

Making Legislative Process Understandable: Survey of Parliaments' Serious Games of European Countries

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Abstract: In addition to passing legislation, many parliaments in Europe and around the world engage in educational activities aimed at promoting democracy and explaining the legislative process. Increasingly, these educational activities take the form of serious games. But just how many European parliaments use games, and what do these games involve? This study is a survey of the use of serious games by European national parliaments' visitor centres, based on a questionnaire and web page analysis. Out of the 43 countries surveyed, 25 were found to use some form of games. The study maps the game genres and activities the games contain, as well as the parliaments' rationale for using them and intended target audience.

Keywords: serious games, political games, parliament RPG, parliamentary simulation

1. Introduction

A cornerstone of any functioning democracy is its citizens' trust in democratic institutions and satisfaction with the democratic process itself. Factors that influence trust in and satisfaction with democracy are manifold and vary depending on cultural and socioeconomic context (Daoust & Nadeau, 2021). Among these, two key predictors are political interest and knowledge. Political interest refers to citizens' willingness to both follow politics and engage in the political process. In a functioning democracy, the higher an individual's political interest is, the more likely they are to be satisfied with democracy itself (Chang, 2017). Political knowledge—citizens' understanding of how democratic institutions work and why—is also a predictor for both citizens' trust in these institutions and willingness to engage with them (Memoli, 2021).

As such, educating citizens about the workings of democracy and raising their interest in the subject are crucial tasks for democratic institutions. This is especially true at a time when populist discourses around the world often promote political cynicism and alienation among the youth (Noack & Eckstein, 2023). Governmental institutions, including parliaments—the “faces” of the democratic process in action—have a major role to play in tackling this issue.

Indeed, governments and parliaments worldwide offer various educational activities, including guided tours, exhibitions, as well as simulations and so-called serious games. Games and simulations are an appealing form of civic education because of their potential to be highly engaging, as well as their ability to dynamically model complex systems (such as the parliamentary process), rendering them easier to understand (Bogost, 2006; Neys & Jansz, 2010). In other words, games can help raise both political interest and knowledge. To what extent and how they are used by political institutions, however, has rarely been examined in a systematic way.

The present study aims to determine how European countries use serious games to introduce their parliaments' work to citizens. It seeks to map the reasons for the games' use, as well as their genres and the activities they involve. In doing so, the paper explores how European parliaments use serious games to bring the governing and legislative process closer to their citizens.

2. Theoretical overview

Politics and games are interwoven in many ways. First, we often think and talk about politics as if it were a game, often without even realising the language we are using is metaphorical. In media discourse, political agents often become “players” who engage in a “zero-sum game” with clearly determined “winners” and “losers” (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & Vreese, 2011). Moreover, political scientists often model political processes as rule-based “games” involving players with differing goals, and political game theory has evolved into an entire branch within game theory (McCarty & Meirowitz, 2007).

Second, politics can also inform the content of games themselves. This ranges from representations that implicitly reflect the game creators' political views without the game being intended as political (Licari, 2020) to games that are consciously designed as forms of political discourse (Bogost, 2006). The latter category includes government-commissioned propaganda games such as the US' *America's Army* and China's *Glorious Mission* (Sandovar, Braad, Streicher, & Söbke, 2011), games that contribute to grassroots political activism (Wirman & Jones, 2020) and political resistance (Huang & Liu, 2021), as well as those created by disenfranchised citizens to "let out steam" in the absence of genuine political agency (Serada, 2023; Sourì, 2007).

Adjacent to these are digital and non-digital serious games—those designed with a clear educational goal, with the entertainment aspects being secondary—that relate to politics (Dahya, 2009; Neys & Jansz, 2010). A common subcategory of these are games aimed at developing political knowledge and increasing political interest among (young) citizens. These can be designed with schools in mind and integrate with existing political education and civics curricula (Blevins & LeCompte, 2016; Zamora, 2019), or be created by or for cultural and political institutions such as museums (Schaller, 2015) and, most pertinently for this paper, parliaments.

