

# 10

## NEW HORIZONS

### Interactions between Videogames and Activism

*Elliot Doornbos and Jordan Cashmore*

#### Introduction

In the mid-1970s, a representative of the board game company Milton Bradley suggested videogames were just a passing fad (The Tampa Times, 1977). Now, over five decades on from early commercial digital arcade games like ‘Tennis for Two’ (1971) and ‘Pong’ (1972), videogames have become a mainstream cultural phenomenon. Developments in digital gaming have reshaped the entertainment industry, rivalling and even exceeding the financial success of film and music, with some estimates valuing the gaming industry as a whole at almost 200bn USD (Eriksen, 2024). Videogames have been lauded as one of the most influential vehicles of socio-cultural representation and expression (Jones, 2008), playing a significant role in shaping social imagination (Latorre, 2015). As with this book’s theme of activism in the online space, the progress of videogames has created opportunities for them to be used as a medium for activism, both through their design and how they are used by players. Technical advancements that modern games have undergone in the realms of real-time interactivity, mechanical complexity, and visual fidelity, as well as their widespread availability through home computer and console systems, have resulted in greater recognition of the value videogames can offer beyond simple entertainment. Alternative uses have included brain training games to support literacy and numeracy development in schools (Wastiau et al., 2009), flight simulators to complement pilot training (Beckman, 2013), and active motion and virtual reality games to facilitate recovery from illnesses and injuries (Unibaso-Markaida and Iraurgi, 2022). Esports – live videogame-based competitive events – have become a legitimate vocation whose audience seemed to grow during COVID-19 restrictions as some competitive sports

(e.g. Formula 1) temporarily migrated to online platforms (Witowski et al., 2023). Improvements have also enabled videogames to depict more ‘authentic’ situations to immerse players in situations and experiences they couldn’t otherwise access, such as engaging in professional sports and racing, surviving in prehistoric or post-apocalyptic environments, and fighting in conflict zones.

Facilitated by the development of more advanced game engines (the software canvas on which developers paint their games) and processing hardware (to power the engine), complex storytelling has been a cornerstone of videogaming since the era of the first PlayStation, becoming an expectation of most big- and mid-budget titles four console generations later. Stories are often delivered through cutscenes<sup>1</sup> and player-controlled sequences, which help immerse players in the narratives and core messages the developers seek to convey.

With the evolution and reach of this medium, its storytelling and, increasingly, its social connectivity, some have seen opportunities to use videogames to explore ethical questions and even to advocate for real-world change. Since the turn of the century, ‘videogame activism’ has emerged and grown as a viable dimension of public discourse, gaining attention from popular and scholarly commentators. This chapter contributes to the discussion by considering the different ways in which videogames have interacted with activism, questioning whether videogames offer an avenue for meaningful and effective civic engagement. It will assess some of the broader challenges to this effectiveness before finally speculating on how videogames may interact with activism into the future.

In researching videogame activism, this chapter adopts a mixed-methods approach. Firstly, it draws on secondary research from journal articles, news outlets, and wider literature on videogames as tools of social and political engagement. Secondly, the researchers engaged directly with videogames and platforms to further analyse the themes of activism discussed in this chapter.<sup>2</sup>

## Defining ‘Videogame Activism’

In line with broader definitions of activism, Jones (2008: 971) explains that “video game activism is...the intentional use of video game technology to bring about social or political change”. In this definition, videogames are used as a medium through which people – often those outside of the dominant group or representing a marginalised viewpoint – actively seek change. While activism is indeed generally performed by (or at least on behalf of) those without the ability, power and position to make such changes directly, change can be sought in a range of ways, from direct calls to action to awareness raising to game-based political allegory.

Scholars have previously offered typologies of videogame activism. Jones (2008), for example, examines how games are used to deliver messages through their original design, through modding (player-made modifications to the game’s code to change the way players experience the game), and through

Machinima (story-based videos produced using the game's engine and assets). Cermak-Sassenrath's (2018) interrelated taxonomies cover the approach to dissemination, type of political message, and how game mechanics are used. Moosdorff and Vervoort (2021) typologise climate change-related games specifically by how the message is delivered and how the player experiences this. We offer a broader lens to complement rather than compete with these existing categorisations, while also expanding the definition to acknowledge some additional ways that activism and videogames interact:

- a Videogames as the 'subject' of activism.
- b Videogames as the 'vehicle' of activism.
- c Videogames as the 'platform' of activism.

