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DIGITAL GAMES AND JOURNALISM: A CASE-STUDY OF SLOVENIAN POLITICAL WEEKLY'S NEWSGAME – MLADINA'S *FOJBA 2000*

Abstract. *By taking the cultural approach to converging journalism-games dynamics, the study aims to investigate how games can be used beyond entertainment as means to depict recent events, serve as commentaries and realise other editorial pursuits. The case study investigates the Slovenian political weekly Mladina and its Tetris-style newsgame Fojba 2000 by conducting procedural rhetoric analysis and in-depth interviews with Mladina editors, journalists and game developers. The analysis indicates patterns of coordinated cross-company production, the polysemous character of the newsgame as a form of communication, and various perceptions of its societal relevance inside and outside the Mladina newsroom.*

Keywords: *newsgames, journalism, digital games, convergence, Mladina, Slovenia*

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Introduction

Over the last decade or so, journalism studies have increasingly explored the phenomenon of convergence. In this regard, scholars have investigated the blurring lines dividing print, broadcast and Internet markets (e.g. Pavlik, 2008; Ryfe, 2012; Anderson, 2012); combinations of spaces, technologies and staff of previously separated newsroom departments (e.g. Paterson and Domingo, 2008; Quinn, 2009; Erdal, 2011); integration of various semiological forms in multimedia news (e.g. Deuze, 2004; Steensen, 2011; Usher, 2013); and contingent self-understanding (e.g. Chung, 2007; Robinson, 2010; Vobič, 2013). These studies indicate that convergence has significantly blurred the traditional media boundaries within production, textual and reception levels, reshaping journalism as a social institution, business and cultural practice. Despite this rather large research scope, scholars have paid little or almost no attention to the convergence between journalism
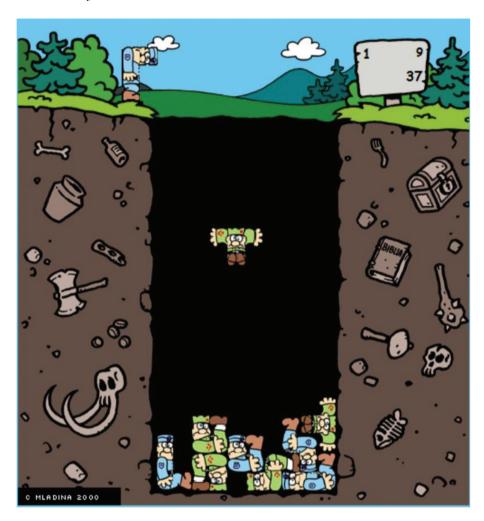
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and digital games, which from a particular point reflects manifold political and cultural complexities of contemporary public communication.

Connections between journalism and digital games have so far been explored through the prisms of media representations of computer and video games (e.g. Gallagher, 2012; McKernan, 2013; Milner, 2013), "serious games" as tools for educating future journalists (e.g. Tran and Biddle, 2008; Ritterfield et al., 2009; Aayeshah, 2012), and as convergent applications of journalism and digital gaming (e.g. Frasca, 2003; Sicart, 2008; Ferrari, 2009; Treanor and Mateas, 2009; Bogost et al., 2010). While the first two fields have received substantial scholarly attention, the 'newsgames' phenomenon has only been partially explored and hardly conceptually elaborated by journalism scholars, left on the margins of journalism research. We attempt to fill this research void and conceptually and empirically explore this "new way of doing journalism" (Bogost et al., 2010). By taking the cultural approach to converging journalism-games dynamics, we aim to investigate how games can be used beyond entertainment as means to depict recent events, serve as commentaries and support other editorial pursuits (e.g. Frasca, 2003; Sicart, 2008; Ferrari, 2009; Treanor and Mateas, 2009; Bogost et al., 2010). Previous studies do not provide comprehensive insights into the decision-making rationale behind newsgames development and hardly discuss implications for journalism's primary obligation to connect citizens with societal life. Therefore, this study also aims to explore the journalism-games convergence in regard to the production dynamics between the newsroom and game developers, as well as the societal functions of these interactive media forms.

The research objective is addressed in the context of Slovenian journalism, particularly the political weekly *Mladina*, and aims to offer insights into the production rationale and cultural implications of their Tetris variant, *Fojba 2000*. The puzzle game depicts the ideological divisions among Slovenians during the Second World War, which often enter the political agenda in contemporary Slovenia (cf. Škerlep, 2009). The goal of *Fojba 2000* is to tile-match cartoonish Partisans (*partizani*) and Home Guards (*domobranci*) shaped into tetrominoes, geometric shapes composed of four square blocks each, which randomly fall into a sinkhole (*fojba*). The study aims not only to dissect *Fojba 2000's* rhetorical character, but also to reveal *Mladina's* decision-making process leading to the development of the newsgame, as well as to identify perceived societal functions of the newsgame through the editors', journalists' and game developers' narrations. The investigation is based on data gathered through the procedural rhetoric analysis of *Fojba 2000* and in-depth interviews with *Mladina* editors and journalists, as well as game developers.

