# Why Political Engagement Should Not Be a Game

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## Author Statement

## Abstract

This paper begins a dialogue between the ethics of gamification (Hyrynsalmi, Kimppa, and Smed, 2024), defined as "the study and understanding of right and wrong conducts by or with gamified solutions," and political theory, understood as a discipline which "aims to determine what ought to be done" (McDermott, 2008) in the political sphere. Informed by research on gamification to increase civic engagement (Lobna and Hamari, 2020), and by considering several projects in France to make citizens participate in local decisions, such as park development, voting budgets, or discussing political issues, it questions the fairness of gamification. These instances of gamification can be understood as being motivated by a desire to make every political activity more pleasing to experience, and thereby overcome the disinterest and disengagement of citizens about political issues. The question remains, if this ambition were effective, should we accept to spread gamification in political activities?
First, I examine the criticism about the intrinsic and extrinsic value of activity. Gamification is usually accused of making people lose the perception of the intrinsic value of their activities in favor of a rewarding system, where the value ends up being only extrinsic or affects the character of the individuals (Grant, 2012; Kim and Werbach, 2016). I defend that this criticism is not sufficient because some games are not based on rewards and that even without gamification, some political activities will probably always be considered instrumental and not valuable per se.

Second, I propose to see the real problem of gamification as a problem of equal consideration in the political sphere. This point has rarely been emphasized by the literature, but gamification can be considered a practical utopia (Latowska and Steinkuehler). Gamification implies that any

political activities can be a game, because if we consider that the state should treat every citizen with equal consideration – or at least fairly – so if gamification is beneficial to some citizens, then all citizens should be able to ask to have access to a gamified version of their political activities. Therefore, my point leads us to consider that gamifying one political activity may lead to claims of gamifying all political activities.

Third, if we have a possible total gamification of political activities, even if it is not done directly in practice, then we face three different problems. The first one is how citizens using gamified political engagement will still be able to exchange with people rejecting gamification. The second one is about the habituation of citizens to consider that every political activity may be formalized as a hierarchical system (Thibault and Hamari, 2021) where some people decide rules and develop epistemological knowledge about incentives, while others will only be considered as players or users. The third one is more grounded in deontological traditions: can we consider that people will fulfill their political duties if they are not directly aware of their personal and existential efforts? More precisely, this point criticizes the fact that we should consider political activity something that will be made without a serious narrative of efforts and hardships. The idea that political activity can be done by following the rules of a game is thus against the claim that a citizen should develop his/her own solution to be part of the community and that they have a creative duty to find themselves solutions to their instinctive aversion for some political activities.

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**Protest Storytelling & The Crowd Problem in Videogames: The Case of Riot: Civil Unrest**

Videogames are being globally politicized to adopt narratives beyond mere entertainment. They are used by the police to train officers (e.g., Safeciti, 2016), by the military for recruitment (e.g., American Army, 2002), and by politicians to sway voters (e.g., Corbyn Run, 2017). While gamestudies have explored videogames influence as propaganda tools and examined their connection to militarized violence, (Crogan 2011, Godfrey 2022) there remains a gap in understanding the continuous portrayal of violent protesting crowds in videogames and its influence on players' behaviour.

Simulating protests, riots, or demonstrations has been a common theme in videogames since the 1990s. Triple-A series, such as *SimCity* (1993, 2003), *Tropico* (2011, 2019), and *Emergency* (2005, 2016), prioritize entertainment over accurate representation of social justice issues. In these games, players control police units to contain violent crowds that vandalize the city. A narrative that aligns with the medium's long-standing complicity with military ideologies for what is known since the 80s as the militarization of videogame culture through the Military–Entertainment Complex.

The last decade has witnessed a substantial shift in protest storytelling in videogames. Global uprisings, (Ortiz et al. 2022) along with the affordance of game development tools, have enabled amateurs and independent developers to explicitly situate their narratives around social justice. (e.g., OccupyGezi, 2014) For instance, the developer of *Riot: Civil Unrest*, a 2019 game depicting global uprisings in 2011, stated that he was standing with protesters opposing the construction of the high-speed train in Italy. His game narrative recognizes that "the civil crisis deepens, and inequality tears the fabric of society." (Jones 2019)

Despite this political shift in storytelling, the portrayal of crowds in *Riot: Civil Unrest* still favours the depiction of irrational and violent crowds. Instead of creating a narrative that stands against the oppressive system, the game became an echo of the system itself. This disconnect between developers' political inclination and the technical representation of crowds in videogames necessitates stepping back from the game narrative to examine the tools and methods used to generate crowds as well as its correlation to crowd psychology.

Crowd studies has been an established field within humanities since the 19th century. Driven by the growth of simulation technologies during the Cold War, the interst in the crowd problem shifted to computer simulation during the second half of the 20th century. The introduction of Reynolds' flocking boid algorithm in 1986 established the technical foundation to develop crowds for animation and videogames. In videogames, crowds are predominantly composed of non-playable characters (NPCs) — artificially intelligent entities programmed by developers to generate human-like behaviours within the gamespace, which vary from rule-based (e.g., A* algorithm) to emergent behaviour (e.g., Flocking Boids).

