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The Revolution Will Not Be Gamified: Videogame Activism and Playful Resistance across the Sinophone

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Abstract

Videogames are political spaces. For more than twenty years, videogames have been co-opted by activists globally to organise protests in amorphous, organic, and rhizomatic assemblages. Presenting instances of videogame-based activism in global Chinese language contexts, this paper connects cases of videogame activism in Hong Kong's anti-extradition movement of 2019, to earlier videogame protest repertoires and playful resistance in Mainland China and Taiwan. Through an extensive literature review approach, this paper surveys cross-disciplinary discussions on Sinophonic game-based activism in three ways: by contextualising the antagonisms that drove the protesters to action; by exploring the strategies and tactics employed in each; and by drawing them into a lineage of Sinophone activism that has spread predominantly through Massively Multiplayer Online Games. With much of the discourse surrounding videogame activism occurring in US and European contexts, this paper recalibrates existing discourses of videogame activism to consider their most prominent instances: those that occur in Sinophone contexts.

Keywords: China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, videogame activism, playful resistance, gamification

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, videogames have increasingly appeared as sites of activism into which protest energies have been directed. A key example is Joseph DeLappe's *Dead-in-Iraq*, a pacifist act of civil disobedience that saw him type the names of US soldiers killed in Iraq into the chat function of the US army's recruitment and training game *America's Army*. DeLappe's 'micro-protest' raises complex questions around how a game player's rights and responsibilities can be evoked within military style games. Also notable is Schleiner, Condon & Leandre's *Velvet-Strike* (2002) which saw antiwar graffiti mods adorn the *Counterstrike* first-person shooter, and Eddo Stern's RUNNERS*: Wolfenstein* (2002) a mod that invited Israeli players to invade Nazi Germany.

These works of digital activism have been interpreted and contextualised at the intersection of art, activism, and videogames, a field of practice that has more recently included such works as *Escape from Woomera* (EFW Team, 2003), *Darfur is Dying* (Susana Ruiz, 2006), *Phone Story* (Molleindustria, 2011), *Papers, Please* (Lukas Pope, 2013), and *Everyday Racism* (All Together Now, 2014). While in the US, Europe, and elsewhere in the West, activist videogames have either emerged from or been embedded into conceptual art domains, across the regions of China, videogame activism has remained firmly entrenched in the political underground. Modes of activism that emerge within and through videogames rely upon on a governmental acceptance of both videogames and civil dissent, an acceptance that is not enjoyed in the Chinese Mainland. As a result, videogame protests and activism across Sinophone contexts take on dynamic new dimensions.

Sinophone videogame protests and protest videogames have arisen at the activist frontlines, resembling in this regard the works produced during Turkey's Taksim Gezi Park Protests of 2013. Koenitz (2014) and Sezen and Sezen (2016) have each investigated how Turkey's protest games such as *Occupy Istanbul* (2013) appropriate game structures, logics, discourses, and popularity to showcase forms of civic participation within the safety of the virtual domain, but in ways that might draw players into the actual activist frontlines. Drawing on previous work by Emre et al. (2014), Demirbag-Kaplan and Kaplan-Oz (2018) have suggested that a new grammar of playful resistance that is identifiable across both the Tahrir Square and Hong Kong protests is founded in a ubiquitous recognition and understanding of the game-like qualities of social and political unrest. Extending upon Demirbag-Kaplan and Kaplan-Oz with attention to the scholarship of videogame protests in the northeast Asian context, this paper makes the case that Hong Kong's videogame activism inherits strategies and tactics that have appeared elsewhere in Taiwan and Mainland China.

Today, China dominates the global gaming industry. With a market worth nearly twice that of Japan and attracting nearly three and a half times as many players as its nearest rival in the United States, China represents the world's largest player base (Christensen, 2019). The size of this gaming community is larger again when we include the regional discursive linkages sometimes referred to as Greater China, here termed as the 'Sinophone'. Massively Multiplayer Online Games play a huge role in the Sinophone's vast virtual entertainment culture, generating at once enjoyment, profit, online communities, and public anxieties about addiction and social isolation. Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) also constitute key sites of antagonism, protest, and activism.

In discussing the activist appropriation of games within Chinese-speaking spheres globally, I deploy the term Sinophone to collectively describe these communities. The term Sinophone rejects monolithic representations of Chineseness by giving attention to the plurality of cultural identities, linguistic practices, and ethnicities of globally located Chinese-speaking communities. For Shu-mei Shih who coined 'Sinophone', the term recognises the cultural relatedness of Chinese speakers, but also their fundamental differences: cultural, political, social, and geographical (Shih, 2011). As such, the term Sinophone works to confront and destabilise the hegemony and homogeneity of 'Chineseness' within a transnational context. I use the term Sinophone here predominantly to refer to players within Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, but I also recognise the Sinitic speakers that are connected through games servers from across the Chinese diaspora, especially within MMOG spaces.

Nationalist sentiments are often expressed in MMOG spaces in the Sinophone. Residents of Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan diverge in their linguistic dialects, their use of simplified or traditional Chinese characters, their histories, political systems, and cultural customs, and are physically separated by national borders. However, these often-conflicting communities converge in MMOG servers where borders are much more porous. Lin and Sun (2019) note that although both Taiwanese and Hong Kong players generally hold neutral opinions and a level of mutual respect, relations between Mainland Chinese players and those in Hong Kong and Taiwan have tended to be strained at best. Exchanges between these player groups are often outright abusive. Lin and Sun note the prevalence of open nationalist confrontations in MMOG spaces; however, they also remark on the presence of more civil discourse and interactions, noting the "restrained yet

frank exchanges of political opinions on one-to-one private channels" (Lin & Sun, 2016: 195). As a result, Lin and Sun suggest that online games provide alternative spaces for cross-border relations, influences, and interactions, and thus have the potential for new constituencies to emerge. The very act of social connection between these politically separated groups bears an activist dimension. In discussing multiple strategies and tactics of activism in Sinophone game spaces, this paper acknowledges the marginalisation of game communities, especially within Mainland China, and how this propels activist action. Indeed, the intense derision, regulation, and poor consumer rights of mainland Chinese gamers appears to have nurtured game activism that has spread to other areas of the Chinese-speaking world.

