

Videogame Activism: Contemporary Examples and their Effectivity

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Keywords

videogame, protest, activism, politics, play

INTRODUCTION

Activism is media dependent. In the past, protest movements have communicated discontent and gained momentum through literature, music, moving images, and poster art. In the contemporary context, videogames attract broader demographics than ever before and thus represent a potent medium through which social and political activism can be enacted. As a result, protest movements globally are increasingly embracing videogame elements.

For example, in 2019 Hong Kong protesters used videogames to powerfully express localist sentiment, and in 2022, Ukrainian citizens have created playable experiences to denounce invading Russian forces - both groups have represented the violence of their cities under siege by adapting popular videogames titles (Davies, 2020; Evans-Thirlwell, 2022). Black Lives Matters activists in the United States have taken up videogames to articulate new futures in titles such as *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000) and *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2013) (Schofield 2020; Cortez et al. 2022). Activist videogames were produced as part of Turkey's Taksim Gezi Park protests (Koenitz, 2014; Sezen and Sezen, 2016) while more recently, Iranian authorities have blocked the popular *Clash of Clans* (Supercell, 2013) to prevent users from coordinating demonstrations via the game platform (Rees, 2022).

With attention to these trends, for some time videogame scholarship has examined how the dynamics of videogame protest plays out. Bogost (2007) has highlighted the expressive and persuasive power of videogames as a communicative medium for activist causes. For Davies (2020) the spatial nature of videogames renders them ideal locations to demonstrate the politics of place. Koenitz (2014) suggests that videogames enable players to play test levels of engagement before participating in real-world events. In Jones' estimation (2009), the growing prevalence of videogames for activist pursuits marks the next logical step of adaptability to a constantly evolving media environment.

While the spaces of videogames allow for a kind of 'gamified activism' (Davies, 2022), what are the actual affordances of this virtual protest medium? With no embodied presence, what is the capacity for videogames to bring about tangible real-world change? Within a protest context, what can videogames really achieve?

Drawing attention to recent instances of videogame activism from Ukraine, Iran, the United States and Hong Kong, this paper provides a snapshot of contemporary videogame protest exploring their efficacy through a range of strategic and tactical examples. These include: (1) raising awareness about injustices; (2) causing inconvenience and disruption to those in power; (3) invoking a sense of community and solidarity; (4) acting as a communicative and organisational platform; (5) operating as a terrain of battle; (6) broadening the horizon for hopeful futures.

While the efficacy and legitimacy of videogame activism has come into question (Richardson et al), in this discussion videogames are shown as contributing a broad and growing repertoire of resistance practices and possibilities. These include as tools of organisation and planning, as leveraging support across digital and social platforms, as communicating ideas to those inside and outside of movements, and as gesturing toward the potential for new civic futures. With scholarship at the intersection of protest, politics and play, this paper unpacks videogames as potent sites of activism and as new public spaces in which to counter forces of oppression.

BIO

Hugh Davies is an interdisciplinary artist, scholar and curator. His work spans architecture, design, games, and geopolitics. He is a researcher of Chinese Platform Studies at RMIT in Melbourne where he has co-authored two books, one concerning games and game cultures and the other on Minecraft. Both are informed by his research into games and play in the Asia Pacific region. Hugh is president of the Chinese Digital Games and Research Association (CDiGRA).

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