Picture 1: FOJBA 2000 GAMEPLAY

Conceptual framework: Converging games and journalism

A review of the studies exploring newsgames (e.g. Frasca, 2003; Sicart, 2008; Ferrari, 2009; Treanor and Mateas, 2009; Bogost et al., 2010) indicates that authors more or less agree that journalism's convergence with games is a reply to what Gitlin (2009) calls the "crisis of authority" and an attempt to revitalise journalism's connection with the public. In this sense, newsgames are generally understood as digital games designed to illustrate a specific aspect of news by means of their particular rhetoric, with the goal to engage people in relevant political issues. Nevertheless, there seems to be no firm

consensus among scholars on how to conceptually frame the notion of news, resulting in various derivatives, such as "current event games" (Bogost et al., 2010), "editorial games" (Ferrari, 2009), "political games" (Sicart, 2008), "persuasive games" (Bogost, 2007) and "social comment games" (Treanor and Mateas, 2009). Differences in scholars' conceptual framings of newsgames are based on distinct conceptualisations of news, which mostly neglect the multifaceted character of the notion that derives from particular articulations between normative theories of journalism and its empirical manifestations in particular social contexts. Nevertheless, newsgames are embedded in these continuous tensions between traditions and transformations in journalism, which essentially shape not only what newsgames stand for and how we should understand them, but also how they get produced and why.

Gonzalo Frasca (2003) is regarded as the first to use the term 'newsgame'. On Newsgaming.com, Frasca and his game developer colleagues acknowledge that digital games have mostly focused on fantasy rather than reality; however, they believe that games can be a great tool for understanding the world better. Frasca (ibid.) characterises the notion as a "simulation meets political cartoons", suggesting that newsgames are digital games equivalent to political cartoons, through which newsrooms satirically allude to political issues in large or narrow scopes. Drawing from Frasca's work, Mike Treanor and Michael Mateas (2009) also translate political cartoons into the field of newsgames. They distinguish between "social comment" games that are not about a specific news event, but rather a broad issue in which people can easily engage, and "political" games that provide a commentary about a specific event, taking a stance or position. In this sense, Treanor and Mateas (ibid.) argue that newsgames can engage people in ways that political cartoons are unable to do, due to the "procedural rhetoric" (cf. Bogost, 2007) tied to the core computational affordances where editorial advocacy is embodied in running processes and executing rule-based symbolic manipulation. In any case, by basing their conceptualisations on the reference to political cartoons, Frasca (2003), as well as Treanor and Mateas (2009), understand newsgames as non-journalistic digital communication modes, which are, however, through particular rhetoric combinations of visuals, sounds and gameplay, closely tied to journalism as a cultural practice.

At the same time, building his work on theoretical concepts and ideas from journalism studies, Miguel Sicart (2008) argues that newsgames do not persuade but illustrate, in order to provide an open space for discussion. "Unlike political games that present a clearly biased argumentation with the intention of shifting or reassuring the audience in their political beliefs, newsgames do not enforce directly instrumental goals" (ibid.: 29). By using public service theory and concepts from computer game studies,

he argues that newsgames can have an editorial line, but they do not have political interests; newsgames participate in the public debate, illustrating news by means of procedural rhetoric, but they do not aim to steer the discussion, and newsgames are temporal, as they refer to specific timely news and do not aspire beyond particular news events (ibid.: 30). In this context, Simon Ferrari (2009) acknowledges that Sicart's understanding of newsgames is "constraining"; therefore, he introduces the notion of "editorial games" while stressing limitations of timeliness, ephemerality and the simulation gap in Sicart's conceptualisation. "Basically, our suggestion is that most games called 'newsgames' don't have the same intentions or goals as traditional reporting, or 'the news', but rather those of the op-ed piece: to persuade; therefore, we should label these digital opinion pieces as 'editorial' rather than 'news'" (ibid.). In this sense, Ferrari bases his distinction between newsgames and editorial games on a pragmatic understanding of reality (cf. Maras, 2013), where the method of verification refers to what does not exist, but can be perceived as being brought into being.