This paper proceeds as follows. Beginning with a brief literature review, the first section sketches out the scholarly discourse surrounding videogame activism and its strategies and tactics from within the field of game studies. The remainder of the paper is dedicated to illuminating instances of videogame activism beginning with the 2019 anti-extradition protests in Hong Kong. Discussing several videogames that were specifically developed as objects of protest, such as *Liberate Hong Kong* (2019), *Revolution in Our Time* (2019), and *Add Oil* (2019), this section also considers the ways in which existing digital games such as *GTAV* (2013), *Pokémon GO* (2016), and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020) were each tactically deployed by Hong Kong activists to articulate the contours of their dissent. In the section that follows, this paper recalls histories of videogame activism and protest in Mainland China, and the circumstances that led to these virtual unrests. Specific attention is given to the games *World of Warcraft* (2004) and *Fantasy Westward Journey* (2001) and the seminal protests that occurred in these game spaces, as well as to MMOG spaces more broadly. It is through MMOG server networks that we can trace a genealogy of in-game protests through the Sinophone. What emerges is not only the resonance of common themes: of spatial access and independence, of competing notions of Chinese identity and of calls for a cyberspace homeland, but also the increasing prevalence of MMOGs as networks, tools, and sites through which activisms are transmitted and enacted.

The use of videogames in protest and activism represents an instance of gamification - "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (Detering *et al*, 2011: 2425). While the process of gamification popularly entails applying game systems such as points, badges, levels, and progress bars to non-game activities to make them more appealing, it can also involve the introduction of game-like narratives or flow experiences to evoke a game-likeness to increase engagement. Crucially, gamification can also draw on the popularity of games, their vernacular, spatial logics, and cultural gravity in attempting to make a product, service, or a cause more attractive to captivate user engagement. The uptake of games tactics at the overlap of politics and activism operates as a potent example of what Mahnič (2014) and Bogost (2006) have each respectively described as a form of gamified politics.

Methodology

Through a semi-systematic review, this paper collects and collates the reporting and scholarship into game activism in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Exploring the appearance of protest videogames and in-game protests during Hong Kong's extradition protests, this paper recalls the strategies, tactics, and ambitions of previous videogame protests across Mainland China and Taiwan over the past two decades. The aim of this

paper is to review the instances, contexts, and methods of videogame protest and to locate these activisms within a lineage of tactical repertoires that are connected via MMOGs in the Sinophone. The occurrence of videogame and game-inspired activism across the Sinophone world is rich and varied, making it impossible for this survey to be conclusive. For that reason, this article draws focus on tactics that emerge in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan that have used videogame spaces, cultures, and rhetorics in their tactical and strategic repertoires. Particular attention is given to MMOGs as sites in which numerous activist actions have occurred and as virtual locations where players from across the Sinophone can connect.

In delineating these research boundaries, important instances of game activism across the Sinophone are excluded. Significant omissions include feminist activism against the mobile dating simulator "Love and Producer" (*Lian yu zhizuoren* 恋与制作人) developed by Suzhou Diezhi Network Technology Co., Ltd (SDNT). "Love and Producer" was targeted as its game advertisement featured derogatory depictions of female players. The resulting in-forum protests and exodus of players is excluded from the analysis here but is well documented by Mao (2020). Also beyond the remit of this paper is the ongoing activist campaign known as the 'Gamer Rights Protection Movement' (*Wanjia weiquan* 玩家维权) which has repeatedly evolved into violent confrontations, mobilizations, litigations, protests, and collective discursive critiques. Constituting perhaps the largest series of game actions globally, it is only briefly touched on here, but has been given sustained attention elsewhere by Chew (2011, 2019, 2022). While significant attention is given here to the 2019 Anti-ELAB activism and the game protests it produced (see below), the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement and the *Yellow Umbrella* (*Huangse yusan* 黄色雨伞) (2014) game that emerged from those protests are omitted. These have been examined thoroughly by Yang (2018) and Shea (2019) respectively. Other noteworthy absentees include the Taiwanese videogame *Devotion* (*Huanyuan* 還願) which included insults directed at the President of the PRC, Xi Jinping, concealed within its code (Xiao, 2019), and the Taiwanese game *Bloody Day 2.28: Vampire Martina* (*He yi Tai ji xixuegui* 荷裔台籍吸血鬼) which presented a pro-independence protagonist (Po-hsuan and Hetherington, 2019). These Taiwanese protest games, as with the games emerging from Hong Kong Anti-ELAB protests, each provoked nationalist/patriotic responses from gamers in Mainland China. While these Chinese anti-game protests and protest games such as *Everyone Hit the Traitors* (*Quan min da Hanjian* 全民打汉奸; 2019) as discussed by Ye (2019) fall beyond the scope of this discussion, these nationalist games warrant further collective investigation. The broad scope of this study into Sinophone game activism, and the many games listed above that fall outside it, serves to accentuate the rich diversity of activist practice, and firmly underscores the need for additional and ongoing scholarship to examine it. While western discourse often downplays the desire or capacity of Chinese people to dissent, the vast spectrum of videogame protest movements and the many instances of playful resistance present a different picture.