A prominent example of a political serious game is the Youth Parliament: a role-playing game (RPG) in which players take the role of Members of Parliament representing different constituencies, who must through negotiation and debate arrive at decisions that take into account the constituencies' needs and interests. By doing so, the game helps engage teenagers in civic and political life, teach democratic principles and concepts, explain the mechanisms of the legislative process, and build a sense of ownership of democracy (Milliken, 2001; Shephard & Patrikios, 2013; Cowley & Stuart, 2015). This experience is often used as part of civic education (Fuks, 2015; Zamora, 2019).

The Youth Parliament exists in many countries and comes in different forms. In Europe, notable examples include the European Youth Parliament (EYP), the Model European Parliament (MEP), and Parlamentarium. For example, EYP is an international organisation with representatives in over 40 European countries. The role-playing sessions offered by EYP take place at the regional, national, and international levels. Each session has three parts: team building to get to know each other; working in committees to discuss critical European issues; and the general assembly: a standard parliamentary procedure where committees debate the proposed solutions. International events take place three times a year in different European countries, with 200–300 participants from some 40 countries coming together for nine to ten days. EYP coordinators facilitate the role-play activities during the sessions, as well as organise media coverage (EYP, n.d.).

Youth Parliament initiatives have been highly valued by teachers (Moreno-Fernández, Puig-Gutiérrez, & González-Monteagudo, 2018). Some research suggests that they can increase not only participants' political knowledge (Zamora, 2019; Cruz-Martínez, Sainz, & Sánchez, 2022), but also their confidence in democratic institutions (Fuks & Casalecchi, 2012), and that they can even directly lead to civic initiatives by the youth (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013). At the same time, changing participants' core values and political beliefs, if they are at odds with democratic governance, is often beyond what a Youth Parliament can accomplish (Fuks, 2015). Youth Parliament initiatives have also been criticised for not doing enough to engage rural youth (Trivelli & Morel, 2021) and under-representing marginalised communities and issues relevant to them (Turkie, 2009). These limitations are not inherent to the Youth Parliament model, but rather stem from how specific implementations are designed and framed: their shortcomings often reflect the organisers' failure to meaningfully and genuinely engage their participants and partners (Elliott, 2021).

Before we can systematically address and rectify these shortcomings, it is important to map the existing use of political serious games by parliaments. The present study aims to do just that, focusing on the games used by national parliaments in Europe. These are not limited to variations on the Youth Parliament format, but also include other serious games employed by the parliaments for educational purposes.

3. Methodology

The main methodology of this study is a survey of European national parliaments regarding their use of serious games for civic education. A qualitative questionnaire was used to collect data from European Parliament visiting centre representatives. Additional information was collected through a study of the parliaments' web

pages. Triangulation was used to ensure the study's validity: data was collected from two sources by two researchers.

The parliaments' web pages were briefly studied at the start of the project, and the findings were used to create the questionnaire, which was employed between December 12, 2022, and February 10, 2023. After a preliminary study of questionnaire results, a second iteration of analysing the parliaments' web pages was conducted in April 2023. Additional online sources were consulted when more information was required.

3.1 Population and sample

The population of this study are the parliaments of European countries. The question of how many countries are there in Europe has multiple possible answers. According to the United Nations (United Nations, n.d.), the number of European countries is 44 (this excludes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, as well as autonomous territories such as the Åland Islands, Gibraltar, and the Vatican). Russia and Belarus were excluded from the study, due to being authoritarian states whose parliaments do not conform to democratic principles (as evidenced, for example, by the two countries occupying the two last places in Europe in both the 2022 Economist Democracy Index and the 2022 Bertelsmann Transformation Index). Kosovo was included, despite not being a UN Member State, due to being a new state in the centre of Europe recognized by most European nations. The final population size is thus the parliaments of 43 European countries.