In their monograph "Newsgames: Journalism at Play", Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari and Bobby Schweizer (2010: 13) expand the notion of a newsgame: "[F]or us, 'newsgame' suggests any intersection of journalism and gaming." Within this broader approach to the journalism-games convergence, newsgames appear as particular forms of communication that – through running processes and executing rule-based symbolic manipulation – inform, persuade or titillate, recreate a historical event or build a community through interactive engagement. By reviewing their analyses, one can identify an understanding of journalism that rests on what is known as a high-modern or classical paradigm, which is aimed at the heterogeneous citizenry sharing a common public culture and at citizens using journalism as a resource for participation in society (cf. Dahlgren, 2009). In this context, newsgames, as implied by Bogost et al. (2010), emphasise people's ability to judge their own self-interests and assume that playing audiences have the potential to respond to processes and relations in society. As such, the function of the convergence between journalism and games is to gather, assemble and provide information; to comment in order to place news in a proper cultural context; and to assist the public in understanding its relationship to societal life.

The above review indicates a dual void in previous scholarly investigations of newsgames – with respect to their conceptual complexity and empirical focus. On the one hand, foregoing theoretical work on newsgames is mostly based on the notion of news that is characterised by liberal concepts of citizenship and participation and that neglects the normative-empirical variety of ways that journalism links physically separated but spiritually interrelated individuals to political, economic and cultural life.

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On the other hand, previous empirical research deals almost exclusively with the rhetorical character of newsgames, providing only partial insights into the development rationale of newsgames. Thus, many issues, such as newsroom-game developers' relations and editors' and journalists' perceptions of newsgames, are not elaborated in-depth. Therefore, this study aims to supplement preceding works by shifting the conceptual emphasis from communication to the work by which newsrooms decide what news is to be depicted in games, to the social constraints that influence and limit newsgames' development, and to the societal relevance of newsgames as forces that shape the values, beliefs and processes by which people manage their lives. Thus, in this study, the empirical investigation of the journalism-games convergence is aimed not only at what is produced with respect to procedural rhetoric, but also at how newsgames get produced and why – under what conditions, for what purposes, and within which institutional mindset and journalists' self-perceptions. In order to manage such an investigation, deep knowledge of a contextual background is needed regarding larger issues of journalism, particularities of convergence processes and newsgames' positions within the media realm.

Contextual background: Journalism, convergence and newsgames in Slovenia

Convergence research in Slovenian journalism indicates that lines dividing journalism, entertainment, public relations and advertising are getting increasingly blurred, because media markets are being converged (e.g. Bašić Hrvatin and Kučić, 2004; Petković in Bašić Hrvatin, 2007; Milosavljević and Kerševan Smokvina, 2012), previously separated media departments are getting integrated (e.g. Vobič, 2009, 2012), and discourses are hybridised (e.g. Poler Kovačič, 2005; Laban, 2007; Erjavec, 2008). Although a cross-section of media and journalism research in Slovenia shows that convergence studies present one of the salient branches of scholarly investigations, there is a substantial lack of scholarship on newsgames. Nevertheless, the convergence of journalism and digital games has often been placed on the public agenda during the last two decades with respect to their societal relevance, newsrooms' rationale behind them, and their role in public reasoning.

Over the last two decades, Slovenian journalism has evolved in rather contingent relations among the state, civil society and media, resulting in a "crisis of journalistic accountability" (Poler Kovačič, 2005) and in hard-to-define societal functions of journalism (Vobič, 2013). At the same time, facing declining audience attention and advertising incomes, journalism attempts to reconnect with people by combining its normative functions, prescribed in self-regulatory documents, with entertainment (cf. Poler

Kovačič and Erjavec, 2008; Poler Kovačič, 2009; Vobič, 2009), resulting in what Melita Poler Kovačič (2005) identifies as "market-driven journalism". In this context, particularly in the election years, traditional news institutions in Slovenia provide newsgames with their in-house or outsourced programming teams, depicting relevant social issues through articulations among partisan politics, political satire and popular culture. For instance, *Delo*, the leading Slovenian newspaper in terms of the print circulation of its serious and tabloid dailies (RPN, 2013), has provided several newsgames in the last half decade, such as the puzzle game Pirates of the Piran Bay (*Pirati Piranskega zaliva* – http://www.delo.si/pirati), referring to the sea border issues between Slovenia and Croatia (Delo.si, 2009); the strategic game Wildly Wild Country (*Divje divja dežela* – http://ddd.delo.si), depicting corruption issues at local political levels (Ivanc, 2012); and the racing game Furious and Fast (*Drzni in hitri* – http://www.drzni-in-hitri.com), reflecting politicians' types of leadership through different driving styles (Aeris3.si, 2009). Despite the fact that these games have been played by between 30,000 and 60,000 people (ibid.), and several blogs have been posted by renowned bloggers (e.g., Had, 2009), they have hardly caused a stir in Slovenian public life.