Before exploring each of these in turn, there is a fourth way we recognise that videogames have been used: as 'window dressing' for activism. In this context, active gameplay – often from popular games like *Grand Theft Auto*, *Minecraft*, or mobile 'endless runner' games – is presented on-screen while social media commentators audibly deliver political messages on platforms like YouTube and TikTok. The videogames in these videos rarely have any contextual relevance and are instead used as a vibrant visual stimulus and/or to justify the use of game-related hashtags to 'game' social media algorithms and appear in the searches and video reels of a broader audience. While we acknowledge this kind of content, its incidental relationship with videogames means it is not included in our typology. We instead first turn our attention to videogames as the 'subject' of activism.

### *Videogames as the 'Subject' of Activism*

Activism concerning the gaming industry is the longest-lived of the three forms and includes several different manifestations. Likely best known are campaigns against depictions of sex and violence in videogames, particularly arguing that they expose young people to inappropriate content. The early-1990s moral panic about depictions of bloody dismemberment in such games as *'Mortal Kombat'* and *'Doom'* desensitising children towards violence and motivating aggressive behaviour led to government pressure that compelled the industry to self-impose an age-based rating system (overseen by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board) in 1994, which US Senators Hillary Clinton, Joe Lieberman and Evan Bayh would later attempt to enshrine in law.

Concerns continued, however, as hardware improvements in successive home game console generations enabled more lifelike visual and mechanical presentations. The early- to mid-2000s saw activists like Jack Thompson – emboldened by findings from the American Psychological Association (2005) – popularise the 'crusade' against violent games, focusing in particular on games like *'Grand Theft Auto'*. Thompson condemned the role of violent videogames in 'training'

the school shooters of Paducah and Columbine and was joined by TV personality ‘Dr Phil’ McGraw in vilifying them in connection with the Virginia Tech mass shooting, despite the perpetrator not being a player of violent games (Ferguson and Ivory, 2012). Rhetoric demonising violent videogames was reignited by President Donald Trump in the latter half of his first presidential term (BBC News, 2018), but there remains no conclusive scientific consensus on videogames’ effect on player violence (Ferguson and Colwell, 2017). Some games have nonetheless been refused classification (refused for sale) or forced to change in some countries due to excessive violence.<sup>3</sup> For example, 1997’s ‘Carmageddon’ – wherein players run over pedestrians with their cars – was required to ‘censor’ the gore by changing human pedestrians to zombies when it was first released in several countries.

A more recent example of this kind of activism, largely spotlighted by prominent videogame journalists and livestreaming personalities via platforms like Twitch and YouTube, was against unregulated gambling-like mechanics inherent in randomised ‘loot box’ systems in some videogames during the late-2010s. This provoked government interest in countries like the Netherlands, Belgium, Japan, and the UK (see Griffiths, 2021), which, alongside vocal opposition from the gaming community, seemingly worked as a ‘warning shot’ to de-escalate the use of these controversial mechanics.

This category of activism does not, however, exclusively involve action *against* the industry. Interest groups both within and outside the industry (e.g. the International Game Developers Association) have promoted inclusion in gaming, contributing to and supporting the development of a range of accessibility options from on-screen subtitles to colourblind options to a range of specially designed controllers for those who struggle using conventional controllers. Rather than pressuring the industry to stop disagreeable actions, these advocates instead collaborate with the industry to expand its existing efforts to engage an ever greater and more diverse player base.

While activism concerning videogames (and their industry) has its place in keeping companies honest, the main thrust – and remainder – of this chapter focuses on the ways that games themselves are used to facilitate activism, starting with an examination of videogames as the ‘vehicle’ of activism.

### ***Videogames as the ‘Vehicle’ of Activism***

The power and intricacies of game engines and hardware paired with tried and tested approaches to storytelling that modern game developers have at their disposal enables them not only to weave more captivating narratives into their games but also to create games that advocate for and have the potential to motivate real-world political and social change. What the messages of these ‘activist games’ are, and how they are delivered, can vary.

