games that Ian Bogost describes as games that '...apply a political skin to existing procedural mechanics, without attempting to transfer those mechanics into rhetoric supporting a political argument. These *graphical logics* may or may not make visual arguments about the world, but clearly they do not make procedural ones.'⁷⁷ The only procedural rhetoric that can be found in the game besides 'if we do not kick Kim Jong-un's butt he will nuke everyone' is the rhetoric of reflex: 'carefully timed physical responses to ... visual stimuli'.⁷⁸ The designers admitted that they had not even attempted to insert a sophisticated rhetoric into the game (fig. 8).

The game bears a disturbing similarity to one of North Korea's own crude propaganda games, which was published on North Korea's central news agency's web portal *Uriminzokkiri*. The game has spread on the Internet under the name *Hitting the Ddanara Party*.⁷⁹ It is also a *Whac-A-Mole* type of game, the difference being that the player can hit South Korean politicians instead of Kim Jong-un, there are no additional elements besides whacking, like the nuclear missile in Imepilt's game, the player cannot share her score online and the game is generally more poorly executed, especially visually.

The public response to the game was controversial; some people considered it funny while others deemed it too violent. However, a more serious form of feedback to the game came from the video-sharing website LiveLeak, which consequently decided to ban Imepilt from its page entirely. One possible explanation for the ban was the violence in the game; however, the *Whac-A-Kim* game's violence does not exceed the violence of a number of similar simple politically themed games, such as *Bush vs. Kerry Boxing* (Sorrent Games, 2004), which even shows cartoon blood. Another possible explanation is that Imepilt's videos were mistakenly taken for advertisements.

Theory vs. practice: newsgames' problems and potentials

There are not many scholarly writings about newsgames, so it's worth considering all of them. In the following section, I will compare some theoretical statements with the practical experience of Imepilt. The following analysis not only points out some of the inconsistencies in theory and practice, but also draws attention to the strengths and weaknesses of the newsgame medium. However, it is important to remember that the conclusions of this analysis are based on only one case study and the designers who will be quoted here have designed just one type of newsgames:

76 Imepilt, http://imepilt.com/whack_a_kim.html (accessed 30 August 2013).

77 I. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, p. 94.

78 I. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, p. 303.

79 G. Prestia, *North Korea's Video Game Assault: Six Crude Propaganda Games from the Rogue State*. - GamesFix 24 January 2013.

editorial games. Therefore, the analysis does not aim at any kind of closure or broad generalisation but hopes to point out some aspects of newsgames that might add something to the general knowledge of the medium.

The first contradiction in newsgames is that they are simultaneously described as games genre that are easy to develop and distribute⁸⁰ but take a 'substantial time to create'⁸¹. I described creating browser-based web games as a high-speed and low-cost process at the beginning of the article. The truth is that such web games as Imepilt's editorial games are much easier to develop compared to commercial video games, whose budgets and development teams compete with Hollywood blockbusters. Likewise, web games are relatively easy to distribute, because people do not need to purchase them from stores or even download them from the Internet but can play them in their web browsers. However, as Imepilt's experience shows, both developing and distributing newsgames can be arduous processes.

Technological issues

Almondi Esco names technology as one of the biggest 'enemies of the [newsgame] genre'.⁸² One problem Imepilt has had to face is the technological incompatibility between different operational systems and web browsers: 'Nowadays, every modern device can be used for reading text and watching videos. Games have to be separately converted for every device.... Sometimes it can even be impossible to customise a game for Internet users. For example, many companies use the Windows XP operational system and IE (Internet Explorer) web browser. Because XP is an old operational system, Microsoft has stopped updating it, which means that those ... computers cannot be used for playing HTML5 games. If all users cannot play the games, media agencies do not want to pay for them or do not want to show them at all.'⁸³

Miguel Sicart sees newsgames as games that 'are not for direct profit' and their 'audience is not understood as consumers, but as citizens'.⁸⁴ This is a debatable opinion. It is generally acknowledged that traditional news media are in trouble, maybe even dying: printed newspapers' revenues are constantly shrinking all over the world, and they are losing subscribers, advertising money etc. However, news outlets are generally profit-seeking enterprises, so why should they employ a game designer if that does not increase their revenue? Why should they commission a game from an independent company like Imepilt? And what about the designers themselves? Unless they clearly take an activist position (or possibly an artistic position) and declare themselves free of any commercial interests, they usually expect to get paid for their work. It is in their best interest to sell their work to news

80 M. Sicart, *Newsgames*, p. 30.

81 M. Mateas, M. Treanor, *Newsgames*.

82 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

83 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

84 M. Sicart, *Newsgames*, pp. 28–29.

outlets and their audiences, and therefore the audience of newsgames can be seen as consumers.