Compared to the *Delo* newsgames, *Mladina's* newsgame *Fojba 2000* has received much more media and political attention in Slovenia and abroad, not only in 2000 when it was developed, but also in subsequent years (e.g. Crnkovič, 2000; Savin 2003; STA, 2003; Cerar, 2004). In this Tetris-style game, the player needs to manipulate the falling bodies of the Partisans who formed a National Liberation Army against Fascism and Nazism [1941–1945], the Home Guards who collaborated with Nazi Germany [1943–1945], or "All Together" (*vse po spisku*), in order to develop lines to stay in the game. The bodies shaped into tetrominoes are tile-matched by the player in one of the sinkhole which were used to dispose of corpses of soldiers and/or the civil population killed after extrajudicial trials during and after the Second World War – in the territories bordering Slovenia and Italy. *Fojba 2000's* depiction of ideological war divisions in Slovenia (cf. Škerlep, 2009) has been regarded by some journalists as "hideous" (in the Slovenian daily *Delo*) and "cruel" (in the Italian daily *Il Piccolo*), while some were "supportive of *Mladina's* cynicism" (Crnkovič, 2000). Additionally, in the spring of 2003, a group of right-wing members of the Italian parliament called for the "darkening" of the *Mladina* website (STA, 2003), asked the Italian government for assistance (Savin, 2003) and organised demonstrations in front of the Slovenian embassy in Rome (Cerar, 2004). *Mladina* (cf. Savin, 2003) responded that the game was "slightly misunderstood" in the media discourse, since the dichotomy between Partisans and Home Guards was presented as one between Communists and Catholics. *Mladina*, known for its progressive stance in the late 1980s and regarded as having played a

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significant role in the political processes leading to the fall of socialism in Slovenia (cf. Luthar et al., 2008), explicitly connected the game with contemporary reconciliation discussions rearticulating ideological divisions during and after the Second World War (cf. Škerlep, 2009). "[The] computer game *Fojba 2000* is *Mladina's* contribution to reconciliation in Slovenia. Partisans as well as Home Guards are indiscriminately falling into the holes! The game has no connection whatsoever with Italian Fascism of the first half of [the] 20th century and post-war extrajudicial killings," said Jani Sever, *Mladina's* editor-in-chief at the time (as cited in Cerar, 2004). In 2004, the game was revived and republished as Sprava 2004 and again in 2009 as Sprava (Reconciliation in Slovenian). "For a moment we thought that the message of the game [was] not up-to-date anymore, but we were wrong, as many readers kindly claimed" (Lajovic, 2009). A decade later, the newsgame is no longer available on its original URL (http://www.mladina.si/projekti/igre/fojba2000/), because The Tetris Company, owned by the Tetris creator Alexey Pajitnov, sent *Mladina* a copyright act violation notice regarding *Fojba 2000*.

Although the above review of media accounts on *Fojba 2000* brings only bits and pieces of the newsgame's procedural rhetoric, the newsroom rationale behind it and its role in public reasoning, it indicates that the matter deserves profound scholarly elaboration. Therefore, the study attempts to analyse *Fojba 2000* from the perspective of procedural rhetoric, its development process and journalists' perceptions. Conducting a comprehensive analysis of the news-games convergence is not only relevant, because previous works have not aimed to do so (cf. Frasca, 2003; Sicart, 2008; Ferrari, 2009; Treanor and Mateas, 2009; Bogost et al., 2010), but mainly because the insights reflect larger patterns of convergence in journalism with respect to the media representation of social reality, the combination of conventionally separated production staff members, and issues of journalists' self-understanding in a particular social context. In this sense, we pose the following research questions:

> *RQ1: What rationale shaped the development of Fojba 2000 with respect to the dynamics between newsroom staffers and the game developing team?*
> *RQ2: What is the rhetorical character of Fojba 2000 regarding the game mechanics and rule-based system?*
> *RQ3: How do Mladina journalists, editors and game developers understand the societal relevance of Fojba 2000?*

By dealing with these questions that regard games as production, communication and social force, the study also attempts to investigate *Fojba*

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2000 as a cultural product that has rearticulated itself through the 2000s and in the 2010s. This aspect indicates how connections between the normative and empirical in journalism are non-essential and context-related, since they are forged and can be broken, particularly into a certain medium and specific societal configurations. In order to obtain useful and reliable data, we adopt two qualitative methods, which are presented in the next section: procedural rhetoric analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Methodology

This study's goal is to answer the three research questions by investigating the procedural rhetoric, development process and perceptions with respect to the analysed newsgame. Similar to previous studies dealing with the convergence in journalism on textual (e.g. Deuze, 2004; Steensen, 2011; Usher, 2013), production (e.g. Paterson and Domingo, 2008; Quinn, 2009; Erdal, 2011) and perception (e.g. Chung, 2007; Robinson, 2010; Vobič, 2013) levels, this analysis takes a case study approach to investigate the newsgames phenomenon in the socially, technologically and institutionally shifting contexts of the last 15 years. This case study is qualitative, since it probes a particular case of in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within the contextual settings, rather than providing vast generalisations (cf. Yin, 2003). The data gathered through procedural rhetoric analysis and semi-structured interviews are synthesised in order to increase the scope, precision, depth and consistency in methodological proceedings (cf. Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

