

Civil Disobedience in the Era of Videogames: Digital Ethnographic Evidence of the Gamification of the 2019-20 Extradition Protests in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates that the 'gamification' of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong extradition protests was instrumental to the longevity of the protests and their success in repealing the Extradition Bill. Two elements of the protests are identified to be both crucial and game-like: the 'play' and the 'meta-game' elements of the protest. The play element is best exemplified by the mobile application colloquially known as 'Popomon Go', where 'players' are incentivized to go on 'missions' to seek and geotag police officers to form a heat-map of police officers throughout Hong Kong, as well as gather their personal data. The meta-game element, on the other hand, looks at every other aspect of those games except the gameplay. The combination of these two elements helped an apparently leaderless civil disobedience movement evade mass arrest, reduce anxiety, and increase efficiency, but also led to a long period of civil disobedience, thus placing more pressure on policy decision makers.

Keywords: Hong Kong, protest, videogames, cyberbullying, civil disobedience, gamification

Introduction

This essay analyses the use of videogaming elements in acts of civil disobedience in the context of the 2019-20 Extradition Protests in Hong Kong (HK). By way of context, in 2018 HK discovered it was harbouring a murderer: 19-year-old Chan Tong-kai had murdered his girlfriend in Taiwan before fleeing back to HK. However, since there was no extradition agreement between HK and Taiwan, there was the possibility that Chan might escape justice. In response, the HK Government sought to amend the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance and Mutual Legal Assistance Ordinance (hereafter, the Bill) to plug this legal loophole. The Bill planned to remove the geographical limitations on extradition, making it possible to extradite Chan to Taiwan but also, by extension, others to Mainland China.

The timing of the Bill, however, was poor, for the public's confidence in the Government was still low following the 2014 Occupy Central protests and 2016 Mong Kok Riots, especially considering that there had been protests against a similar proposed bill back in 2003 (Harney & Mackay, 2003). As a result, civil groups and individuals took to the streets to protest the Bill, fearing it would strip them of their autonomy and legal protections in HK. The ensuing protests at the early stages were peaceful, but after 10 June 2019 protests were more likely to devolve into violence, and the events that did so could be better characterised as riots. This essay only focuses on the latter variety and investigates the impact of videogames on these types of protests, especially events following the storming of the Legislative Council on 1 July 2019, after which point multiple Telegram channels were created to promote gamified violence.

The literature on the economic potential of videogames is well-established (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013; Tomić, 2019), and the potential for videogames to be used in smart power exploits – such as civil disobedience – has also received attention in recent years (Davies, 2020). This essay takes the 2019-20 Extradition Protests in HK as a case study by examining how videogames and their respective mechanisms were adopted by rioters (as opposed to peaceful protesters) to gamify the protests and perpetuate the momentum of the movement. My findings are based on digital ethnographic fieldwork and textual analysis of multi-media sources such as online forums and posters. The remainder of this essay is organised around two thematic videogame elements: the ‘Play’ and the ‘Meta’.

Play

Some videogames are designed to simulate reality. The game *Liberate Hong Kong* (2019) (Fig.1), for example, was designed to simulate the HK protests throughout 2019-20 to deliver “the experience [of rioting] to the non-frontline fighters” (*Bloomberg Quicktake*, 2019: 0:55). However, the videogame also functioned as a tutorial, teaching players how to riot in HK. The game does this by rewarding players for “throwing tear-gas canisters back at the police” (*SCMP*, 2019a, 0:20), ducking from rubber-bullets when warning signs are raised and when they “hide away bullets [and from arrest]” (*Bloomberg Quicktake*, 2019, 1:46-2:00). When coupled with virtual reality technology, such as an Oculus Rift headset, a simulation of the riots could also be used by people outside of Hong Kong and be exported to “enhance [this type of] digital activism [abroad]” (*Bloomberg Quicktake*, 2019, 2:15).