Financial issues

Imepilt tried to sell its first newsgame, or 'interactive caricature', *Clerk's Christmas* to four Estonian media outlets: *Äripäev* (*Business Day*), *Delfi*, *Postimees* (*The Courier*), and *Eesti Rahvusringhääling* (Estonian Public Broadcasting). The original price of the game was 1600 Euros. 'The best (and only) offer'⁸⁵ was made by *Äripäev*, whose Editor-in-Chief was 'very interested' in the new medium, willing to pay 800 Euros for the test game and negotiate the price if the test was successful.⁸⁶ When the final version of the game was introduced to potential buyers, 'another *Äripäev* executive, who was not really enthralled by the medium, came to inspect the game ... and in his opinion, paying such money for [the game] was not justified, because ... the idea was boring and for that much money he could employ a new journalist who ... would earn their money back for sure'.⁸⁷

One problem for an aspiring newsgame company operating in virgin territory is that a price for their products that would be acceptable for both parties, designers and media outlets, must be determined through trial and error. Imepilt's negotiations with *Äripäev* over the price of their games fell flat in the end. The other problem is traditional news outlets' general lack of funds and their unwillingness to spend their already scarce cash reserves on experimental projects. As noted in the book *Newsgames*, Ian Bogost's serious games company Persuasive Games faced very similar financial obstacles when trying to negotiate with newspapers.⁸⁸

According to Sicart '...newsgames have very basic game mechanics inspired, or directly copied from classic games. Far from being a problem, this is an advantage for newsgame design. For a game, it is fundamental that players understand the principles of play.'⁸⁹ Again, this is a debatable opinion. Easily accessible games with short learning curves and play sessions can indeed attract many people; this is clearly proved by what Jesper Juul calls 'a casual revolution':⁹⁰ the recent boom in cell phone and social network games that are targeted to a mass audience of casual players. However, editorial newsgames have continued to use the mechanics of arcade games, which were new and innovative 30 years ago (*Donkey Kong*, *Pac-Man* etc.). The Internet is littered with countless clones and remakes of these games. Older generations who did not grow up playing video games are slowly but surely being replaced by players who are familiar with basic video game mechanics long before they are old enough to be interested in the news. A game without captivating

85 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

86 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

87 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

88 I. Bogost, S. Ferrari, B. Schweizer, *Newsgames*, p. 177.

89 M. Sicart, *Newsgames*, p. 31.

90 J. Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010, p. 152.

gameplay⁹¹ is unlikely to hold the attention of players who have previous experience with video games, no matter how interesting its content is.

Design issues

Both of Imepilt's designers are reluctant to use the word 'games' in describing their work. Almondi Esco prefers to call their newsgames 'interactive caricatures', while Magnus Vulp still uses the word 'game', but only because he has not found a suitable replacement ('other definitions do not work'⁹²). Esco's reasons for avoiding the game label are as follows: 'The word 'game' may make you expect something more than our work embodies. When a person approaches [it] from the perspective of a game, she may be disappointed, expecting either more complicated gameplay, extra levels or something else that she was used to encountering during her previous game experiences. The usual comments about our games are that they are too boring, they could be more challenging, and there should be more levels. An interactive caricature, however, can work without gameplay.'⁹³ Vulp has similar ideas: '*World of Warcraft* is a real game!'⁹⁴

Therefore, very basic game mechanics may not necessarily be an advantage for newsgame design and ease in understanding principles of play does not guarantee players' lasting interest and positive reception of the game.

In January 2013, an article was published in *The Guardian* with the title 'News as Games: Immoral or the Future of Interactive Journalism?' The article was inspired by Apple's decision not to add the war simulation *Endgame: Syria* to the App Store because of its political content. The article refers to 'a familiar strain of revulsion at the very idea of games dealing with topical issues' and adds a comment from Ian Bogost, who explains this revulsion by saying '...we're more accustomed to non-fiction film and television because there are more examples of them. [...] Meanwhile, in games, we tend to see non-fiction topics on the fringes.'⁹⁵ The article also mentions the problems that surround the word 'game'. The designer Tomas Rawlings notes: 'It has cultural connotations of triviality. However, as games have grown up as a form, we can show they don't have to be about only entertainment; they can have other roles too.'⁹⁶

91 Gameplay: a central term in the video game vocabulary that does not have a canonical definition. Generally used to describe the rules, strategies and interactions within the game world and players' engagement with those rules.