An invitation to participate in a survey on the use of serious games by parliaments was sent out to each parliament's representatives via the International Forum of Parliament Visitor Centers. This forum is a network of national parliaments that aims to foster cooperation between visitor centres to exchange the best educational practices (IFPVC, 2016). (This is because serious games and other educational activities typically fall under the domain of visitor centres rather than the parliaments' legislative departments.) In total, 11 responses were collected from European countries, with a further two—which were not used in the present study—coming from non-European nations. Parliaments in different countries have different structures (e.g., some consist of one chamber while others are bicameral) and are referred to by different names, such as Assembly, Council, House of Representatives, and so on. For the sake of simplicity, in this article, they all are referred to as parliaments.

As all 43 European parliaments were sent an invitation to the survey, the total of 11 responses makes for a response rate of 25.6%. Because of the low response rate, additional data collection through the parliaments' websites was required, and the websites for each of the 43 parliaments were analysed.

3.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire focused on qualitative data and consisted of the following open-ended questions:

- Does your parliament use educational games to introduce the legislation process or other aspects of governance or democracy?
- If yes, can you provide the name of the game and a reference (link, PDF, etc.) to find more information about it (description, target audience, etc.)?
- How frequently is the game used? (Where possible, please share the number of users)
- What is the reason behind the choice/implementation of such a game?
- Do you or the users have any feedback about the game?

The questions were sent out by email and in a text document format to the parliaments' visitor centres. This approach was chosen to give research participants more freedom to choose the level of detail of their answers. In some cases, this led to the detailed responses outlining the different games used by a parliament's visiting centres. In addition, some answers included supplemental materials in the format of presentations, videos, web pages or screenshots.

3.3 Study of web pages

A study of European national parliaments' web pages was conducted to find additional evidence about the use of serious games. Each national parliament's home page was visited and searched for relevant information. Some web pages made the search easy because they were clearly structured (site maps were a particularly helpful feature) and translated into English; others were more challenging to navigate, particularly when no

English version was available (for these, Google Translate was used). Evidence of game use was primarily found in such sections as Education (sometimes named Library or Visits), Public Relations (the part aimed at citizens), and About the Parliament (or How the Parliament Works, etc.). When looking through these sections yielded no evidence, the web site's search functionality was used, with search terms including "game", "simulation", and "youth". It remains a possibility that some of the available evidence was not uncovered due to translation issues and terminological differences.

3.4 Analysis of games

When evidence of game use was discovered on the parliaments' web pages or submitted by the survey respondents, the game description was analysed. When needed, Google Translate was used. Web-based games were played, and paper-based game materials were reviewed.

3.5 Data analysis

Open coding was used to analyse the survey results and findings from the parliaments' web pages. The following categories and codes were generated and used:

- Game format: physical (local), digital: local, online, interactive video.
- Game genre: colouring book, puzzle, quiz, interactive exhibition, interactive guided tour, guided tour with RPG elements, short RPG (1–3 hours), medium RPG (0.5–1 days), long RPG (two days to one year), (single-player) simulation.
- Game activities and topics: walking tour, the legislative process, creating a law, collecting resources, the division between parties, discussion, speech, debate, voting, printing the law, parliament premises, MEPs involved, speaker or president involved, committees, plenary assembly, collecting votes, competition, elections, government formation, political scandal, newspaper headlines.
- Target group: children (subdivided into 5–9 and 10–12), teenagers (13–16 and 17–19), adults (>19)
- Number of players per session: 1; 2–9; 10–35; 100–200.
- Playing frequency: 2–4 x D (2 or more times a day), 1 x D (once a day), 2–4 x W (2 or more times per week), 1 x W (once a week), 2 x M (2 times per month), 1 x Y (once a year).
- Serious objectives: entertain visitors, teach democratic processes, connect students and politicians, teach legislative process, arouse interest in politics, promote critical thinking, and increase involvement and motivation.

Based on the findings, data tables were created. Data analysis was conducted in two iterations. First, the responses to the survey were analysed based on all the questions. Second, an additional study of the parliaments' web pages focused on game genres and their activities. The results are available here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1z-zS090nCu6W4qO5IA-U5BwAhmhN-alA0S4dK2VgwX8/edit?usp=sharing>.