As noted by Yu (*2010*), protest assemblages such as flash mobs, although technically illegal in Mainland China, have occurred in MMOG spaces and provide an outlet for Chinese netizens to express dissatisfaction. Within the broader domain of digital activism in China, the virtual spaces of MMOGs open up new public spheres and cyberspaces in which popular discontent to be organised and expressed (Yang, 2009a; Yang 2009b). Chan (2009a) has noted that in-game protests in MMOGs are a dynamic part of a burgeoning global cartography of activism and mass mobilisation which unfolds across virtual worlds

in the Sinosphere and elsewhere. Chew (2011) has catalogued gamer protests, both online and offline, which have taken place in China between 2003 and 2007, citing them as evidence of an emergent sociology of radical yet playful activism that has built through the early 2000s. More recently, Huang and Liu have identified three ways in which ludic elements are becoming intertwined across activist contexts as a means of nurturing playful resistance: namely, "[the] game as an action tactic, [the] game as the mechanism for critical pedagogics, and [the] game as a tool for public education" (Huang & Liu, 2021: 26). Huang and Liu foreground the notion of "gaming capital" as a phenomenon within protests movements that denotes both the cultural capacity of activists to interpret social movements through game design and the technical competencies required to create them (Huang & Liu, 2021: 26). More broadly, Davies (2020b) has proposed that increased restrictions and limitations for activism within city spaces results in a centralisation of videogames as alternative sites of protest. In multiple ways, videogames emerge as the strategies, tactics, terrains, and logics through which protest movements increasingly occur.

Game Activism Against Empire

The inherent participatory nature of videogames recommends them as sites of activism. In his chapter, *Saving Worlds with Videogame Activism* (2009), Robert Jones endorses videogames as a uniquely ideal activist platform owing both to their capacity to engage through interactivity as well as to what Ian Bogost has termed their "procedural rhetoric" (2007: 1), referring to the persuasiveness encoded into their rule-based systems (Jones, 2007: ix). Jones suggests that by leveraging procedural rhetoric, videogames can pry open new political spaces and modes of collective thinking. Complicating Jones' position, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) show that videogames are already constructed as tools of Empire. In deploying the term "Empire", Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter do not specifically evoke the British, American or Chinese empire, but instead draw on Hardt and Negri's notion of Empire, which they characterize as the present stage of decentralized but globally connected spheres of cultural, political, and economic power and control (Hardt & Negri, 2000). As products evolved from military technologies translated through hypermasculine cultures into systems of capital accumulation, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter contend that Empire is already hardcoded into videogame software. Moreover, through play, story, structure, and code, videogames serve to indoctrinate players into these structures and thinking.

Along similar lines, Chan (2009b) has questioned the extent to which the values of choice and freedom often ascribed to games are correct, asking whether they are simply part of a broader western self-deluding discourse and ideology concerning what is free and democratic. As echoed by Ingrid Hoofd (2019), what are often lauded as 'user agency,' 'active participation', and even 'play' are often camouflage for types of value extraction. Within such conceptions, games do not constitute solutions, but are instead authoritarian structures to be overthrown. However, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter envisage that a gamified revolution can occur – that "games of Empire" can be overthrown by what they term "games of multitude". Toward this, they propose a six-point plan for multitudinous game development that includes "[c]ounterplay, dissonant development, tactical games, polity simulators, self-organized words, and software commons" (2009: 211). These playful tactics draw inspiration and extend upon earlier lineages of digital and electronic activism including electronic civil disobedience (Critical Art Ensemble, 1995), internet activism (Kellner & Kahn, 2003), culture jamming (Negativland, 1995; Raley, 2009),

tactical media (Boler, 2008; Garcia & Lovink, 1997) and social netwar (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 1997).

The tactic offered by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter most specific and unique to videogames is that of "counterplay" (Dyer-Witherford & de Peuter, 2009: 211), of opposing and resisting the gamified Empire through playful means. The notion of counterplay finds resonance with Galloway's invocation of "counter gaming" (2006: 109) – of disrupting the mainstream expectations and subverting the norms around how electronic games should be designed and played. Paradoxically, it is the subversions of play that both enable and upset the structures of videogames.

Complicating matters further, Woodcock and Johnson suggest that gamified structures may be effectively developed in the service of resistance. Drawing on histories of games tactics and playful resistance by groups like the Situationist International, Woodcock and Johnson differentiate two types of gamification: "gamification-from-above" and "gamification-from-below". According to Woodcock and Johnson, the former involves "the capture of 'play' in the pursuit of neoliberal rationalization and the managerial optimization of working life and labour"; while the latter is a form of active resistance against the "standardization of everyday behaviour" (Woodcock & Johnson, 2018: 542). Developing Dragona's notion of "counter-gamification" (2014: 239), rather than pursuing the standard formula of gamification wherein game-like and playful elements are applied in managerial contexts, the authors make a case for transforming non-games into games as resistance.

While the efficacy of games as mechanisms of resistance is contested, the increasing use of games as a medium of protest can be accounted for in the growing status of games as among the most significant media interfaces of contemporary life. It is precisely because of their popularity and cultural gravity that games are becoming so widely applied in a variety of everyday and global contexts, including dissent. In the following section, we move from theory to praxis to explore how the nature and culture of game activism plays out in real world contexts. Beginning with attention to the 2019 Hong Kong Anti-ELAB protests, the following sections describe and contextualise protest strategies and tactics of videogame activism in the Sinophone.

2019 Hong Kong Protests

Throughout the second half of 2019, Hong Kong became a pitched battleground between police and protesters, producing scenes of street violence that were "redolent of videogames" (Davies, 2020a: 1). The initially peaceful demonstrations arose in opposition to the controversial Extradition Amendment Bill (ELAB) that would allow Hongkongers to be extradited to be tried within Mainland China's justice system, leading to a further erosion of the city's judicial independence. From March 2019 onwards, increasingly large and determined Anti- ELAB protests erupted every few days in Hong Kong. As the year wore on, police and protester violence intensified. When the government finally revoked the bill, activist demands evolved, taking on broader democratic ambitions and incorporating both pleas for justice and calls for regional autonomy. For many, the movement represented Hong Kong's last stand for autonomy against Mainland Chinese encroachment. These sentiments were echoed in the protester clarion calls of 'Liberate Hong Kong' and 'Hong Kong Revolution in Our Times'. Both the phrases would become the titles of protester-made games. Simultaneous with the fierce clashes that took place

on the streets of the city, another battle was occurring behind computer screens, smart phones and within digitally networked spaces. Videogames were being tactically deployed as an inventive new domain of political protest and activist action (Davies, 2021).