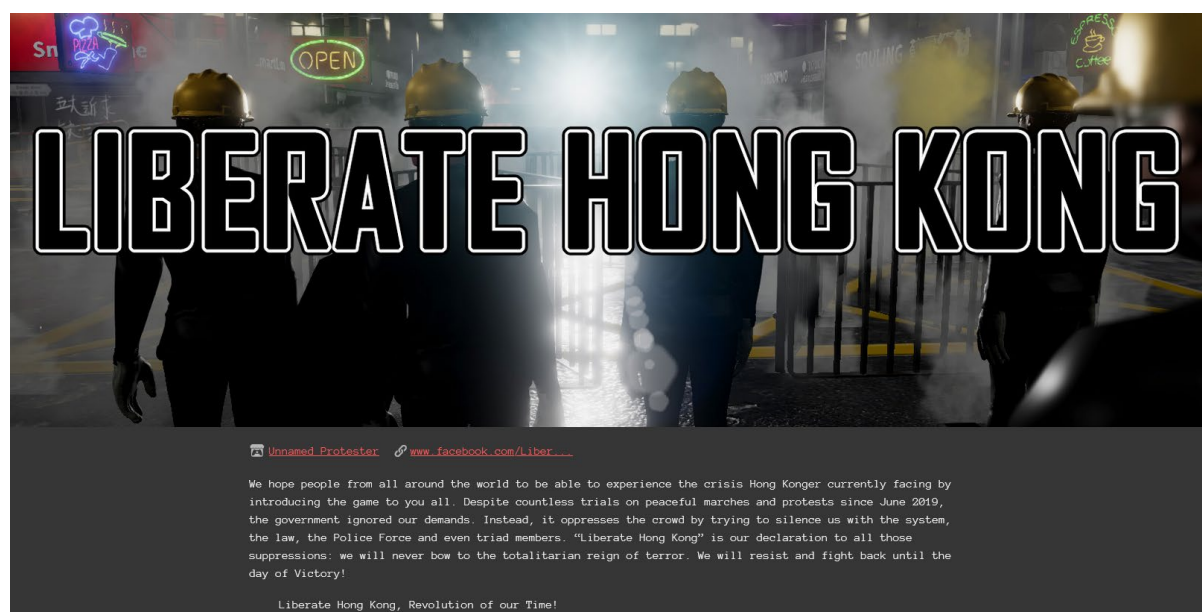


Figure 1: Screenshot of the *Liberate Hong Kong* videogame homepage, 2022, Unnamed Protestor.

Another example of the riots gamified is the game *PopomonGo* (Fig.2C) which is derived from combining the functionalities of the website and mobile app *Hkmap.Live* with social-media platforms like Telegram and *LIHKG.com* (Fig.2B). The title ‘PopomonGo’ and its style of gameplay referred to the wildly successful augmented-reality game *Pokémon Go* (2016-present). However, rather than catching imaginary creatures, *PopomonGo* was devised to help rioters to evade arrest and to cyberbully police officers. There were two parts to this

game. The first part incentivised players to go on ‘missions’ to seek and geotag HK police officers in real-time, which formed a heat-map of the locations of police officers throughout HK. The heat-map in turn helped those on the frontline to evade arrest (Fig.2A) and preserve their numbers for subsequent ‘missions’. These ‘missions’ were then advertised on posters and widely circulated online – as well as affixed to “Lennon Walls” throughout the city (Fig.3). These walls functioned like noticeboards, relaying pro-protest information and further doubling as political sanctuaries for protestors to gather and share words of encouragement for one another.