4. Results

4.1 How Many European Parliaments Use Games?

Out of the 11 European parliaments that responded to the questionnaire, ten (91%) reported using educational games to introduce the legislation process or other aspects of governance or democracy. Based on the additional analysis of the parliaments' web pages, 25 countries out of 43 (58.1%) use games in some form. While the remaining 18 countries' parliaments appear to not use games, it is possible that some of the games were not discovered due to the language barrier.

Some parliaments (for example, Austria, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Serbia, and the United Kingdom) use multiple games. Most of the parliaments offer physical, on-site games, where the play experience is designed as part of the parliament visit. Some parliaments have made their games available online (Lithuania, Norway, and the UK).

Altogether, 40 different games were identified. Outside of the sample, the parliaments of Brazil and the USA also reported using political serious games.

Table 1: Games used by the parliaments of European countries

#	Country	Game
1	Albania	NO
2	Andorra	Short RPG: Consell General dels Joves – General Council of Youth
3	Austria	Interactive Exhibition: Demokratikum; Puzzle: Doppelmoppel and Deine Woche als PolitikerIn; Quizzes: Bildersuchrätsel, Themen; RPG: Youth Parliament
4	Belgium	Interactive guided tour: Objectif loi
5	Bosnia and Herzegovina	NO
6	Bulgaria	NO
7	Croatia	NO
8	Czech Republic	Short RPG: Parliamentary Simulation
9	Cyprus	NO
10	Denmark	Guided tour + RPG: Politician for a Day
11	Estonia	Long RPG: Noorte Riigikogu
12	Finland	NO (earlier game, Lainsäätäjät, currently not available)
13	France	Puzzle: Senat Junior
14	Germany	Guided tour + RPG: Rollenspiel, Medium RPG: Planspiel
15	Greece	NO
16	Hungary	Medium RPG: The democracy game; Long RPG: Model Parliament
17	Iceland	Tour + RPG: The Dragon at the Parliament; Short RPG: Skolathing
18	Ireland	Short RPG: Politics and Society live experiences
19	Italy	NO (earlier game, Il Parlamento dei bambini, no longer available)
20	Kosovo	Interactive exhibition: Once Upon a Time and Never Again
21	Latvia	Interactive tour: Meet the Saeima; Long RPG: Jauniešu Saeima – Youth Parliament
22	Liechtenstein	NO
23	Lithuania	Short RPG: How is the law drawn up?; Quiz: Seimas Vaikams
24	Luxembourg	Short RPG: #MengChamber; Simulation: DemocraCity
25	Macedonia	Short RPG: Имам став! – In my opinion!
26	Malta	NO
27	Moldova	NO
28	Monaco	Long RPG: National Youth Council
29	Montenegro	Short RPG: Parliament Simulation
30	Netherlands	Puzzles and quizzes: Third Chamber
31	Norway	Short RPGs: Demo, The Choice is Yours, The Government Negotiations
32	Poland	Unclear genre: Młody Obywatel
33	Portugal	Long RPG: Parlamento Dos Jovens – Young People's Parliament
34	Romania	NO
35	San Marino	NO
36	Serbia	Short RPG: Simulations of National Assembly sessions; Unclear genre: Your Vote
37	Slovakia	NO
38	Slovenia	NO
39	Spain	NO
40	Sweden	Guided tour + RPG: Demokratiwerkstaden – Democracy Workshop
41	Switzerland	Short RPG: Mon point de vue – My point of view
42	Ukraine	NO
43	United Kingdom	Simulation: MP for a Week; Guided tour + RPG: Tours and workshops

4.2 Reasons for using serious games

The parliaments' motivation for implementing serious games varies. The most frequently cited reasons are (most popular first):

- Introduce the work of the parliament;

- Teach democracy and increase civic awareness;
- Introduce the legislative process;
- Make visitors feel like valuable members of society (civic involvement);
- Entertain visitors (make their visit attractive and fun);
- Connect students and politicians;
- Reduce the barriers (increase the interest) to teaching democracy and parliamentarism;
- Develop critical thinking.