The method of procedural rhetoric analysis was used to investigate how *Fojba 2000* adapts journalism to playable elements that are relevant for understanding the simulated and embedded ideas and values of the newsgame. By taking the "procedural rhetoric" analysis introduced by Bogost (2007) and widely adopted in games studies (cf. Sicart, 2011), we analysed a combination of the newsgame's defining ability to execute a series of rules (i.e., procedure) and its effective expression (i.e., rhetoric). In order to know the procedural rhetoric character of *Fojba 2000*, we analysed the newsgame's rule system that provides the basic conditions for the game, including its game over or winning conditions, as well as game mechanics that design limitations in a player's actions within the game experience. In this sense, we analysed the newsgame's rules in order to identify "the systemic embodiment of the boundaries of the editorial line" and "the opinion: the boundaries where play takes place, those that decide what is simulated, and how" (Sicart, 2008: 32). Additionally, we explored the game's mechanics to learn how *Fojba 2000* funnels player agency towards a specific type of behaviour relevant for understanding the game's message (ibid.). Both lines

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of analytical inquiry were tied to the specific contextual background presented above in terms of the critical proving, disproving and reconstructing of theoretical groundings, and in terms of experimenting with the case's empirical boundaries through time, space and culture (cf. Riain, 2009).

Additionally, in January 2014, we conducted semi-structured interviews and short conversations with a former *Mladina* editor-in-chief (1996–2006), the current *Mladina* editor-in-chief (2006–), the head of the *Mladina* website reconstruction team, the newsgame's animator and two former *Mladina* journalists who worked there in 2000. The conversations flexibly applied the interview guide while combining three types of questions, each of which was a distinct stimulus used for a particular purpose at a certain stage of the conversation. First, 'content-mapping' (Legard et al., 2003, 148) was used to start the conversation on the topic rather loosely. Then we asked 'theory-driven' (Flick, 2006: 156) questions based on the literature review and the study's theoretical framework. Finally, the 'content-mining' questions (Legard et al., 2003: 150) responded to the notions the interviewee had presented up to that point in order to critically re-examine them. We then used Grant McCracken's (1988) five-step process for the analysis of qualitative interviews. Through careful reading, preliminary descriptive and interpretative categories were made based on the set conceptual framework. Later, these preliminary codes were thoroughly examined in order to identify connections and patterns in the journalists' discourse. From there, the analysis involved a determination of basic themes by examining clusters of comments made by the interviewees. In the last step, we examined themes from all interviews across such groupings to delineate predominant ones in relation to the two research questions.

Results

The analysis of data gathered through in-depth interviews and procedural rhetoric analysis indicates that the journalism-games convergence in the case of *Fojba 2000* is articulated in cross-company production processes, context-related procedural rhetoric, and perception variety among editors, journalists and game developers. In this sense, results show that the *Fojba 2000* development happened within the larger project of Mladina.si reconstruction, with the convergent cooperation between the newsroom and an outsourced programming team, and was conducted in three phases: gathering and assembling ideas, newsgame programming and arranging *Fojba 2000*'s online life. With respect to procedural rhetoric, the analysis of *Fojba 2000* indicates a rhetoric of paradox, which is reflected in the newsgame's choice of Partisans, Home Guards or both, ridiculing the "moral dilemma" constructed by Slovenian political elites (head of Mladina.si reconstruction

team, interview, 10 January 2014). It also implies a "rhetoric of failure" (Bogost, 2007) through the newsgame's rules, where the absence of the winning condition articulates a myopic character of the prevailing discourse of exclusion in regard to the historical context of the Second World War. Furthermore, in-depth interviews indicate that *Fojba 2000* was a response to the prevailing ideological discourse in media and politics, although the interviewees express a varied range of understanding of the newsgame – as a joke, protest or contribution to reconciliation. Moreover, despite one interviewee's perception of the game as a "surplus of the website" (*Mladina* editor-in-chief [1996–2006], interview, 8 January 2014), the former and current *Mladina* editors and journalists interviewed more or less agree that the future development of newsgames is rather uncertain due to the "shortage of money, ideas and time" in the weekly production (*Mladina* editor-in-chief [2006–], interview, 10 January 2014).

Spontaneous development within the website reconstruction project

By interviewing people involved in the production of *Fojba 2000* (*Mladina* editor-in-chief [1996–2006], outsourced leading game developer, in-house cartoonist and two *Mladina* journalists), we approach the first research question in order to reconstruct the factors and rationale behind the development of this newsgame, as well as the cooperative dynamics between the *Mladina* newsroom and the outsourced game production team.