Games and Play within the Protest

In their 2020 article "'Block the Spawn Point': Play and Games in the Hong Kong 2019 Pro-Democracy Protests", Wirman and Jones discuss how multiple forms of games and play were deployed during the year-long protest movement to globally publicise and elucidate the plight of Hongkongers as well as to create a sense of collective belonging through the common language of games. Wirman and Jones document and categorise the innovative and wide-ranging use of games in protest art, street slang, the tactical use of existing games, and game modifications as well as the development of protest games specific to the unfolding events. Throughout the unrest, a media discourse emerged in Hong Kong that likened the protests to the visual aesthetics and logics of videogames (Wirman & Jones, 2020). Writing in the Hong Kong Free Press, Ming Ming Chiu (2019) outlined resemblances between Hong Kong activists and players of MMOGs.

The parallels between the street protests and videogames were more than a media discourse within Hong Kong in 2019; videogame rhetoric permeated the protest movement itself. Ho has explored the use of computer game vocabulary, jargon, and slang during the planning and coordination of protest actions. He highlights how, in their online discussions, activists used the term 'Hong City Online' instead of 'Hong Kong' to disguise their real-world actions as game strategies. When Molotov cocktails became part of the activist tactics, they were referred to as "fire-magic" to codify them as in-game tactics found across numerous MMOGs such as *Project Gorgon*, *Gothic II* and *World of Warcraft* (Ho, 2020). Elsewhere in this issue, Ho provides further digital ethnographic evidence of ludic mechanisms employed by the Anti-ELAB protesters in Hong Kong.

In their own analysis of gamer activism in the Anti ELAB movement, Lin and Sun also detect ludic rhetoric and mechanisms. They suggest that online gaming literacy had strengthened activist toolkits and intensified the networked nature of the leaderless social movement. Cataloguing the extensive examples of game-associated terms used by Hong Kong extradition movement protesters, Lin and Sun illustrate that "game-literate participants…shared a common language when discussing tactics and strategies involved in various confrontation scenarios" (Lin & Sun, 2022: 7). In this way, they write "videogame culture provided a ready-to-use set of activities within a recognizable framework consisting of action modules and other components that protestors could use to execute large-scale collective movements" (Lin & Sun, 2022: 7). The slippage between real world and videogames was more than visual or conceptual; it was tactical and strategic.

A potent instance of the activist mobilisation of videogame culture is found in the guerrilla tactic of sharing *Pokémon GO* maps to indicate where forthcoming protests may take place. If cornered by police, groups of protesters claimed they had congregated not to demonstrate but to play *Pokémon GO*, thereby circumnavigating laws denying permission for assembly (Vincent, 2019). More broadly, the Pokémon character, Pikachu, who had featured as a Hong Kong protest symbol in 2016, again arose in the 2019 protests

as a symbol of Cantonese defiance.[1] Davies (2020b) has detailed the extent to which global videogame communities such as players and fans of *Pokémon GO* lent support to the protests, expressing solidarity via Twitter with redesigned Pokémon in protest gear under the hashtag #PokemonForHK. Meanwhile, protest art featuring the *Pokémon* character Weezing was used to refer to the effects of tear gas on demonstrators and across the space of the city. Just as game mechanics had informed tactics of protest, game brands were mobilised as activist memes.

Reluctant Game Company Involvement

The global game company Blizzard unwittingly found itself at the centre of Hong Kong-China political tensions. The controversy was sparked when the e-sports champion Blitzchung proclaimed support for the Anti-ELAB protests then taking place in Hong Kong. Blitzchung, a native Hongkonger, shouted the statement: "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of our time" in a live-streamed post-match interview while wearing a face mask, contravening the recently enacted anti-mask law. Blitzchung's protest was met with a swift one-year ban and the forfeiture of his winnings from the tournament from for violating Blizzard rules. The live-streamers who interviewed Blitzchung were also fired. Three days later, and following a massive online backlash, Blizzard was forced to reverse its position reducing the ban and refunding Blitzchung's prize money. As highlighted by Minotti, the incident cast a light on the capitulation of western game companies to pressure from Chinese authorities (Minotti, 2019).

More broadly, the incident compelled gamers globally to assess their own ethics and the loyalty to game properties for their proximity to human rights violations (Kent, 2019). Blizzard found itself plunged into crisis-management as players across the company's game worlds, including *Overwatch*, *Hearthstone*, and *World of Warcraft,* began conscripting Blizzard intellectual property into anti-CCP and Pro-Hong Kong protest memes. A key example was the deployment of *Overwatch's* playable game character 'Mei-Ling Zhou' 周美灵 as a protest symbol. Within the *Overwatch* narrative, Mei's motto is "Our world is worth fighting for" a slogan that became a potent call to arms for Hong Kong nativists (Kent, 2019). Digitally manipulated images of Mei covering one eye appeared across social media in solidarity with the Hong Kong based journalist who was permanently blinded by a riot police officer. Other images appeared of Mei wearing a mask with the words 'liberate Hong Kong', including on deviantart, Reddit and Twitter.

Protest Games

Beyond the mobilisation of game rhetoric and cultures, several games in which the player is active within the Anti-ELAB movement appeared. These included the browser-based

[1] Pokémon originated as a Hong Kong protest symbol in 2016 when Nintendo altered the pronunciation of standout character Pikachu's name from Cantonese to Mandarin. Although the change was purely economic, designed to draw the vast pool of Mainland Chinese player to the Pokémon franchise, it enraged Hong Kong players who saw it evidence of a broader replacement Hong Kong's Cantonese dialect with Mandarin. In response, dozens of Pokémon players demonstrated outside Hong Kong's Japanese Consulate demanding Nintendo offer a unique Cantonese translation for the game.

game *Add Oil* (*Jiayou* 加油). Little more than a design reskin of the then-popular mobile game *Angry Birds, Add Oil* positions the player as a Hong Kong protester who uses slingshots and trebuchets to destroy police defences. At once more confronting and more technically complex is *Liberate Hong Kong*, a protester-developed Virtual Reality videogame that simulates the battlefield-like street-level protest environment in Hong Kong within a 3D headset. The player takes the role of an unarmed protester attempting to evade police attack and arrest. Play is brutally difficult, and each game typically lasts seconds before the player is killed or incarcerated.