One of the respondents concisely explained some of the key reasons as follows:

For many people, democracy and parliamentarism are abstract and complex and not an interesting topic. These games should help to break down the barriers and invite the visitors to playfully explore the different issues the parliament has to deal with. Second, visitors should get the feeling of being a valuable part of the society and understand it.

These serious goals largely align with the broader goals of civic education.

4.3 Game Genres

The parliaments' educational games belong to the following genre categories:

- Quiz (3: Austria, Lithuania, and the Netherlands);
- Puzzle (3: Austria, France, and the Netherlands);
- Interactive exhibition (2: Austria and Kosovo);
- Interactive guided tour (2: Belgium and Latvia);
- Guided tour with short RPG (5: Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Sweden, and the UK);
- Short RPG (13: Andorra, Czech Republic, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Montenegro, Norway x 3 games, Serbia, Switzerland);
- Medium RPG (2: Germany and Hungary);
- Long RPG (6: Austria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Monaco, and Portugal);
- Simulation (2: Luxembourg and the UK);
- In two cases, the genre is unclear.

The most frequently mentioned game genre is a short (1–2 hours long) RPG provided as part of a guided tour of the parliament (mentioned five times) or as a stand-alone activity (mentioned 13 times). The second most mentioned game genre is a long RPG, lasting between two days and a year (mentioned six times). Taken together, short, medium and long RPGs account for 23 games out of 40 (52.5%). Interactive quizzes and puzzles (typically, physical games that can be played at the visitor centres) were mentioned three times each. The following section discusses the activities that games in different genres contain.

4.4 Activities in parliament games

The **puzzles** are typically physical games that can be played at the visiting centres. For example, the Austrian Parliament Visitor Centre offers a puzzle aimed at 5–8 year olds where players have to design a city square. The goal of the game is to experience group discussion and decision-making. In addition, some parliaments offer simple online puzzles (such as memory games).

Most parliaments offer **guided tours**. Some have added playful interactive activities to increase visitors' engagement. For example, the Austrian parliament issues tour participants with "passports" that they can use to collect stamps (badges) from different areas of the parliament. In other countries (Belgium, Denmark, Iceland), the tour includes a short RPG-like workshop where the participants can propose their own law, participate in a parliamentary discussion, and vote on the proposed legislation. Participants can even have an accepted law printed out as a "document" to take home as a souvenir. The typical duration of a guided tour with such interactive activities is 1.5–2 hours, and the group size is 15–30 people. Such guided tours are mainly provided for children and teenagers. Some parliaments (such as Austria) also offer **virtual guided tours** where users can enter parliament members' working rooms in an online environment.

Many parliaments introduce their work and the legislative process through a short **role-playing game**. In several cases, this game takes place in specially designed rooms that imitate the setting of a real parliament.

This arrangement makes it possible to play the game several times a day (for example, in Norway, twice daily). Sometimes, the game takes place on the parliament's actual premises. This approach limits how often the game can be played (for example, twice a month in Czechia and 85 times per year in Lithuania). A typical game session proceeds as follows:

- Players are divided into 4–6 political parties and asked to read their parties' manifestos.
- A critical political issue is introduced by the game facilitators or raised by the players themselves. Players are asked to propose a new law or amendments to an existing law to address the issue.
- Details of the new law are discussed in committee groups, presented (players have to select spokespersons and give speeches), and voted upon during the plenary sessions.
- The feedback on the game outcome is delivered as the voice of the citizens (fictional characters in the game).

Some games involve real parliament speakers (for example, in Iceland) or actual parliament members (for example, in Macedonia and Switzerland). In some games, players are asked to form a government (e.g., in Norway) or to collect signatures to start a new law (e.g., in Lithuania). The typical duration of a short RPG is 1–3 hours, and the group size is 10–35 players. Such games are mostly provided for teenagers. Some parliaments offer a similar game but of a longer duration. For example, in Hungary, the parliament RPG lasts one day, and in Germany, 6 hours.