The development of *Fojba 2000* was part of the larger reconstruction of the *Mladina* website. "At that time the website was neglected; the administrator took care of the maintenance and put in-house print content online. /.../ We did not want only text and photos, but also something extra." (*Mladina* editor-in-chief [1996–2006], interview, 8 January 2014) In this context, *Mladina* opted for interactive features, such as user-generated cartoons and user comments sections, and strove to create a newsgame. Those involved say that the development of Fojba was "accidental" (ibid.) and "spontaneous" (*Mladina* journalist B, interview, 16 January 2014), but at the same time part of "serious and responsible work" (head of Mladina.si reconstruction team, interview, 10 January 2014) within the Mladina.si reconstruction.

> *As I remember, 15 years ago we had never-ending pleasant messing around, which was also planned brainstorming. This was not done in [a] café or over a beer. The game was being created with a purpose. /.../ Mladina is transgressive, innovative, pervasive, societally relevant and bla-bla-bla. So, we said, let's make such a game – not just playing and having fun, but basing it on Slovenian local specifics* (ibid.).

All the members of the core development team acknowledge that the first phase, gathering and assembling ideas, was organic. For instance, "Things just happened. One said Tetris and then somebody else said Partisans and Home Guards. Eventually, we made a script and then it had to be programmed" (*Mladina* editor-in-chief [1996–2006], interview, 8 January 2014). Other interviewees say that "we did not philosophise a lot" (*Mladina* journalist A, interview, 8 January 2014), and "it was not a big story" (*Mladina* journalist B, interview, 16 January 2014). Yet the head of the Mladina. si reconstruction team (interview, 10 January 2014) says that they found inspiration in Monty Python's game, The Meaning of Life, where at a certain point, the player had to tile-match bodies of the people who died at the time of the Great Plague. "Tetris is a satirical game by itself. /.../ And Monty Python [was] our canon – our Aristotle and Hegel" (ibid.).

In the second stage, programming the game, the head of the Mladina.si reconstruction team included the in-house cartoonist to draw all the characters and other elements of the game, which were then digitalised into a Tetris-style game by the outsourced company Literal. The core development team and the newsroom in general were excluded from the programming of the newsgame, "Everything was based on trust, and I thank [the] then editor-in-chief for that. /.../ The game was made as a bonus, for free, in the reconstruction of the website." (head of Mladina.si reconstruction team, interview, 10 January 2014) According to the editor-in-chief, when the game was presented in the newsroom, the journalists were divided: "Some were absolutely for the game; some thought it was ethically questionable. /.../ Yet I decided that we go for it, because I did not see it as offensive" (*Mladina* editor-in-chief [1996–2006], interview, 8 January 2014).

The third stage, arranging the game's online life, was significantly defined by the fact that "*Mladina* had no direct commercial goals with the game" (head of the Mladina.si reconstruction team, interview, 10 January 2014). Therefore, the primary focus was to stimulate rapid and wide circulation from one online user to another. "With its unexpected aspect of fun, the newsgame promotes *Mladina's* website and plays with virality. /.../ Therefore, we allowed that the game [be] pirated, but at the same time, we got readers to the website" (ibid.). In this sense, the interviewees stress that it was not important who was on top of the results table, but rather, it was the character of interactions via *Fojba 2000* and consequently, between online users and Mladina.si.

Rhetoric of paradox and failure

By taking the method of procedural rhetoric analysis, we approach the second research question and investigate *Fojba 2000*'s game mechanics

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and rule-based system. As the game is a variant of Tetris, *Fojba 2000* is procedurally close to this classic puzzle game, whereas its rhetoric character is tied to the specific background of the Slovenian historical context and current political life.

In *Fojba 2000*, the player manipulates cartoonish human bodies shaped into tetrominoes and matches tiles in a rectangular-shaped mass grave to be able to keep up with the flow. Before the game starts, the player needs to decide whether to throw Partisans, Home Guards or both into the sinkhole. "The player faces the paradox in this moral choice. It is a difficult game in this sense. The game brings the dilemma that is artificially constructed by the political manipulators each time before the elections" (head of Mladina. si reconstruction team, interview, 10 January 2014). The paradox of choice is extrapolated as the player is faced with the infinity of bodies being literally kicked into the sinkhole and required to cope with repetitious mechanics in order to make room for the continuous onslaught. In this context, the in-house *Mladina* cartoonist (short e-conversation, 13 January 2014), who has drawn the figures and the background of *Fojba 2000*, believes that the game "might be cathartic for many. As much as I could, I tried to downsize the sharpness and drew cute clowns – all the same, except the symbols" (ibid.).