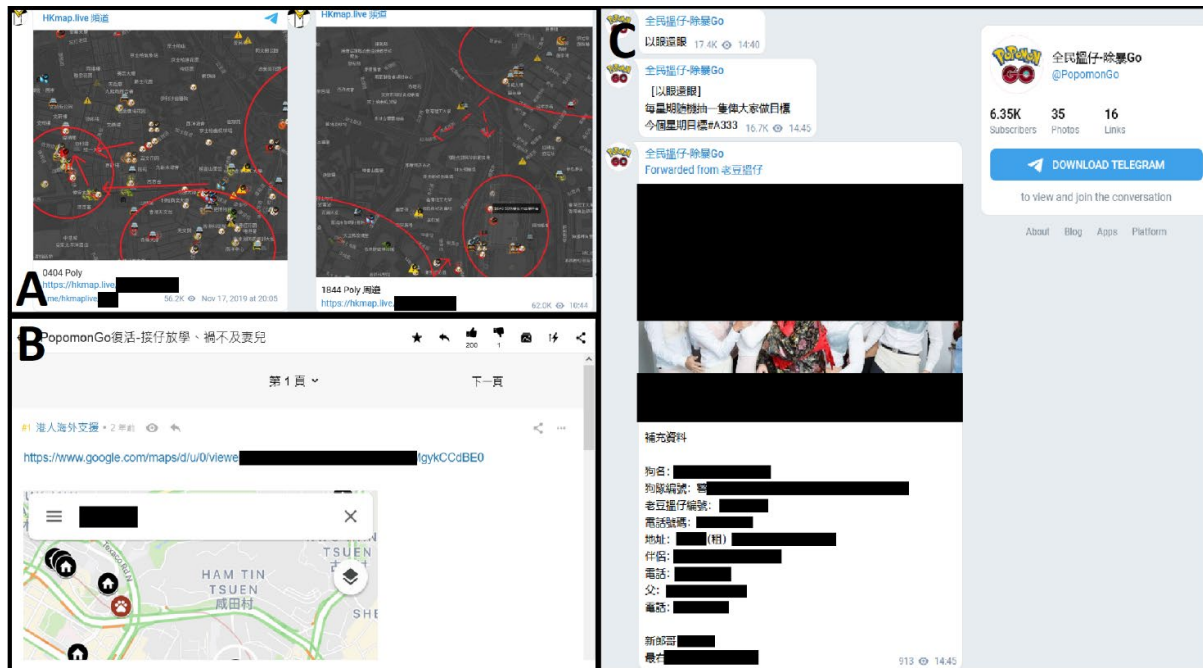


Figure 2: Censored screenshots of @PopomonGo and @hkmaplive on Telegram, and LIHKG forums, 2021.



Figure 3: Digital posters advertising Hong Kong protest events that circulated on Telegram, 2019, Anonymous.

The second part of the game was to profile police officers, mimicking *Pokémon Go*'s 'stats' function in which the details of a captured Pokémon would be displayed. The stats of a 'captured Popomon', however, would be the personal details of that individual, discovered, stolen, and uploaded by users on Telegram, hkchronics.com and/or Google Drive after combing their social media profiles (Wong, Brian, 2021; see Figs.2&4). Details could include the officer's name, ID number, phone number, address, and details of their children, parents, and spouses – sometimes even their love interests (Fig.4). This was referred to as 'game-data' (*jau4 hei3 zi1 liu2* 遊戲資料; see Fig.4A) within the PopomonGo world. Similarly, private images of officers and their families uploaded to the game were predicated on the idea of harmless gameplay, which was referred to as 'in-game photos' (*jau4 hei3 tou4 pin3* 遊戲圖片; see Fig.4A). The language used within the game further dehumanised officers and their families by using words like 'dogs' (*gau2* 狗; see Fig.4A), 'cockroaches'¹ (*gaat6 zaat6* 甲由; see Fig.4B), and the use of animal pronoun 'it (they)' (*taa1(mun1)* 牠(們); see Fig.4B). The 'it' pronoun is characterised by its use of the semantic indicator 'cow' (*ngau4* 牛) instead of 'male' (*jan2* 𢆈) in 'he' (*taa1* 他) or 'female' (*neoi5* 女) in 'she' (*taa1* 她), to strip them of their individuality and humanity.