We cast a wide net to recognise the myriad ways developers can deliver activism through their messaging, but we should consider what does and

does not constitute an ‘activist game’ for the term to be meaningful. Depictions of civil resistance in a game, for example, only qualify as videogame activism if the player is expected to engage with it as part of the story, protagonist’s journey, or worldbuilding. ‘Hitman’s’ (2016) Marrakesh level depicts a protest outside a national embassy; however, neither the player nor their character is expected to actively engage in the ideological purpose of the protest, which is not sufficient to constitute an activist game. Conversely, ‘Watch Dogs: Legion’ depicts activism against oppressive state surveillance while also aligning its story and player character motivation with this message, and so could be considered within the definition. A similar view is taken of the representation of people in games. Videogames continually expand their representation to reflect broader trends and societal attitudes, such as including female protagonists (e.g. ‘Tomb Raider’), homosexual relationships (e.g. ‘Fable’), and, more recently, transgender and non-binary characters (e.g. ‘Cyberpunk 2077’; ‘Dragon Age: The Veilguard’). While this has provoked resistance from some commentators, including accusations of ‘wokeification’ in gaming (see MacDonald, 2024), demographic diversity in videogames to reflect broader society, while important, only constitutes an activist game if this diversity is used as a significant story element or message designed to encourage broader attitudinal, social, and/or political change.

There is a range of different causes that activist games have sought to broach. The military stealth-action series ‘Metal Gear Solid’, for example, contains anti-war messages centred on state control, government corruption, disposability of soldiers, and private military companies. While the core gameplay loop does not require the player to engage with these messages – indeed, open violent combat is a viable option in several of these games – the player can choose to complement these story beats with a non-violent playstyle, which offers various rewards – as well as bragging rights – in each instalment (Robinson, 2012). In the first-person shooter ‘Haze’, the player character begins the game as a soldier fighting rebel forces and, as the story unfolds, increasingly questions the ethics of their role in the violence. Robinson (2012) contends, however, that this narrative development is not complemented by changes in the ‘procedural rhetoric’ – the way the player is expected to interact with the game – with the player continuing to engage in violent warfighting, only against a different threat. Without (re-)aligning the rules and processes for what the game mechanics support (and restrict) with the message the game seeks to convey, its persuasiveness in delivering that message is limited (Bogost, 2007). That said, while ‘Metal Gear Solid’ gives the player the option to engage with its anti-war subtext, some players may lack the ‘procedural literacy’ to understand the underlying message and what the game expects of them (Robinson, 2012).

Whereas the mainstream, ‘triple-A’ titles like those mentioned above may have broad mass market appeal and tend to be developed primarily for entertainment, ‘serious’ games – those designed to educate, persuade or raise awareness as well as entertain (Galeote and Hamari, 2021) – are often

developed by smaller independent (indie) studios and address their motivations and themes of change in a more direct, focused, and deliberate way. While not exclusively so, the growing library of games relating to climate change and environmental crisis are most often serious games, evoking emotion and enjoyment in meticulously crafted worlds to raise awareness of the issue and the effectiveness of our responses (Galeote et al., 2022a). The scope of these serious games tends to be small-scale, aiming to affect the individual player's behaviours and attitudes rather than directly encouraging collective social or political action. Some serious games may, however, be accused of serving up what Moseley and Whitton (2014: 1) call 'chocolate-covered broccoli' – games that prioritise interactive learning activities over well-aligned and fun game mechanics – which may limit the size of the game's potential playerbase. Activist games, then, must balance consistent delivery of the developers' core message through narrative and gameplay mechanics while maintaining sufficient fun factor to attract a broad enough audience to be commercially viable and spread its intended message.

### BOX 10.1 ENGAGEMENT IN GAME-BASED LEARNING

To study the efficacy of game-based learning about climate change and its links to public health and pandemics, Daniel Galeote developed '*Climate Connected: Outbreak*', a short (one-hour) single-player interactive narrative game for PC and virtual reality (VR). Very much in the camp of the 'serious' game, the purpose was to test the benefits of game-based learning over traditional learning and the sensory immersion of VR compared to other digital platforms. While participants demonstrated improved knowledge and understanding after the experiment, a similar level of improvement was seen across the VR, PC, and text-based e-learning versions of the information delivery.