Additionally, *Fojba 2000* has no winning condition. The rule system only determines the losing condition – that is, when the player is incapable of responding to the combination and speed of tetrominoes coming down, the sinkhole gets full of cartoonish bodies, while MIDI Slovenian polka is playing in the background. This inevitably fatal, never-ending task of this Tetris-style newsgame embodies the rhetoric of failure, reflecting a particular game design that comments on a particular political state or relations by disabling the player from winning. In other words, the rhetoric of failure of *Fojba 2000* articulates the difficulties of overcoming the Second World War's ideological divisions in the political life of contemporary Slovenia and the unsuccessful reconciliation process since the late 1980s. At the same time, *Fojba 2000* has two results tables: the first one ranks the best players according to the matched tiles, and the second table provides the percentages of Partisans, Home Guards or All Together thrown into the sinkhole. The interviewees give particular importance to the second one. For instance, "This was a trick. As a player, you were burying those you have chosen. I think that the results showed that most players selected all together, but I am not completely sure" (*Mladina* journalist A, interview, 8 January 2014).

Newsgame as a joke, protest and contribution to reconciliation

With respect to the third research question, the interview analysis indicates the diversity in the *Mladina* current and former editors', journalists'

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and game developer's understandings of *Fojba 2000*'s societal relevance. In their narrations, one can identify three variations in their understanding of the newsgame.

The first understanding frames *Fojba 2000* as a "satire" (head of Mladina. si reconstruction team, interview, 10 January 2014), "joke" (*Mladina* editor-in-chief, interview, 8 January 2014), "parody" or "stunt" (*Mladina* journalist A, interview, 8 January 2014). For instance, the former *Mladina* editor-in-chief (1996–2006) (interview, 8 January 2014) says that *Fojba 2000* was a "political game with a message. It was fun and [a] provocation – content on our website used for communication with our readers" (ibid.). Additionally, the head of the Mladina.si reconstruction team (interview, 10 January 2014) sees *Fojba 2000* as a response to the political discourse of separation: "[The] satirical spirit won. We wanted to distance ourselves from the political class, who see themselves too seriously, and relax a bit. /.../ Yet this was not a light joke but serious stuff that will overcome the test of time."

The second identified understanding depicts *Fojba 2000* as a "protest" (*Mladina* journalist B, interview, 16 January 2014) or "response" (*Mladina* editor-in-chief [2006–], interview, 10 January) against the political discourse on the Second World War's ideological divisions and extrajudicial trials during and after the war. "I understand this game as a protest against Partisans-Home Guards discussions. Give us a break already! Historians should deal with the Second World War. /.../ Crimes were committed in a particular historical context." (*Mladina* journalist B, interview, 16 January 2014) The current *Mladina* editor-in-chief (2006–) (interview, 10 January 2014) sees the game in a similar fashion: "[The] media at [that] time did not know how to respond to the ideological political discussions. To the stupidity that is still around, you need different means. /.../ *Fojba 2000* was a response to that: We don't want a discussion like this. While we are at it, we could throw our people [in]to sinkholes instead."

The third understanding sees *Fojba 2000* as a "contribution to reconciliation" (*Mladina* editor-in-chief [1996–2006], interview, 8 January 2014). Among the interviewees, the former editor-in-chief appears to be alone in his perception; the others say that "such understanding is a bit too much" (*Mladina* editor-in-chief [2006–], interview, 10 January 2014), and "maybe he sees it like that, but I do not think that is the case" (*Mladina* journalist A, interview, 8 January 2014). The editor-in-chief at that time sees *Fojba 2000*'s reception among the people in a "humorous tone bringing reconciliation. What is reconciliation? Well, everybody [was] throwing people into holes. Now, we can throw each other into holes. Some of us do this for fun while playing Tetris" (*Mladina* editor-in-chief [1996–2006], interview, 8 January 2014). Some interviewees recall that in 2004, when the Italian members of parliament protested against the game, the then editor-in-chief used the

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argument that *Fojba 2000* contributed to reconciliation in Slovenia: "One day, he returned from a meeting at the Italian Embassy and quickly decided that the game [was] going to be renamed Sprava (Reconciliation)."

Newsgames not in primary focus

Although the interviewees agree that newsgames bring what the Mladina editor-in-chief (2006–) (interview, 10 January 2014) calls "additional value" to online journalism, they acknowledge that the convergence between journalism and digital games is not *Mladina's* primary concern, since they are focused on the printed edition. Yet the interviewees do not agree on whether *Mladina* journalism should incorporate newsgames in its operations.

On the one hand, most of the interviewees concur that *Fojba 2000* was just "something besides other activities" (*Mladina* journalist A, interview, 8 January 2014) and that newsgames are not the only alternative form of communication that *Mladina* offers to its readers. "Sometimes we make a game, sometimes we make a petition or a shirt. When we had a public discussion whether a street should have [the] name of Yugoslav President Tito, we made a shirt with a red star as a joke. Here you go: eat it!" (*Mladina* editor-in-chief [2006–], interview, 10 January) Some interviewees also stress that newsgames are not in the forefront of *Mladina's* business strategy. For instance, "The former online editor wanted these sorts of games, but we did not have enough ideas, money or energy. /.../ There are many such games on the Internet, and we cannot compete with them. *Mladina* does not make games; we make a weekly" (*Mladina* journalist B, interview, 16 January 2014).