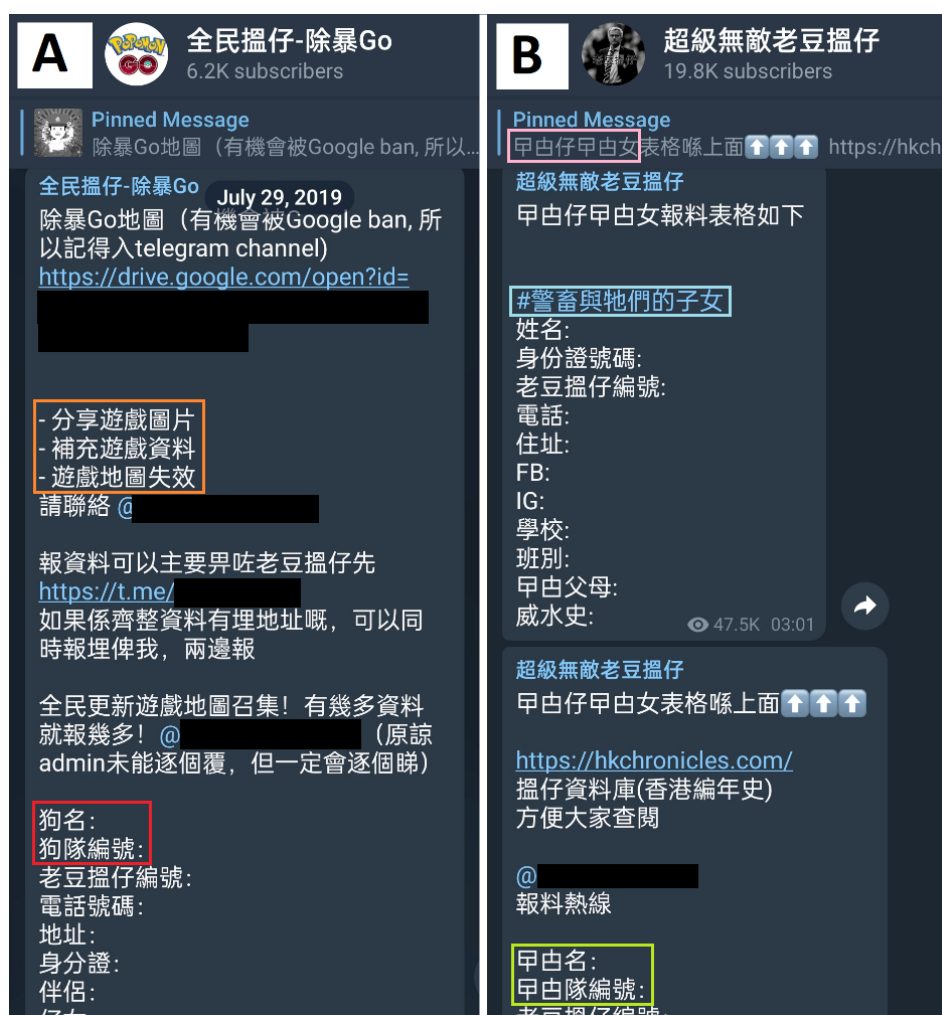


Figure 4: Censored screenshots of PopomonGo game details on Telegram, 2021.

¹ The later adoption of the phrase "cockroaches" may have also been a reaction to people referring to rioters as cockroaches due to their chosen black uniform and their signature hit-and-run tactics.

The gamification of HK's riots, as demonstrated above, effectively trivialised the psychological violence directed against officers and their families under the veil of gameplay. The phenomenon of referring officers as 'it/them', 'dogs' and 'cockroaches', for instance, echoes Kelman's (1973: 48) psychological explanation for mass violence, as summarised in Kafumann *et al*, where perpetrators of violence see their victims "outside [their] moral kinship or scope of justice, and thus [were] a legitimate target for... oppressions and exclusions" (2011:87). A similar effect is seen in the way non-playable characters (NPCs) are treated in other videogames, as violence inflicted upon NPCs is generally exempt from real-world moral repercussions. It was through this and other methods of gamifying rioting that an escalation of violence was promoted in 2019-20. For example, prior to the breaking in of the Legislative Council on 1 July 2019, protestors mainly relied on previously established methods of rioting that were reminiscent of "the 2016 violent clashes in Mong Kok" by "breaking up pavements to hurl [bricks] at [the] police" (*RTHK*, 2019). But after 1 July 2019, Telegram channels promoting gamified violence had begun to emerge that coincided with the timing of the escalated violence. This included the normalised use of petrol bombs (Lau, 2020), assassination attempts with box-cutters (*SCMP*, 2019b), arrows fired against officers (Ong, 2019), as well as injury inflicted on bystanders (*SCMP*, 2019c; Wong, Kayla, 2019; Siu, 2019; Wong, Brian, 2020).

Moreover, a secondary effect of the game was to reduce police morale by adding psychological stress for the officers and their families, on top of the physical stress officers had to endure when suppressing the riots on a daily basis (*China Daily*, 2019; Tsang, 2019). This combination of psychological and physical stress resulted in a number of resignations (Leung, 2020) and consequently decreased the overall efficiency of the police force, allowing rioters more opportunities to prolong their protests (Lo & Lau, 2019; Lo, 2020).