Perhaps the most sophisticated and nuanced work was the mobile news game *Revolution in our Times* (*Shidai geming* 時代革命), which presents a pro-democracy narrative following the life of a Hong Kong protester. Resembling the interface of social media apps through which the protests were organised and mediated, the game captures the difficult personal choices and conflicts faced by activists. Players as activists must delicately navigate personal relationships, employment, and individual freedom while monitoring broader public opinion towards the protest campaign. More than any other protest game, *Revolution in our Times* details the personal deliberation of fighting for democratic principles, a quandary that would also come play out in the games' hosting company.

Made available on Google Play on October 5th 2019, the game *Revolution in our Times* was then removed on October 8th 2019, only to return several days later. This process hints at conflicting priorities within the US tech giant. According to Gonzalez (2019), during the brief period between the games' removal and then its restoration to the app store, a heated debate broke out among Google staff with Hong Kong-aligned workers demanding the US company support Hong Kong's democratic movement. Others, including pro-Chinese staff, argued that political disputes were ill-suited to company listservs. Meanwhile, the removal of the app saw many accuse Google of pandering to pressure from China. The game had provoked a political schism in a major company from half-a-world away.

In-Game Protest Players

By the end of 2019, Hong Kong activists – perhaps best termed as protest players – began using virtual private networks (VPNs) to access the Chinese servers of *Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V)*. Once inside, Hong Kong protest players attired their avatars in the distinctive garb of Hong Kong protesters - black clothing, goggles, gas masks and signature yellow construction helmets. These Hong Kong protest players then ran amok in the Chinese servers of the *GTA V* open-world game, flinging petrol bombs, vandalizing train stations, and attacking police (Subagja, 2019; Yee, 2019). Mainland players rapidly organised and responded in kind, reskinning their avatars with riot police outfits, and resisting the Hong Kong insurgents. This tactic of virtual violence cannot be directly read as an instance of counterplay because *GTA V* already encourages free-form violence within the open-world it presents. The in-game clash involving both Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese players was absolutely in keeping with the ideological coding of the game. However, a form of counterplay arises through the incursion of real-world politics into the game's political vacuum. Although the GTA franchise celebrates combative spaces, its virtuality in this instance ensured that within heated clash between opposing sides *no-one was hurt*. The exchange opens new horizons for political dissent and activist energy in virtual domains.

In early 2020, the combined restrictions of pandemic lockdowns and new security measures rendered public demonstrations in Hong Kong impossible. In response, activists moved further into videogame spaces, enacting their pleas for independence in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Players fashioned virtual pro-democracy posters and imagery critical of both Hong Kong chief executive Carrie Lam, and Chinese president Xi Jinping. Soon after, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and its merchandise disappeared from Mainland Chinese game outlets. No official reason was provided (Yin-Poole, 2020). As the year drew on, protest videogames and many articles discussing them were taken offline while their titles, including *Hong Kong Revolution in our Times* and *Liberate Hong Kong,* were made illegal utterances under a new National Security Law for Hong Kong, that was passed 30 June 2020 by the People's Republic of China.

The contextualisation or analysis of videogame-based activism in Hong Kong also disappeared alongside the games themselves. The strategies, tactics, vernaculars, and domains of activism that arose in the 2019 Anti-ELAB movement warrant recollection and inquiry within a regional and historical context. In contrast to the videogame protests that have appeared in the west, largely in gallery and arts contexts, Hong Kong's videogame activism exists alongside a lineage of videogame protest movements in other Sinitic regions over the past 20 years, specifically in Taiwan and Mainland China. Notwithstanding the fundamental differences in scale, communities, and spaces, parallels emerge between the desire for autonomy as expressed by Hongkongers and the Mainland Chinese inhabitants of *World of Warcraft* whose protests took place more than a decade earlier. At stake in these Sinic and ludic communities is an existential quest for agency, identity, and homeland.

The lynchpins that connect these protests across time and place are MMOGs. MMOGs do not simply erode national borders, they have also been found to foster social connections across political and national spheres nurturing tolerance and civic engagement (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). For Shen and Chen (2015), MMOGs transcend cultural boundaries, presenting comprehensive 'worlds' of their own in which networked participants lead virtual lives, build social groups, and cultivate shared concerns. Lin and Sun (2017) give particular attention to the strategic and tactical elements of MMOGs as providing cooperative frameworks for collective combative interactions. More recently, Lin and Sun have directly connected tactics that emerged in Hong Kong's protests to MMOG organisation and mobilisation tactics within Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Student Movement (*Taiyanghua xueyun* 太陽花學運). In Lin and Sun's estimation, the use of MMOG vernaculars across both these movements evidence cognisance and influence from Mainland Chinese protest practices that have occurred in game spaces over the past two decades (Lin & Sun, 2022). With attention to this lineage, the remainder of this article outlines and contextualises three historic instances of protests in Mainland China with attention to MMOGs. The aim is to establish the precedence of Mainland Chinese protest actions but also to show how these modes of playful protest and resistance were disseminated throughout the Sinic region in MMOG spaces.