Though this experiment centred on an educational game and employed a sample of young people who were already invested in the subject matter, some of the challenges experienced and lessons learned about how messages can be delivered effectively could also translate to activist games made for entertainment and targeted towards a broader audience. For example, players struggled to internalise messages – particularly where they advocate real-world action – if they were not sufficiently explicit and personally relatable, and players also found it difficult to recognise messages in the context of overwhelming in-game situations, emphasising the importance of aligning the game's procedural rhetoric. Fun factor and player freedom to go beyond the developers' intended message was also considered crucial, even in serious games, with players wanting to 'engage in free-spirited exploration' (Galeote et al., 2022a: 265).

(Galeote et al., 2022a, 2023).

Finding a genre that can be used to strike a balance between delivering messages, prioritising fun factor, and maintaining a game's mechanical cohesion and internal consistency can be challenging. Activist games exist across a variety of genres, though the compromises that developers have made in each have received criticism. As previously mentioned, warfighting and action games (e.g. 'Metal Gear Solid') have been used to deliver anti-war rhetoric but the narrative messages are not always complemented by gameplay shifts (or these shifts have been optional, obscure, or overly subtle). Environmental immersion games (e.g. 'Abzu') offer a platform to observe the harms of climate change, but do not always involve actions that the average player could realistically engage in, so the action it intends to inspire may be unclear. Real-time strategy (e.g. 'Anno 2070') enables players to make 'green' choices but has been accused of minimising the complexities of the climate crisis to a rational management problem (Vervoort, 2024). Clean-up and puzzle games (e.g. 'Trash Attack') advocate individual responsibility, but it has been suggested that the resultant behavioural changes are short lived (Larreina-Morales and Gunella, 2023). New genres are still being explored, with forthcoming game 'All Will Rise' incorporating deck building and courtroom elements to deliver stories based on the real-world experiences of environmental lawyers (Vervoort, 2024), though how efficacious this will be in delivering messages and motivating action is yet to be seen.

Beyond already well-established franchises, videogames containing activist messages, especially serious games, usually appeal to niche audiences. In such a competitive industry, where already popular franchises with large marketing budgets dominate and the indie market is already saturated (McBay, 2023), activist games can struggle for attention and commercial viability, particularly when the nature of activism often challenges the status quo, potentially alienating large publishing companies who profit from that status quo (Jones, 2008). Self-publication has become a viable and accessible option; however, the startup capital and expertise needed to buy an engine and develop a game can be prohibitive, particularly when graphical fidelity and interactive freedoms are considered so important to successfully engaging an audience and motivating attitudinal change (Galeote and Hamari, 2021). Crowdfunding sites like Kickstarter can ease some of these burdens if there is initial interest in the project; however, low ongoing viability can still compromise a game's reach. A small playerbase and low marketing capability make it challenging to successfully reach a critical mass of the intended audience. Subscription service platforms for games, such as Xbox Game Pass and PlayStation Plus, can facilitate wider distribution, being that players are not expected to pay up front for the product, potentially making them more willing to experiment with titles they would otherwise have considered a risky purchase. This may also be beneficial to owning companies Microsoft



and Sony, as including (climate) activist games in their packages may be a symbolic demonstration of their commitment to sustainability (Smith, 2020; Sony, 2022).

One way to overcome some of these challenges may be the creation of mods for existing games. Rather than obtaining a game engine and developing (or purchasing) assets to create a new game, modders appropriate the code of existing titles to make changes ranging from the cosmetic (e.g. altering the appearance of characters, environments and interactable objects) to ‘total conversions’ that create entirely new worlds and stories using the original game’s mechanics as scaffolding. This can both avoid the startup costs of videogame development and take advantage of established titles’ existing popularity to deliver activist messaging. The mod ‘Velvet Strike’ for the warfighting game ‘Counter-Strike’, for example, allowed players to spray pro-peace graffiti on the walls of the virtual environments (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018). Mods occupy something of a middle ground between creators using videogames as a vehicle for activism – modders develop new creations but are not usually part of the original game’s development team – and videogames as a ‘platform’ of activism – modders are often fans of the games using the original creation to express themselves (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018). This chapter, therefore, turns now to the typology’s final category.