On the other hand, the head of the Mladina.si reconstruction team in the early 2000s, as the leading *Fojba 2000* developer (interview, 10 January 2014), stresses that traditional news institutions should concentrate on newsgames production. First, he emphasises that newsgames are a form of communication that overcomes the limitations of conventional newspaper journalism. "In the digital age, computer games as a carrier of political satire appear as a good choice. /.../ If we wrote an article full of information, multilayered, full of analyses on a political class's relation to reconciliation, we would not talk about it almost 15 years later. We are talking about a game – so there is something in the form itself" (ibid.). Second, the leading game developer also believes that newsgames can be an effective online promotional tool for traditional news institutions. "It is not that complicated. Back then it was a good atmosphere, and *Mladina* showed it had a vision. We quickly agreed to make something that would push the website forward. /.../ Even today, making a game is cheaper than the costs of advertising the print edition via billboards."

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Conclusion

The study shows it is useful to explore newsgames to gain insights into the processes of convergence in journalism on production, communication and perception levels. The analysis of the procedural rhetoric of the Slovenian political weekly *Mladina's* newsgame *Fojba 2000* and of in-depth interviews with journalists, editors and game developers indicates patterns of coordinated cross-company production, the polysemous character of newsgames as forms of communication, and diverse perceptions on the societal relevance of the journalism-games convergence inside and outside the newsroom. Empirical findings from *Mladina* confirm larger convergence trends in media and journalism that were identified in previous studies, that is, the production convergence between traditionally separated practices such as journalism and entertainment (cf. Deuze, 2004), the utilisation of various semiological forms in the digital package (cf. Steensen, 2011), and great complexities in journalists' self-perceptions in relation to technological innovations (cf. Robinson, 2010). Additionally, investigating *Mladina's Fojba 2000*, through procedural rhetoric and in-depth interviews, indicates patterns of larger contingent trends in journalism with respect to production, communication forms and its societal function, among other perspectives.

The coordinated cross-company production of *Fojba 2000* manifestes a larger process in the media realm, where different professionals collaborate on convergent projects. Furthermore, the gradual processes of increasing the combination of technologies, staff and content across formerly distinct businesses reflect what Ari Heinonen and Heikki Luostarinen (2008: 236) understand as "the changing locus of journalism". Specifically, the production settings of news institutions are becoming more complex, and their products are increasingly related to a variety of occupational groups, of whom many (for instance, game developers) have a professional identity other than journalistic as their frame of reference (ibid.). In this sense, being torn between old virtues and the changing media production environment might explain the interviewees' narrations suggesting that the newsroom has not paid much attention to the newsgame's mechanics and rule-based systems as signifiers of *Fojba 2000*'s meaning. In other words, in the digital age, "media logic" (cf. Altheide and Snow, 1979) – referring to mutuality of specific forms of content and production processes – is being reshaped. It appears that the rationale behind Fojbe 2000 lacks a comprehensive orientation towards the interactions among various actors within and outside the newsroom, which define what gets depicted in the newsgame and how it gets done. Therefore, the identified perception variety with respect to *Fojba 2000*'s societal relevance is not surprising. The interviewees put their reasoning somewhere between entertainment and advocacy, which indicates

greater difficulties of contemporary journalism in how to position itself in public communication and how to understand itself as a link between people and political life. In the context of the "multi-epistemic environment", where citizens are being increasingly cognitively segregated (cf. Dahlgren, 2009), identification issues of journalism seem deep – not only with respect to the social functions of newsgames, but communication in general.

Thus, newsgames – as products, communication forms and identification anchorages – reflect larger issues of communication in late modernity, where journalism faces continuous structural challenges, organisational difficulties and identity uncertainties (cf. Dahlgren, 2009; Jones and Salter, 2012; Vobič 2013). Therefore, additional conceptual and empirical work is needed to further clarify the identified complex issues of the newsgames phenomenon. Since a particular case study does not allow for generalisations across the news industry, it is not possible to extend the findings from *Mladina* to other manifestations of journalism-games convergence in Slovenia and other countries. Therefore, in order to provide more comprehensive insights, future studies of newsgames could benefit from comparative transnational investigations of the phenomena covering production, rhetoric and perceptions – not only within the institutional settings, but also among the "people formerly known as the audience" (cf. Rosen, 2008). The latter has already assumed roles that used to be reserved for media professionals and has essentially reshaped the character of public communication.

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