Mass In-game Protests

In the history of in-game protests, the 2005 mass in-game protest within *Fantasy Westward Journey* (*Menghuan xi you* 梦幻西游) looms large. The incident remains the highest attended in-game protest to date. The event was sparked when a single-player account called "Kill the little Japs" (*Gan si 4 xiao riben* 干死 4 小日本) was banned by the game

administrator NetEase for their insensitive username. The following day NetEase dissolved the same player's 700-member guild "The Alliance to Resist Japan" (*Kangri tongmenghui* 抗日同盟会) for propagating anti-Japanese sentiment. Irked at the forfeiture of their hard-earned game rankings and confused by NetEase's admonishment, especially given they had used these pseudonyms for two years without issue, many of the 700+ players from the now-dissolved guild took their grievances to the game forums. A conspiracy theory was already swirling through these bulletin boards stating that NetEase would soon be taken over by a Japanese company. Although untrue, the conspiracy appeared to explain the banning of the insensitive account names. The following day, when a symbol resembling Japan's rising sun emblem appeared in an in-game Tang Dynasty government office in *Fantasy Westward Journey*, up to 80,000 players stormed into the game's server. In a space designed to accommodate no more than 20,000 players, server engines ground to a halt.

Game scholarship has approached these protests from numerous angles. Where Jenkins (2006) identifies in them an unexpected internalization of Chinese state sentiments within the gamer body politic, Apperley identifies the incident as a key turning point whereby the "game consumer/player reconstitutes themselves as citizens of the virtual world" (Apperley, 2011: 113). More than highlighting a Chinese nationalist identity that connected *Fantasy Westward Journey* and Mainland China, the protest evidenced a slippage between actual and virtual identity spaces. The mass in-game protest brought to the fore the principle that games are not merely places of leisure and enjoyment, but are complex terrains in which sense of self, nation, space, and agency are constructed and enacted. More broadly, Hjorth, Richardson and Davies (2021) have outlined how videogames are a culturally specific medium that inevitably reflect the specificities of technology, location, and the concerns and desires of players. Videogames are inhabitable places where communities of players gather and share common interests and grievances. Situated in the milieu of protest and activism, videogames are taken up and adapted not only as tools to communicate demands, ambitions, and opinions, but the spaces of games further become terrains in which protest movements occur. Within huge games spaces, such as MMOGs, differing identities and complex agendas come to the fore.

In the early 2000s, *World of Warcraft* rose to prominence as the largest MMOG. At once immersive, challenging, and fun, the popular game world presents a convincing and distinctly ornate universe of detailed characters and lavish environments. As early as 2008, the game had accumulated over a ten million players, approximately half of whom were Chinese (Nakamura, 2009: 129). More than merely offering escapist play, *World of Warcraft* holds up a mirror of the actual world in its social and cultural intricacies, ecologies, and economies. *World of Warcraft* transcended its digitality to become a dense yet hybrid space – a complex social and cultural territory that cast its borders well beyond the virtual space of the game to include internet cafes, dormitories, and other locations of play. Within Mainland China's diversity of cultures, ethnicities and dialects, *World of Warcraft* offered a shared sense of space, but also nurtured a growing set of grievances.

In her 2020 book *Mapping Digital Game Culture in China,* Szablewicz details how MMOGs came to represent escapist utopias for many young Chinese gamers. Informed by ethnographic studies in and of Mainland China's dorm rooms and cybercafes, Szablewicz identifies how a "spiritual homeland" and "social and a geographical reality" emerged within MMOGs (Szablewicz, 2020: 115). Szablewicz finds that the friendships, camaraderie, and even marriages and families forged through the guilds and raids built

toward an "affective register" and a profound sense of belonging in these virtual worlds (Szablewicz, 2020: 23). In similar findings, Lindtner et al. (2008) explore the deep relationships that were forged between *World of Warcraft* players. These exchanges cultivated a growing sense of fraternity, community, and egalitarianism in both the virtual game world and in the physical spaces in which MMOGs were played.

However, as extensively outlined by both Szablewicz and Lindtner and colleagues within their respective studies of Chinese gaming from the early 2000s onwards, dominant attitudes toward videogamers in Mainland China have been deeply strained. Players suffer stringent regulation and are the subjects of strikingly negative portrayals by state and media. Depictions of uncontrollably addicted players dropping dead from extreme use, obsessively stalking other players in real life, and even killing their own parents in fits of internet-induced violence have marked the popular discourse around videogames (Golub & Lingley, 2008; Szablewicz, 2010; Pissin, 2021). Internet addiction was and continues to be treated like a disease in the Chinese Mainland, cured in military style camps that charge excessive monthly fees (Lee, 2010). These multiple and intensifying pressures led to inevitable reactions from growing constituencies of self-identified gamers – to the point that the most popular videogame in early 2000s China, *World of Warcraft*, emerged not only as a primary target of state and media concern, but also a central location in which numerous playful protests would be staged.

An early example arose in 2005 when, in response to government plans to introduce three-hour limits to online gaming at cyber cafés, a small group of *World of Warcraft* players staged a dramatic mass suicide of their digital avatars in the game world. The protest echoed a real world 'die-in', an activist action that sees participants feign death in physical space. As such, the incident emphasises Cermak-Sassenrath's observation that political activism in digital games often take its cue from activism in in the actual world (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2015). However, the *World of Warcraft* die-in also raises larger questions around how the performative work of protest is altered by the immaterial space of digital games, a domain in which the corporeal body is not present. As noted by Golub and Lingley, this avatar suicide must be understood not materially but symbolically, "as a powerful but ambiguous response to social and moral dilemmas"; a culturally inflected form of "resistance" demonstrating that that even death is preferable to living under unacceptable political conditions", be they virtual or actual (Golub & Lingley, 2007: 296). Several months following the die-in and the subsequent larger public outcry against the three-hour limit, the Chinese government reversed the restriction, allowing adults to play MMOG for as long as they like (Suellentrop, 2006). Even a symbolic protest in the virtual world of games appears to bear some impact.