The intent of using violence to disrupt the reading of the Bill on 12 June 2019 was always clear, as demonstrated by testimonials of ex-Legislative Council member, Charles Mok, and protestors alike, who claimed that they have "no choice" but to use violence and that peaceful protests "are no longer working" (*BBC Newsnight*, 2019, 0:43-1:26 & 2:27-3:08). However, protestors were neither satisfied when Chief Executive Carrie Lam suspended the Bill on 15 June 2019, nor when Lam declared that the Bill "is dead" on 9 July 2019. To that end, rioters readily adopted the use of lethal force to deal with frontline officers, and officers also had to use increasing force in return. This resulted in an undermining of the city's political and moral integrity through the propagation of news articles citing police brutality in the international media,² which in turn increased international pressure on local politicians to permanently withdraw the Bill on 4 September 2019.

At the time of writing, *PopomonGo* still has some users. However, newly uploaded content is swiftly censored for violating either the law or Telegram's terms of service. One of the applications used during the 2019-20 period, *Hkmap.Live*, has a spiritual successor known as *zau2 gwai5* 走鬼 or, 'run, the cops are here' (Fig.5). Along with its rebranding, the app's function has also been ostensibly revised: it now helps users evade parking fines. However, the implicit function of the app for monitoring the movements of officers and evading police action remain clear.

² When asked to condemn the violence in Hong Kong after the Bill was withdrawn, during a live debate between Shaun Rein and Joshua Wong on 5 October 2019, Wong famously refused to do so and held his ground by stating that the "use [of] force and [maintaining] public support" was a matter very important to the protestors (*Economist Impact Events*, 2019, 2:40:42-2:44:34).



Figure 5: Screenshots from Zau Gwai 走鬼 and its entry on Apple's App Store, 2021.

Key: **Red** – Police Presence **Blue** – Sightings of Police
Grey – Tickets Issued 幫 (*bong1*; help) – Pro-protest Outlets

Meta

During the riots, violent protestors made use of terminology and systems which paralleled videogame 'metas'. Metas refer to the systematic ways in which videogamers discuss, improve, rate and share gaming strategies. For example, rating of strategies is usually done through tiered-ranking systems ranging from A to F, with A being the most prized. When this system was borrowed by rioters, riot gear was graded using the same kind of tier system (Fig.6). This simplified the decision-making process for rioters who were seeking to procure weapons and defensive tools for upcoming missions.

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保護裝 按安裝 次序排序	半面罩 防毒面罩	濾罐	濾罐用 濾棉 P95	濾罐 濾棉 P95	濾罐 濾棉 P95	濾罐 濾棉 P95	濾罐 濾棉 P95	濾罐 濾棉 P95	濾罐 濾棉 P95	濾罐 濾棉 P95	濾罐 濾棉 P95
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使用方式	面罩 + 配件	一對裝使用，左右各一									
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SET B 究極裝 · 裝飾大罐適用 · 遠工難得之選 · 效能與 稀有裝相同		6006 *** 6003 ** 6001 * 6005 *				502					7093 *** (防本) 2297 ** 2296 ** 2097 * 2096 * 2091 *
SET C 高級裝 · 裝飾大罐適用 · 遠工難得之選 · 遠度高時， 會聞到少少味		6006 *** 6003 ** 6001 * 6005 *	5P71 ***	501							
SET D 基本裝 · 裝飾客戶適用 · 遠工難得之選 · 遠度高時， 會聞到味											2297 *** 2097 *** 2296 ** 2096 ** 2091 * 7093 ** (防本)
SET E 害死人組合 · 會嘔，眼刺痛 · 極痛！玩命！		6006 6003 6001 6005									

圖片只供參考，各配件顏色及形狀會因應型號而有所不同

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Figure 6: Digital posters of Gas Mask Tier-lists on Telegram, 2019, Anonymous.

Similarly, rioters shared ‘recipes’ on social media platforms for things like Molotov-cocktails. Recipes (Fig.7) in videogames are the meta-manuals used to create weapons or other items within the game world and are a core gaming mechanic in games like *Minecraft* (2011-present), *Don’t Starve* (2013-present) and *Magicite* (2014). This also added to the gamification of rioting and enabled less experienced protestors to participate. By circulating recipes and using visual cues reminiscent of videogames, the knowledge barriers to entry were lowered and the prospect of rioting gamified. The spread of recipes via Telegram therefore contributed to the increased use of Molotov cocktails and other home-made weaponry.

