

“Block the Spawn Point”: Play and Games in the Hong Kong 2019 Pro-democracy Protests

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The Hong Kong 2019 anti-government protests leveraged the potential of digital games in an unprecedented breadth. Play and games were employed to gain visibility, create a sense of belonging, and to explain wearing topics through a common language among young people. Grassroot contributions and linking of immediate political events with young people’s digital entertainment interests illustrates a new way of appropriating game and play structures, logics, and discourses during societal crises (Sezen and Sezen 2016). This provides strong support to the idea that play can take place “everywhere”, as the DiGRA 2020 conference theme suggests. Our aim is to document and categorise (see *Table 1*) this innovative and wide-ranging utilization of games in a protest.

Protest Art	Use of the visual representations of game characters and game meanings symbolically to stand for political, cultural, or social aspects related to the protest (e.g. <i>Overwatch</i> ’s Mei as a protest symbol).
Game Slang	Use of game terminology to serve as shorthands to describe real-life events or actions (e.g. police ‘spawn’ from a certain location).
Tactical Use of Existing Games	The utilization of specific game features to directly benefit an ongoing protest (e.g. the use of custom usernames for Pokémon GO’s ‘Pokéstops’ to signal location status).
Modifications	Reskinning and adapting existing digital and non-digital games (e.g. <i>Democracy Dance Machines</i> created based on <i>Dance Dance Revolution</i>).
Protest Games	Standalone games based on factual or fictional events (e.g. <i>Liberate Hong Kong</i>).

Table 1: Different uses of games and play during a protest.

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Protest Art

Most commonly, individual art assets and game characters were used to support or educate about the protests. Similar derivative works had been created earlier during the 2014 ‘Umbrella Revolution’ in Hong Kong (Shea 2019). The difference here is the focus on game and play related references to spread a message. The Twitter hashtag challenge #pokemonforHK saw artists drawing different Pokémon (*Pokémon* franchise, 1996-) wearing gear and equipment typically worn by protestors to not only raise awareness but educate about the protests. Poison gas Pokémon called Weezing, specifically, served to refer to the effects of tear gas. Other memes and edited images based on games such as *Untitled Goose Game* (2019) and *Call of Duty* (2003-) mapped the protest arenas with videogame spaces, events, and objects highlighting the contrast between the typically fantastical game scenarios and real financial and residential districts of Hong Kong.

Some memes and appropriated characters were specifically targeted at companies that were considered in opposition of the protest. Prominently, artists and activists turned the Chinese *Overwatch* (2016) character Mei into a protest icon following Activision-Blizzard’s widely reported decision to ban a pro-*Hearthstone* player who voiced support for the protests in a post-match interview. Such reinterpretation demonstrates how players relate to characters not only through previous texts but based on their own experiences (cf. Lamerichs 2018). Memes, meanwhile, help in communicating current events to a gamer audience making them more approachable through metaphors and familiar visual language to engage viral activism (Shepard 2012).

Game Slang

Game terminology was used by protestors (cf. Demirbag Kaplan and Kaplan 2018) to designate each other with RPG style classes like “fire mage” and “shield soldier” along with instructions to “block the spawn point” by barricading specific entrances known to be used by police. This pervasiveness of ‘game speak’ echoes ideas of players learning strategy and leadership skills from games and relating real-life actions to those in games.

Tactical Use of Existing Games

Some games were utilized as actual tactical tools for protesting. During the siege of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in late November 2019, protestors made custom *Pokémon GO* (2016) usernames and occupied ‘Pokéstops’ around the campus to convey key information to others. Moreover, as the COVID-19 pandemic caused limitations to physical gatherings in the first half of 2020, protestors took to virtual worlds, such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020) and *Grand Theft Auto Online* (2013), to spread their message. Such unique approaches demonstrate the malleability of multiplayer games as well as the protestors’ fast, reactive uses of games in critical situations.

Modifications

In “occupy zones” (Ho 2019) and online, appropriations of folk traditions and games show how games connected people across generations. A local ritual practice of ‘villain hitting’ which involves cursing one’s enemies after completing a ceremony hitting a photo of the desired ‘villain’ was turned into a tool of expressing one’s political stance. Villain hitting stations popped up at ‘Lennon walls’ with sandals and other objects for hitting photos of anti-protest individuals. Such playful and casual approaches to political engagement lowered the entry barrier toward public expressions of discontent. A similar appropriation is that of *Hopscotch*, with the traditional numbers again replaced with photos of pro-establishment/anti-protest public figures. Referring to a

decades old arcade game, so called *Democracy Dance Machines* were set up at several of the city's colourful Lennon Walls, taking the concept of *Dance Dance Revolution* (1997) but replacing the arrow buttons with pictures of pro-establishment/anti-protest public figures. In the resulting games, players stamped on their faces to 'play' the game along with music.

Protest Games

The extended duration of the protests allowed developers to come up with entirely new games about the protests. Both pro and anti-protest games portray the protests as a setting for game events. Developers of the game *Liberate Hong Kong* (2019) stated a wish to show the perspective of "frontline" protestors to both outsiders and to moderate protestors abstaining from participating in salient activities. It uses real world references as the basis for a bullet and tear gas dodging game. In opposition, an anti-protest game *全民打汉奸* ('Let's beat up the traitors', 2019) arms the player with tools to assault black shirted protestors and prominent pro-protest public figures in gameplay reminiscent of *Plants vs. Zombies* (2009). Here the name of the game alone shows the position of the developer, depicting protestors as traitors to their country, and the re-skinning of *Plants vs. Zombies* encourages the anti-protest sentiment of the protestors as mindless zombies. Interestingly, the mechanics resemble those of an anti-government game *Yellow Umbrella* created during the 2014 protests in which the roles were reversed.

CONCLUSION

The games utilized during Hong Kong 2019 protests encompass a wide range of types and genres. Their representations, mechanics, community features, and game cultural meanings were adjusted to fit the specific purposes of the protest which we categorised in this paper. Game-based protest interventions stand in line with the artist-made political mods such as *Velvet Strike* (2002), standalone political games like *September 12th* (2003), and in-game political demonstrations (cf. Cermak-Sassenrath 2018). The appropriations discussed here, however, are unique in respect to how widely they addressed different games and uses for a single cause within a short period of time. These works efficiently appropriate capitalist entertainment structures for anti-government protests demonstrating how the political significance of "fan participation in and through commercial entertainment spaces [...] lies in part in the changes in relations of power that may occur through such participation" (Brough and Shresthova 2012, n.p.).

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