Protests in *World of Warcraft* went beyond the state regulation of the game space and also targeted what players considered to be unfair practices, both in the game world, as well as what Chew has expressed as the "corrupted authoritarian rule of virtual worlds" by game corporations (Chew, cited in Chan, 2009a: 154). Everyday difficulties in lived experience both in-game and real-life bred discontent against both state and corporate governmentality. Notwithstanding its popularity as a play space, *World of Warcraft* was also home to enormous social and economic inequities mirroring global systems in which the game was produced and played. Most notorious among them was the practice of gold farming, and the industry surrounding it. Gold farming entails the organisation of virtual sweatshops wherein players work long shifts harvesting in-game currency, experience points, and rare items to be sold for real money to more affluent players ambitious to level

up faster by any means (Fickle, 2020). Gold farming presents a quintessential instance of what Kücklich terms "playbour" – the convergence of play and labour (Kücklich, 2005). Through playbour, game companies extend the videogame market beyond merely selling hardware and software and to exploit playtime itself (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Gold farming practices were unpopular among many *World of Warcraft* players who believed that in-game goods should not be purchasable, but rather attained only through 'honest play'. Yet as Dibbell (2007) points out, gold farming was never a method of cheating or a mode of counterplay – it was intrinsic to the coded affordances of the game from the outset. Through in-game marketplaces, hardcoded currencies, and desirable objects within a subscription-based game, *World of Warcraft* was *already* fully commodified.

It was due to player antagonism against in-game economies, corporate exploitation the overbearing control of game-worlds that the Virtual Property Rights movement first emerged. As deployed by Chew, Virtual Property refers to valuable and tradable goods, assets, equipment, raw materials, avatars, and currencies existing in the virtual worlds of MMOG. In his tireless examination of the complexity of Virtual Property rights protests in Chinese MMOGs, Chew documents the actions of activists against this multibillion-dollar industry and has catalogued the battlefronts of anti-corporate Chinese gamer activism that include real-world violent protests, in-game protests, clicktivism, media campaigns, connective action, political consumerism, and litigation (Chew, 2022). For Chew, gamers' participation in consumer activist politics and social movements are at once informed by and enhanced by their gaming experience. However, gold farming holds more than just economic implications, it also has social and racial undertones. As documented by Nakamura (2009), there was a popular misconception that all gold farmers were Chinese players, and by extension that all Chinese players were gold farmers. The popular stereotype in game communities was that "Chinese gold farmers are low wage, low tech, low culture, and low class" (Nardi and Kow,2010).

Resentment toward gold farming practices meant that many Chinese MMOG players experienced xenophobic backlashes in-game and online. The anti-Chinese rhetoric grew so vicious that blogger Nick Yee (2006) drew resonant parallels between anti-Chinese gold farmer discourses in online games and the anti-Chinese rhetoric that emerged during the 1800s gold rush. Gold farming became an oft-cited issue in fan-made game films known as machinima. Machinima denotes the production of cinema by using footage recorded in videogames engines often by videogame fans. Machinima treats the game space as readymade to be recorded, remixed and reproduced as cultural artefacts with their meanings and popularity (Huang, 2016). Machinima themself became a filmmaking phenomenon, a significant site of activism, and an integral aspect of *World of Warcraft* culture (Nakamura, 2009). Xenophobic machinima were unambiguous bearing titles such as "Ni Hao", "Chinese gold farmers must die", and "Chinese farmer extermination" (Nakamura, 2009: 133). Chinese gold farming workers themselves were mute in this discourse, for as incisively noted by Dibbell (2007), these playbourers could not afford to enjoy the games they had mastered, let alone produce media about them. Meanwhile Chinese MMOG players found themselves discriminated against both within Mainland China and in the virtual worlds. The rising tensions and multilayered grievances ultimately led to an impassioned call from Chinese netizens for the end of government repression of digital culture in the form of a persuasive and influential machinima.

War of Internet Addiction (*Wangyin zhanzheng* 网瘾战争) (Corn dog 性感玉米, 2010) is a 64-minute Chinese protest machinima made using the World of Warcraft game engine. Ostensibly, the film relays the story of an average Chinese *World of Warcraft* player, their frustrations with the Chinese operators of the game, and their dissatisfaction with the continued delays to the game's expansion. In executing this, the film is steeped in memetic humour and a distinctly Chinese online vernacular known as '*egao*' (恶搞), a kind of remix satire that playfully criticizes while skilfully evading both censorship and prosecution.[2] But beneath the tactical veneer of *War of Internet Addiction*'s parody, the film delivers a powerful critique of the stigmatization of Chinese gamers, a protest directed less at the international *World of Warcraft* player community as the Chinese government. The primary target is China's ruling Communist Party and the regulations it imposes purportedly to protect netizens from pornography, sensitive material, and internet addiction. The film reserves singular disdain for those who criticize videogames as addictive and destructive for young minds, chief of which is 'Crying Beast Yang Yongxin', a thinly veiled pseudonym for the controversial Chinese psychiatrist Yang Yongxin 杨永信. Yongxin's Internet Addiction Treatment Centres practised and promoted electroconvulsive therapy as a cure for alleged Internet addiction in youths (Moore, 2009). Playing videogames in China was effectively cause for torture.

War of Internet Addiction compellingly highlights the injustices and humiliations that Chinese gamers are forced to endure. Toward the film's end, one of the central characters fervently demands the right for free and fair participation in digital game spaces without oppressive government interference, in effect asserting what Apperley has termed "a right to play" (Apperley, 2015). According to Beijing based game journalist Frank Yu (2010) "It was this plea that moved the video from being just a game parody but a manifesto for freedom with gut wrenching emotional impact". What follows is an extract of the machinima character's plea to government officials, as translated by Shao and Kuo (2010):

> Everyday, you have nothing else to do but enjoying your prestigious social status, and pointing at us from an ethical high ground. Have you ever wondered why five million gamers are collectively taking this Net poison (as you so describe our addiction to the virtual game), and the deep-rooted social reasons that are covered?