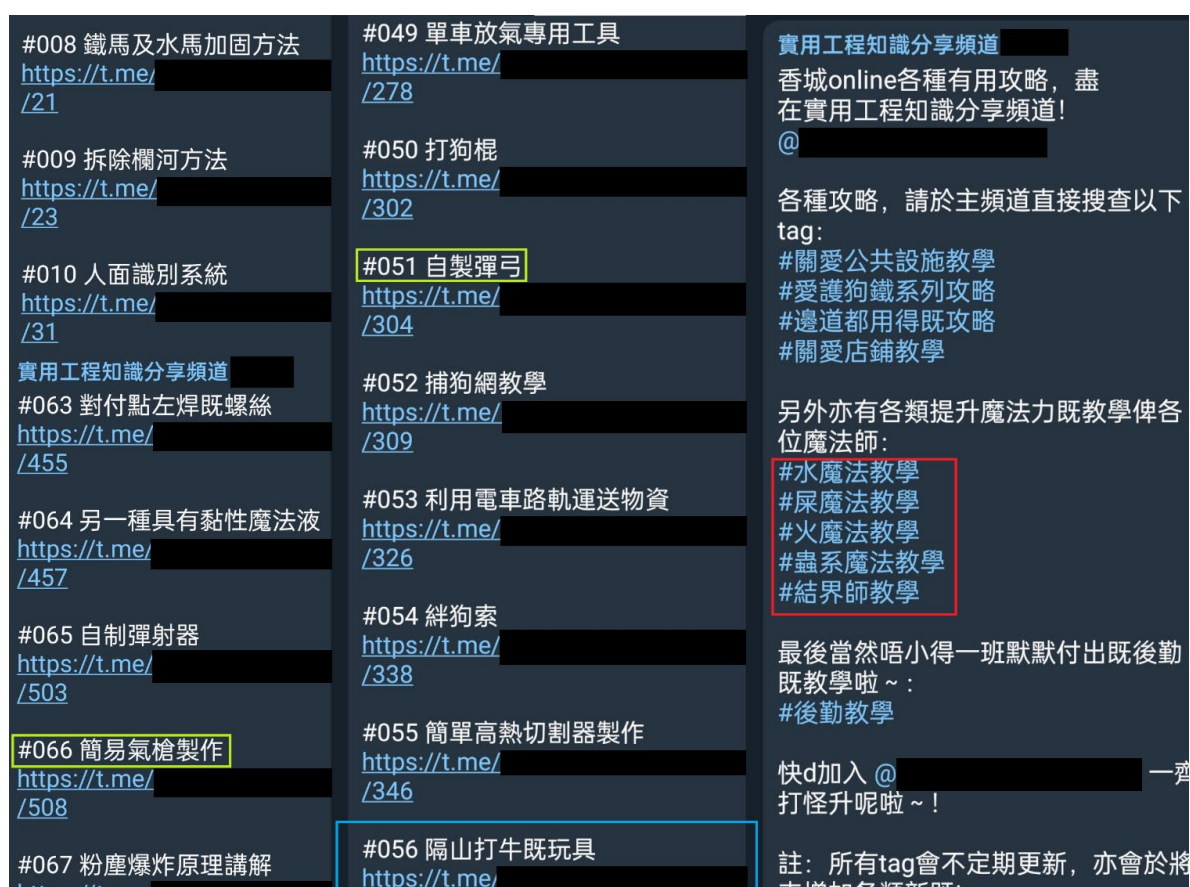


Figure 7: Censored screenshots of weapon recipes on Telegram, 2021.