Even though studying crowd beahviour has been a central theme in humanities, computer engineering and interdisciplinary fields such as computational social science (Edelmann 2020), there is a lack of interdisciplinary investigation into how behavioural models drawn from socio-psychological crowd theories and adapted to simulated crowd models contribute to the production of a violent crowd in videogames. Furthermore, the current models primarily focus on steering (e.g., obstacle avoidance) and emotional behaviours (e.g., contagion theory), which when applied in the context of videogames, portray an image of a docile crowd subject to police control (Bashandy 2023). Consequently, they fail to address the spatial and non-violent dynamics of crowds, an aspect that recent movements

have proven to be crucial (Scholl 2013, Mohamed et al. 2015, Butler 2021). It is at the intersection of these two issues that this research makes its original contribution.

In this interdisciplinary project, I examine the semantic history of crowd theory (Borch 2012), its relationship with crowd simulation and how, together, they are projected in videogames. I argue that the situational failure of *Riot: Civil Unrest* stems from a disconnect between interpreting protest as a social and political phenomenon and adapting it into a videogame through mechanics derived from controversial literature in crowd simulation and classical crowd theory. This literature continues to see crowds as 'disaster' leading to a predominant focus on simulating police tactics for crowd control (Trade 1890, Le Bon 1895, Posadas and Teknomo 2016, Park et al. 2018, Hedlund and Vinsa 2022). Ultimately, this ongoing project aims to challenge the underlying policing ideologies embedded in videogames depicting protest.

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**Author's Statement**
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My research sits at the intersection of urban issues and playful simulations, particularly examining the implications of playful interventions and computer simulations in participatory design and social movements. Throughout my work, I look at the opportunities in videogames' constructed worlds, virtual and augmented environments, as well as generative urban AI to think critically about our inhabited spaces while confronting and dissecting the algorithmic biases and colonial structures embedded in the city. My ongoing research engages with the datafication of crowd behaviour. It investigates the impact of implementing agent-based modelling and crowd simulation techniques on the behaviour of Non-player characters (NPCs) in video games when coded in large masses with a particular focus on digital environments depicting political protests.

# Resilient Resistance: Exploring Empowerment and Experience through Video Games

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Games have the potential to highlight digital inequalities and create spaces for empowering individuals (Bleumers et al., 2012). They can provide access to a wide range of knowledge, skills, and experiences that may not be attainable through traditional education or social avenues. At the same time, digital games offer users various possibilities for agency through their ability to control and shape virtual environments (Muriel & Crawford, 2020). This sense of agency can be particularly empowering for those who lack control over other aspects of their lives. Through the use of avatars, players can experiment with different identities and explore new perspectives, which can lead to increased self-awareness and confidence. Consequently, digital games can serve not only as entertainment but also as tools for social and political change (Flanagan, 2009). Games that address social justice issues, such as poverty, racism, and gender inequality, can raise awareness and promote empathy and understanding. In other words, for the creators, such games can act as manifestos, opening a line of experience that others can participate in, while for players, they can offer an experience that raises awareness, empathy, and understanding about social justice themes they encounter or wish to engage with in daily life. Additionally, games serve as a crucial platform for marginalized communities to share their experiences and amplify their voices. This study focuses on *Citizen Sleeper* as a case study to explore themes of identity, resistance, and empathy in computer games as tools for resilience.

*Citizen Sleeper* (Jump Over The Age, 2022), a science fiction role-playing game depicting a capitalist future society, portrays a dystopian world where income inequality is out of control, and major corporations have expanded a system of indentured servitude by transferring human consciousness into robotic bodies. The player controls a "sleeper," a human whose mind has been digitized and placed into a robot, fleeing from the corporation that seeks to control them. The game unfolds on a space station called Erlin's Eye, where the player must navigate a cyclical flow of time and a branching narrative, striving daily to survive by working and building relationships with other characters. Drawing from classic dice-based mechanics of role-playing games, the game creates a pervasive sense of insecurity due to its use of these tools and the narrative's variability based on player choices. It compellingly conveys the uncertainties of daily life and the inadequacy of an individual's limited resources in the face of these uncertainties. Within the game world, the player is compelled to form solidarity and cooperation with other marginalized characters to overcome uncertainties and integrate into their lives.

In a world built for—and by—capital, *Citizen Sleeper* portrays the player character as an expendable or interchangeable labour unit, forcing them to live with an inherent instability characterized by a disability that must be managed as part of the character's attributes. The study will analyze the game's representation of themes like resilience, experience, and empathy through an intersectional lens. It seeks to explore how representations of intersecting identities—such as queer, disabled, impaired, refugee, and minority—can contribute to empowering players to confront challenges both in virtual and real-world contexts. Based on the findings, the discussion will present opportunities for empowerment and agency relevant to game developers interested in promoting social justice and diversity in their games and educators using video games to teach empathy and understanding.

**Keywords:** Video games, Narrative, Experience, Resilience, Representation

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This particular study focuses on the game *Citizen Sleeper* as a case study to explore themes of identity, resistance, and empathy in computer games as tools for resilience. The game touches on themes such as labour, refuge, disability, and transhumanism. This paper discusses how these themes are adapted into the game's narrative, using the researcher-player's gameplay notes as a basis.