92 Interview with Magnus Vulp, 3 May 2013.

93 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

94 Interview with Magnus Vulp, 3 May 2013. *World of Warcraft* - massive multiplayer online role-playing game, which was first released in 2004 and has been played by over seven million subscribers.

95 K. Stuart, News as Games: Immoral or the Future of Interactive Journalism? - *The Guardian* 11 January 2013.

96 K. Stuart, News as Games: Immoral or the Future of Interactive Journalism?

Moral issues

Imepilt's designers have experienced moral judgements, too. As they already had some connections with the newspaper *Äripäev*, they crafted a strategy for distributing their latest game *Whac-A-Kim* among other Bonnier Group-owned newspapers. The plan looked perfectly solid on paper, but did not work out for several reasons. First, there were technical issues: 'I contacted different Bonnier Group business papers with a cooperation proposal. [...] Our new business plan was to make a profit based on quantity. We would have sold translated versions of the game to different publications, which would have brought the price down. [...] Lithuania and Russia were interested in the idea and Lithuania agreed to test the [game] on their web page. Unfortunately, these negotiations failed as well, because they did not know how to integrate the games into their website.'⁹⁷

Moral issues also entered the picture: 'a Slovenian paper's Editor-in-Chief found that the game was so violent that he would never allow something like that into his web portal, and he strongly condemned the willingness of Estonian and Lithuanian papers to publish the game. Imepilt additionally marketed the game on Facebook and on other free websites, but stopped advertising the game after the Boston Marathon bombings on 15 April 2013. 'The sense of security around the world had been severely shaken by this incident. Joking about nuclear war – however improbable it might be – seemed tasteless in this context.'⁹⁸

The other moral aspect of newsgames is that ideological editorial bias in a news-game may give rise to suspicions that the game's designers might not be politically neutral. When I was studying the Estonian Centre Party's election games for my master's thesis – they were released in 2004–2011 and are the political web games that have received the most media attention in Estonia so far – I noticed a number of new political web games appearing from new sources around the year 2011. At the time of the parliamentary elections, there was the first (but not very successful) attempt to use an election game by someone who did not belong to the Centre Party (the Estonian Reform Party's candidate Jaanus Rahumägi). Imepilt released its first games and also some anonymous web games that reacted to daily politics circulating on the web, such as *Ansip's Seed Determinant* (*Ansipi seemnemääraja*). I assumed that this small-scale political web game 'boom' might be somehow due to the general public's familiarity with the Centre Party's games. Could it be that the party's persistence in using games as part of their election campaign had, in a way, established the medium as a platform for 'serious' issues and had contributed positively to the Estonian serious game scene? It seems that I may have been wrong. Imepilt's designers seem to think that one of the reasons why media outlets are reluctant to cooperate with them is because they remember the Centre Party's web games and therefore suspect that any other web games with political content must also involve (hidden) political propaganda by some political party: '...they are afraid that if the game is about [Juhan] Parts then it is a game of the Centre Party – this is

⁹⁷ E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

⁹⁸ E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

my theory.’⁹⁹ If the designers’ insights are correct, the Estonian Centre Party’s web games may have done a disservice to Estonian political video game scene, not a service as I initially assumed.

Organisational politics issues

One more issue with newsgames that needs to be mentioned is ‘organisational politics issues’, which seem to be mostly caused by the difficult situation that contemporary news media are in, but may be partly also caused by general indifference towards the newsgame medium. The book *Newsgames* describes how the *New York Times* editorial desk, which had previously cooperated with Persuasive Games, ‘stopped responding to contact from the studio’.¹⁰⁰ Bogost says: ‘The problem came down to organisational politics: even when the Times was spending actual money on games, the will to publish them effectively wasn’t there. It wasn’t there because nobody had prioritised it, and the newspaper was struggling just to keep up with its ordinary editorial duties.’¹⁰¹

Imepilt has an almost identical story to tell. After initial unsuccessful negotiations with *Äripäev*, the designers tried to interest delfi.ee, Estonia’s largest Internet news portal. They offered to design an additional web page for *Delfi* (at no cost to the portal), where they would show their games for free. *Delfi*’s readership is much larger than *Äripäev*’s, and therefore the designers hoped to earn back the money that they had spent on game development by selling advertisements on the web site. ‘Unfortunately, the idea got stuck due to communication problems: a new obstacle on the path of cultivating the medium.’¹⁰² In order to start the project, the company would have needed to agree on terms and conditions of cooperation with the news portal, but an ‘...e-mail exchange at a rate of one answer every three months made it impossible. This is a very remarkable situation. Even though *Delfi* was interested in the idea, they would have gained additional value and were not supposed to pay a penny for it ... the idea still never came to life.’¹⁰³ Very similarly to Ian Bogost, Almondi Esco concludes: ‘Today, all media companies are working at full capacity. This means that all employees are so over-worked that they have no time left for innovation, even if they are interested in it.’¹⁰⁴

99 Interview with Magnus Vulp, 3 May 2013. The politician Juhan Parts is a member of the Union of Pro Patria and Res Publica party.