Some parliaments provide a more extensive RPG experience called the Youth Parliament (not to be confused with the European Youth Parliament, which is coordinated by an international NGO). This game has similar features to a short RPG, but lasts more than one day, sometimes a whole week (Belgium), and takes place on the parliament's actual premises, using plenary and committee rooms when there are no parliament activities (e.g., weekends). Due to the limited availability of the facilities, bigger RPGs are usually played once per year. The number of players is limited by the size of the plenary room (e.g., 100–150 in Belgium). This longer format usually also includes pre-visit activities at school and post-visit activities. Sometimes (e.g., in Monaco), the long game largely takes place outside of the parliament, and visiting the actual parliament is a culmination at the end of a one year long experience.

While most of the games are collaborative in nature and focus on reaching a compromise through discussion, some games do emphasise competition between political parties during the debate (e.g., in Macedonia and Switzerland). In these competitive games, the players debate each other on a chosen topic, after which the strength of their arguments is assigned a score by a jury of actual parliament members.

5. Discussion

A majority (58.14%) of European national parliaments use serious games to introduce the parliament's work or educate citizens about parliamentarism and democracy. In some countries, parliamentary games are offered by third parties rather than the parliaments themselves; these were only included in the study if they were mentioned on the respective parliament's website (for example, this was the case in Estonia). Other countries mentioned an interest in using serious games in the future. This shows that parliaments and governments more broadly have understood both the need for civic education and games' potential for making such education engaging and meaningful.

In two cases, Finland and Italy, serious games were used in the past but are no longer available. In the case of Poland, the web game was created using Adobe Flash, which contemporary browsers no longer support. This points to the challenges presented by technological obsolescence, as well as to the importance of considering future sustainability in design and implementation of serious games.

In terms of genre, role-playing games are the most common. Although more challenging to design compared to such genres as quizzes and puzzles, it appears that the RPG is deemed the most suitable genre for civic education, as it allows to directly engage players in activities that mirror the core nature of parliamentary work: forming groups, having discussions, and making joint decisions. Another core characteristic of RPGs is developing the individual character (for example, acquiring new skills and improving existing abilities). There is no evidence that RPGs used by parliaments incorporate this characteristic in a prominent way; this is likely because it is less relevant to the collaborative nature of the legislative process they seek to represent.

However, actually incorporating character (or perhaps group) development mechanics could in fact be useful both in terms of meeting player expectations (young players experienced with RPGs may expect this feature) and communicating player progression, providing an incentive for continued play, especially in longer RPGs.

Most of the games offered by the parliaments are physical, on-site games: players must visit the parliament in person and play the game in specially designed rooms. This affords more immediate social interaction between the players and offers a more situated experience, but it also limits the accessibility of the game, due to requiring travelling and, often, pre-booking. Offering similar experiences that are available online or as a downloadable game is something few parliaments currently do, but it can dramatically broaden the games' reach and go some way towards addressing the criticism of parliamentary games excluding rural communities and marginalised groups.

6. Conclusion

The evidence collected during the study suggests that serious games have become a popular tool for European parliaments to promote democracy and educate the youth and citizens more broadly. Most of the European parliaments already use a serious game—or, in some cases, several—and the number is likely to increase. Role-playing games are by far the most popular genre, although analysing how many role-playing game mechanics they actually contain is beyond the scope of this study. Neither has the study established how many players each of the games has reached.

A direction for future research would be to investigate the player experience of each game. How engaging do players find the games (and how does reported engagement correlate with specific game genres or activities)? To what extent does playing the games stimulate political interest and help develop political knowledge? How do teachers perceive the games' utility for their classes? Are any cultural differences between the different countries' games evident in the player reception or the game design itself? These would be useful questions for a closer analysis of the games.

Another direction that would be useful to investigate relates to the games' accessibility and sustainability. This covers both how the games can be maintained to future-proof them against obsolescence, and how to ensure that the games reach a broad and diverse player audience.

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