The creative force behind the film was 26-year-old video blogger known as 'Corn Dog' or 'Sexy Corn' (*Xinggan yumi* 性感玉米) from Hunan. 'Sexy Corn' mobilised 100 volunteers from across *World of Warcraft* servers to spend three months assisting him to create the machinima epic. Whether players from outside Mainland China were among those creating *War of Internet Addiction* is uncertain, but the film certainly was seen across the Sinophone

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[2] China's strict regulatory environment on freedom of speech combined with the rich homophonic affordances of the Chinese language have cultivated a vernacular of online jokes and entertainment known as *egao* (恶搞). Egao is a form of online parody through which satiric, subversive and absurd humour or memes and remix culture operate beneath the radar of sensors offering civil resistance without exceeding the boundaries of acceptable personal expression. According to Gong and Yang (2010) egao "playfully subverts a range of authoritative discourses and provides a vehicle for both comic criticism and emotional catharsis" (Gong & Yang, 2010: 4).

region. Although banned within days of its release on Chinese video hosting sites, *War of Internet Addiction* remained widely accessible online. The film quickly spread, as it appealed not only to MMOG players, but resonated across an entire generation of Sinophone internet users (Chao, 2010; Yu, 2010). Three months later, it won the Best Video award in the Tudou Video Film awards. The film's greatest praise came from Chinese gamers and fans who regarded it "more important than Avatar", the 2009 US Science Fiction blockbuster which centres on resistance against an encroaching hegemonic power (Lee, 2010).

In another response to the state and corporate oppression that had driven the production of *War of Internet Addiction*, in 2008 and 2009, hundreds of thousands of Chinese *World of Warcraft* players migrated en masse to the Taiwanese servers of the game. Unfortunately, in seeking to escape regulation and demonisation at home, Mainland Chinese players found themselves the target of racial derision abroad. As attested by Lee, many Taiwanese *World of Warcraft* players called this influx of Mainlanders "the plague" (2010). By contrast, Lin and Sun reveal that the mass exodus also brought positive exchanges "resulting in unprecedented levels of interaction between players from the two sides of the Taiwan Strait whose official relationship has long been marked by limited contact and political tension" (Lin & Sun, 2016: 180). From these online diasporas of Mainland Chinese players found in a Taiwanese MMOG server, Lin and Sun (2016) identify the emergence of new hybrid Sinophone communities that alter political practices, challenge traditional borders, and subvert official narratives. Lin and Sun also speculate that MMOG virtual worlds provide spaces outside of nationalist frameworks, evoking Oldenburg's concept of "third place"—"a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" (Oldenburg, 1999: 16). Along similar lines Szablewicz has discussed how MMOG players carve out alternative spaces and modes of being, forming new sociocultural constituencies. In these spaces, gamers struggle against games-related racial discrimination, gender inequality, homophobia, colonialism, and other hegemonic game content and/or oppressive gamer groups. In this light, MMOGs emerge as connective and collaborative spaces in which transnational Sinophone communities might find solidarity in playfully fashioning their discontent.

Although this paper makes the case that MMOG have operated as conduits through which social and activist dynamics have spread across the Sinophone region, it must be emphasized that this activism takes place within the broader hegemonies of networked/digital authoritarian use of games in Mainland China and elsewhere. As noted by Jenkins, it is not only Chinese players but the Chinese government that have "transformed online games from a mere pastime into a highly political environment" (Jenkins, 2006). Zhao recalls that as early as 2001, China's then President Jiang Zemin referred to the Internet and online games as "political, ideological and cultural battlefields" that were pivotal for winning the hearts and minds of new generations citizens (Jiang cited in Zhao, 2014: 31). More recently, Nie (2013) has asserted that China's digital game industry is highly involved in the rise of popular nationalism and the one-party state has developed online games to propagate patriotic values, or what Chew and Wang (2021) expound as 'propagames'. As documented by Yin-Poole (2020), the party state also exerts strict ideological control of its gaming communities. Videogames cannot contain anything that threatens China's national unity, sovereignty, or territorial integrity. In these ways, videogames are not only increasingly foreclosed as spaces of playful resistance, but are in fact crucial sites of state-sponsored political persuasion.

China is not unique in its development or deployment of propaganda games. Many western countries, most notably the US, use videogames as military training tools, as well as to spread democratic ideals and neoliberal economic systems at home and abroad. Indeed, the tensions at the heart of *World of Warcraft* and the practices of gold farming it enables are a logic of extraction hardcoded into the US-produced game. As with many games, practices of playbour are reframed as philosophies of empowerment resulting in ideological associations drawn between choice and agency. In these ways, videogames are imagined as nurturing democratic values of freedom and equality in virtual and actual worlds (Kahne, Middaugh & Evans, 2008; Castronova, 2005). Yet given the place of commercial videogame as authoritarian structures of infotainment, persuasion and indoctrination within the geopolitics of Empire, it is questionable if these experiences can play any role in giving rise to civic solutions, or if instead they crystalise as hegemonies to be overthrown.

Conclusion

The permeation of videogames throughout activist movements globally serves to remind that interactive digital products are not merely artefacts of leisure or entertainment but can also be powerful tools to engage and enable civic participation, protest, and activism. Where the playful resistance of videogame activism has largely resided in arts and museum contexts in the west, as this article has demonstrated videogames have become frontlines of battle across the Sinophone world, thereby giving the phenomenon a wider scope and meaning. Detailing a history of videogame activism and exploring its repertoires and manifestations across the Chinese regions, this article has illustrated how videogames can operate as a locus of social activism and as popular avenues through which political dissent can be channelled. Beginning with a discussion of ludic activism in Hong Kong's Anti-ELAB protests of 2019-2020, it has traced protest styles and vernaculars to Mainland China and presented how these modes of playful resistance have spread across the Sinic region via digital diasporas and cross-border encounters through games servers within MMOGs. Within these server spaces, often-conflicting Chinese speaking communities have wrestled with notions of independence and of dissimilar understandings of identity yet have found common ground in their desires for a right to play and in their acknowledgement of games as a medium through which resistance and discontent can be enacted. In this way, videogames not only emerge as spaces in which play, identity, and politics entangle, but as compelling locations in which protests can transpire. However, as this article has also articulated, given the overriding networks of power in which videogames are produced, distributed, and monetised, the countervailing effects of these modes of protest and playful resistance are rendered uncertain and contested.

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Ludography

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