### *Videogames as the ‘Platform’ of Activism*

Beyond the stories and mechanics of games being used to deliver activism, the players themselves can use in-game spaces to engage in activism in ways that was not originally intended by the games’ creators. Collective action is commonly linked to mainstream activism, such as marches and rallies conducted in physical spaces by people who come together in support of a joint cause. Alongside these in-person forms of activism, however, has emerged the use of online spaces as a hub for social movements and interconnectivity, with social media, online forums, and videogames all being used to facilitate activism (see Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018; Davies, 2022). Postmes and Brunsting (2002) have highlighted that online spaces can transform collective action, offering areas for individuals to communicate, share information, and influence mass audiences, which is more challenging when operating only in physical spaces. As previously noted, videogames across multiple platform generations can be used as spaces for collective action to spread political discourse, raise awareness about a cause, and generate disruption (see McGonigal, 2012; Davies, 2022). This use of the platforms, whether positive or disruptive, often does not adhere to the intended design of the game, instead appropriating in-game tools like text and voice messaging, large server capacity, and customisation tools to facilitate activism (Davies, 2022).



This form of collective action has been facilitated not only by the growth in popularity of videogames but also the technological advancements that have facilitated more complex gameplay, graphics, and player interactions online. Modern videogames and their online platforms, such as PlayStation Network, Xbox Live, and Steam, have evolved into social spaces in which players can connect and communicate. The popularity of multiplayer games, inclusion of voice and message chat capabilities, and increasing player capacity have enabled gaming to grow beyond simply entertainment by enabling players to interact and generate online communities. Furthermore, online platforms such as Discord and Twitch offer further opportunities for players to connect through shared interests and engage together online. These online communities have increasingly become spaces for players to engage in social activism, providing opportunities to raise awareness, engage in political action, and organise social movements. As Wirman and Jones (2020) note, activists can tactically use a range of existing games as tools to help further spread their existing messages and complement real-world movements. Examples of this have included players using ‘Final Fantasy XIV’ to create a women’s rights vigil after the overturning of *Roe v Wade* (Levy, 2023), ‘Animal Crossing: New Horizons’ to perform anti-government demonstrations (Davies, 2022), ‘Roblox’ to stage pro-Palestine protests (Field, 2023), and ‘World of Warcraft’ to promote breast cancer awareness (see Box 10.2).

Although there are potentially positive methods to engaging in videogame activism, it is not without its challenges. Game server capacity restricts the number of players who can engage and communicate in a particular movement. This, in turn, could limit the visibility of the message activists are trying to communicate, as well as present barriers to engaging those outside of the activist group, particularly in cases where servers are open for anyone to access. For example, the free Hong Kong movement used ‘Animal Crossing: New Horizons’ to communicate their messages (Lee, 2024); however, each player island server (where players meet and communicate) could only accommodate eight players (Nintendo, 2025), significantly limiting how many people could directly engage in the activity. Due to the unusual nature of these digital protests, however, the demonstrations went viral on social media, likely resulting in wider engagement in the message the activists were trying to convey (discussed further below). Another risk in this form of activism is that the videogames that are used as platforms can be regionally banned. In the case of ‘Animal Crossing: New Horizons’, activists protested against the state, sharing messages, presenting virtual signage reading “Liberate Hong Kong”, and enacting demonstrations against political figures (Lee, 2024). As a result of these digital demonstrations against the state, the Chinese Government had the game removed from sale (BBC News, 2020). So, although many may have engaged in activism online, games being banned presents significant barriers to engaging in civic resistance activity on these digital platforms.

### **BOX 10.2 RUNNING OF THE GNOMES, WORLD OF WARCRAFT**

One example that encapsulates both the positive use of the videogame space for activism and some of the associated challenges is the annual ‘Running of the Gnomes’ event in ‘World of Warcraft’. This popular digital gathering involves engaged players joining a single server and conducting an in-game fun run from one game location to another to raise awareness and funds for breast cancer charities, with players using the in-game text chat to post messages of support throughout the event.