The names chosen for these recipes implied that rioting was nothing more than a game. For example, a recipe for a truncheon-like blunt weapon was called a ‘cow-beating... toy’ (*daa2 ngau4* 打牛...玩具; Fig.7-8) and a recipe for making Molotov-cocktails was titled ‘basic fire magic’ (*jyun4 ci2 fo2 mol faat3* 原始火魔法; Fig.9). These recipes can also be tweaked, improved, or personalised to fit the gamer’s individual needs: for instance, ‘mid-tier fire magic’ (*zung1 gaail fo2 mol faat3* 中階火魔法) and ‘napalm fire magic’ (*min1 sing3 fo2 mol faat3* 粘性火魔法), were variations of the basic fire magic recipe which produces Molotov cocktails, respectively, with either greater explosive power or an added gelling property to the flames. The naming pattern of these recipes furthermore echoed the appellations of (fire) magic spells in games such as *World of Warcraft*³ (2004-present) and *RuneScape*⁴ (2001-present), which further alludes to the idea that rioting is akin to videogaming.

³ “Fireball”, “Improved Fireball”, “Empowered Fireball”, “Greater Fireball” etc.

⁴ “Firestrike”, “Fire Bolt”, “Fire Blast”, “Fire Surge” etc.



Figure 8: Image of Recipe #056 on Telegram, 2020.



Figure 9: Collage of Molotov cocktail recipe-related screenshots on Telegram, with instructions redacted, 2022.

These recipes and the weapons that they described allowed protestors to fulfil their gaming fantasies. Rioters could pick and choose from the many recipes that best represent their chosen riot personas. A sharp-shooter, for instance, would make use of “slingshots” (*daan6 gung1* 彈弓), “air-guns” (*hei3 coeng1* 氣槍; Fig.7) or the classic bow and arrow combination (AFP, 2019). These riot personas were structured in a way that mirrored the class systems found in popular role-playing games. Similar to those games, it becomes natural for players to seek others to form a party with skills that complement one another in order to succeed in future missions. The combination of videogaming culture, visual cues, and lexicon saw rioters band together to mass-produce booby-traps (Marzo, 2019), Molotov-cocktails (Fig.9; 10; Channel 4 News, 2019, 2:24-3:08; Sky News, 2019, 1:00) and other weapons, as well as to establish training camps (AFP, 2019; Channel 4 News, 2019, 0:00-0:11; Sky News, 2019, 1:59) and socialising hubs (Sky News, 2019, 1:23) within the grounds of universities across HK. These camps resulted in significant, large-scale, violent clashes such as the Siege of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Siege of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Conclusion and Further Considerations

This essay has shown through digital ethnography and textual analysis the ways in which violent protestors used elements from videogames to operate, communicate and organise their members and events. It was evident that videogame technology, vocabulary, and imagery were central aspects of perpetuating the Hong Kong protests, attracting potential protestors and escalating protester violence. However, a more comprehensive analysis of this under-researched area is required to assess the wider implications for society: 1) whether a wider variety of videogame techniques have been borrowed by protestors to compel lawmakers and government officials to permanently suspend the Bill; 2) whether participants/organisers of these games could be tried for organised crimes; 3) whether involvement in these games have lasting (psychological) damage on young participants; 4) whether locations with a high saturation of gamers, such as Seoul and Tokyo, pose an increased risk in which such exploits can be taken advantage of; and subsequently, 5) whether law enforcers or criminologists can create predictive models to accurately identify and mitigate the said exploits as they emerge.

Finally, with further research into how videogames and videogame culture were exploited during the Hong Kong protests, researchers may be able to uncover ways in which other multi-media platforms could be utilised in the future by other civil disobedience actors.

Ludography

Don't Starve (2013), Android/iOS/Linux/Microsoft Windows/Nintendo Switch/PlayStation 3/PlayStation 4/PlayStation Vita/Wii U/Xbox One [game], Klei Entertainment: Vancouver, Canada

Liberate Hong Kong (2019), PC [game], Unnamed Protestor: Hong Kong

Magicite (2014), PC/New Nintendo 3DS/Nintendo Switch/PlayStation 3/PlayStation 4/Wii U/Xbox 360/Xbox One [game], SmashGames: Florida.

Minecraft (2011), Android/iOS/PC/Nintendo Switch/PlayStation 3/PlayStation 4/PlayStation Vita/Wii U/Xbox One [game], Mojang Studios: Stockholm.

Pokémon Go (2016), Android/iOS/iPadOS [game], Niantic: San Francisco.

RuneScape (2001), Android/iOS/PC [game], Jagex: Cambridge

World of Warcraft (2004), PC [game], Blizzard Entertainment: Irvine.

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