100 I. Bogost, S. Ferrari, B. Schweizer, *Newsgames*, p. 176.

101 K. Stuart, *News as Games: Immoral or the Future of Interactive Journalism?*

102 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

103 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

104 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.

Conclusions

This article has aimed to study the story behind the Estonian cross-media company Imepilt and asked if its designers' experiences in founding the company, publishing newsgames and communicating with news outlets with the goal of selling their work have been similar or different to the experiences of their colleagues abroad. Despite the fact that people who are actively involved with newsgames often talk about the medium's great potential to invigorate old-fashioned news media, newsgames are still rather a niche subject, both in game development and game studies. There are not many scholarly studies of them that can be used as background for a case study. Fortunately, such quality publications as Bogost's, Ferrari's and Schweizer's book *Newsgames* have done much to fill the scholarly gap.

Comparison between the information that was gathered from the interviews and previous studies revealed that there are remarkable similarities in issues that newsgame designers have to face in trying to introduce their work to a wider audience, including people's scepticism about the video game as a medium for tackling serious subjects, and media outlets' mistrust of and erratic behaviour towards newsgames. A critical literature review and comparison of the interview data with some normative approaches towards newsgames also revealed that newsgames do not necessarily have to be ephemeral in nature, they can be compared with political cartoons, they might not be as financially disinterested as might be assumed, and simplicity of gameplay is not always a magic formula for winning over game players and keeping them interested if a game's quality is clearly inferior to the games that the majority of people are used to playing.

Some problems that are pointed out in the article have already been noted and discussed, such as the fact that a considerable number of people who may be interested in creating newsgames (e.g. Imepilt's designers), whether as employees of a news outlet or working in a private company, might not necessarily have learned programming. Ian Bogost, Michael Mateas and students of the Georgia Institute of Technology and University of California, Santa Cruz have, for example, created the game-creating tool Game-O-Matic, in which no programming skills are needed. However, the project probably still needs more development before it can actually be used as an effective tool for creating newsgames.

Some current issues, such as public scepticism towards serious video games and media organisations' reluctance to take advantage of newsgames' procedural qualities, may possibly disappear over time, when both media professionals and the general public have got more used to video games, serious games and simulations of news. In the Estonian context, it is still somewhat surprising that Imepilt's attempts to find a partner in the news media have been so futile. Although Estonian newspapers also suffer from declining revenues, like newspapers elsewhere in the world, has lately been invested a considerable amount of money in interactive journalism (digital versions of print newspapers) in order to bring more 'miracles of new

media – moving photographs, videos, trailers, wondrous infographics and interactivity¹⁰⁵ to the newspaper reader. Is not that what Imepilt is trying to do as well?

However, it would be unfair to treat the current situation of newsgames just as a series of ‘problems’ and ‘issues’. There are designers (including Imepilt’s designers) and scholars who sincerely believe in the future potential of newsgames to change the face of journalism. In Magnus Vulp’s opinion, the target group of Imepilt’s newsgames is ‘the people of the future’.¹⁰⁶ Almondi Esco describes the newsgame genre as follows: ‘In this field, everything is missing today: standard formats, standard names, standard platforms, specific target groups. In other words, newsgames and other serious games are in the same situation today that web videos were in ten years ago and this is, after all, the wet dream of every inventor! Personally, I believe that ‘serious’ games will soon cause a similar revolution in the web as videos did with the advent of YouTube.’¹⁰⁷ Considering all the setbacks that Imepilt has encountered during its existence, this conviction is certainly admirable. If widespread mistrust or lack of procedural literacy limits the options of what can or cannot be done with newsgames, then that kind of optimism is needed to expand the prospects of newsgames.

105 P. Hõbemägi, Ekspressilt ja Päevalehelt tasuta iPad ja uus digiajaleht tavaarvutis. – Eesti Ekspress 12 May 2011.

106 Interview with Magnus Vulp, 3 May 2013.

107 E-mail interview with Almondi Esco, 2 September 2013.