This reinforces that videogames can be used as platforms for activism and social awareness, even if this was not intended in the game’s original design. It also serves as an example of the barrier that limited server capacity can present, preventing more people from joining and engaging with the event.

Furthermore, the case highlights other issues of appropriating games for activist purposes. Some players on the publicly accessible server may not be there to engage with the event and the high volume of in-game traffic may overload servers, causing temporary shut-downs. Both of these can be challenging for such organised activities; however, they are embraced by participants as part of the fun and a way to further spread messages and motivate fundraising, even receiving support from the game’s publisher, Blizzard Entertainment, on its website.

Blizzard Entertainment (2016) and Collister (2017).

Additionally, within the gaming space, there is a risk of alienating players who are playing for escapism or have a more casual relationship with the game and its online platform. Williams et al. (2006) explored political protests conducted within ‘World of Warcraft’ and found that around two thirds of players engaged with the game casually and were not comfortable with discussions of topics such as politics and religion within the game.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that, although videogames can offer an interactive space and do in many cases have significant audiences, just like in-person activism there will be people who do not want to engage or could be alienated, which may limit the impact and spread of these messages.

### **Discussion**

Videogame activism encompasses a diverse array of mechanisms, taking advantage of in-game tools and wider platforms to engage players in political and social issues. This chapter will now consider how this interacts with the broader landscape of digital activism, how social movements might harness the educational potential of videogames to promote their causes, and

ultimately assess the validity and value of videogame activism as a form of civic engagement.

### *Social Interconnectedness and Digital Activism*

Within all themes of videogame-related activism discussed, social media has played a pivotal role in the spread of messages. Whether used to broadcast news from traditional games journalism, streamers and influencers, or snowballing through forums, the reach of collective action and engagement in activism would be severely limited without social media. Social platforms enable people to share their direct experiences of social and political issues, exposing them to a global audience and fostering greater awareness, engagement, and community support for organised activism (Greijdanus et al., 2020). All of these were seen when young activists promoted pro-Palestine messaging in 'Roblox', which was subsequently shared and inspired a virtual protest in game zones that saw considerable online traffic (Field, 2023). As discussed in the 'World of Warcraft' case cited earlier (Williams et al., 2006), however, staging politically charged activism in a game whose playerbase is comprised in large part of people who play for pleasure or escapism can alienate these players and impact on the community's engagement with this kind of activity.

Social media can be used to encourage engagement with videogame activism, showing clear intention and providing a proxy to affirm the values of the constituent community. While it can be a great way to engage people in planned activity (e.g. protests in 'Animal Crossing'), non-committal support for such causes on social media can exceed genuine (digital) action. This often manifests as, for example, users clicking a 'like' or 'share' button or using a hashtag on a post without complementing this with more active participation in a cause; a phenomenon known as 'clicktivism' (Halupka, 2014). Even this kind of symbolic gesture can be valuable, though, insofar as it can spread awareness and indicate popular endorsement of or solidarity with a cause or movement. The convergence of digital activism – activism specifically situated in videogames supplemented with broader public engagement through social media – can in turn mobilise real-world civic engagement (Greijdanus et al., 2020).

There are, however, some issues that may present barriers to the reach of and participation in videogame activism. Those who suffer from inequality and wider deprivation may have limited access to social media, smartphones, and broader IT infrastructure (Lythreathis et al., 2022; Manduna, 2016). This digital divide impacts videogame activism more than its traditional counterparts, limiting the awareness of and ability to engage in organised civil resistance among those affected. Another barrier is that some games have been banned in certain places, either due to their design (e.g. 'Command

and Conquer: Generals' banned in China for smearing the State's image) or the way they have been used (e.g. 'Animal Crossing: New Horizons', discussed earlier), demonstrating that the State can exercise some control over would-be players' abilities to engage in activism. Some of these obstacles can be somewhat mitigated through the creation and consumption of 'deep dive' blogs and video essays from dedicated fans dissecting their interpretations of deeper meanings – including social and political ones – within games, particularly those games whose core messages are subtextual and require advanced procedural literacy to understand (Inderst, 2021). This can emphasise and reinforce messages that existing players may have missed on previous playthroughs or that those who haven't played may be unaware of; however, these again will only be consumable by those with access. The digital nature of videogame activism, then, presents unique challenges to access from which more traditional offline forms of civil resistance do not suffer.

With videogames – and videogame activism – being so dependent on social media for publicity, the future may shift towards greater integration of these two entities. While videogame platforms have long supported social connectedness (e.g. through text and audio communications) and have more recently begun to integrate more direct social networking links, smartphone apps have expanded the contexts in which digital activism can be seen and, crucially, gamified. Apps that gamify real-world activities by offering specific challenges, applying points to actions, and enabling users to compare their performance to others via leaderboards have been used in a variety of contexts, such as apps that reward fitness activity like 'Fitbit' and 'Strava' and apps that guide and reward reductions to personal/household energy consumption like 'Earth Hero' and 'enCOMPASS' (Douglas and Brauer, 2021; Galeote et al., 2022b). Expanding this approach more broadly to the nebulous concepts of civic engagement and activism, however, could prove challenging. Decisions would need to be made about what kinds of activism – both in topic and in activity – the game would reward and how. The apps may be banned in some places or unavailable due to digital poverty in others, thereby restricting access. Some scholars have also questioned whether gamification trivialises serious causes by prioritising individual accomplishment over collective action (see Edelblum and Giesler, 2025) and whether it could result in perverse behaviours, such as only valuing a cause or action for the 'points' it accrues without, perhaps, appreciating relevant risks (especially in anti-State activism).

## **Education**

Videogames have increasingly been used in education settings to deliver messages. 'Minecraft's' educational edition, for example, has been used in several countries to help students to learn subjects like geography and maths

and to help educators in classroom-based delivery (Bar-El and Ringland, 2020; Minecraft Education, 2025). Games have also been used to engage and improve learners' critical thinking and perception skills, receiving favourable feedback when employed in these contexts (Cole et al., 2023). Engaging these qualities in deepening people's social awareness and sense of social responsibility is a key aim of activism both broadly and through videogames specifically.

Videogames have covered an ever-expanding range of activist themes, including war crimes, human rights, environmental destruction, and social injustice. Games like 'Papers, Please', 'This War of Mine' and 'Beyond Blue' expose players to ethical and social dilemmas that exercise their critical thinking and moral and ethical decision-making, which can influence the way that they engage with moral conundrums. By requiring players to make difficult decisions that reflect real-world problems, videogames offer an alternative format to heighten awareness and further players' understanding of societal issues, which, in turn, can affect their social conscience and willingness to engage in other forms of activism.

Evidence suggests that videogames can be a valid and effective educational and pedagogical tool (Ashinoff, 2014) and studies have shown their ability to improve player awareness of climate-related issues (e.g. Galeote et al., 2023; see Box 10.1). Though ascertaining the impact of videogames in delivering activist messages meaningfully may be challenging, and some have suggested that positive behavioural responses taken after playing such games are short-lived (Larreina-Morales and Gunella, 2023), it seems likely that videogames can have a positive impact on players' social conscience.

### **BOX 10.3 MEASURING MESSAGE PENETRATION**

Quantifying the successful delivery of attitude change messages is difficult. Game sales, playtime, and completion rates are available metrics, but they cannot measure how many players were influenced by the messages, how many minds were changed, or how many players consequently committed to – and followed through with – real-world action as a result of playing the game. Numbers cannot account for player predisposition (people tend to consume media they already have some connection to) or the influence of other factors on players' receptiveness to the message.

The core story of *Detroit: Become Human*, a 2018 narrative-driven game based on offering the player action-based decisions that affect the direction of events, considers the civil rights of advanced AI androids in a hypothetical future. After the final act of the game, players can engage with a short in-game survey, one question in which asks '*was there a moment in DETROIT that resonated with you personally?*' Answering the question reveals the percentage of players who gave each response, allowing players to compare their answers to

others and developers to see how much, if at all, their game's messages might have impacted its audience.

The most popular outcome for the question at the time of writing (on the Steam platform) was 'Many' times at 60%, though the sampling method (self-selection sample of those sufficiently invested to complete the game) and potential biases (e.g. interpretation of questions; poor generalisability; truthfulness of responses) may call into question how reflective this response is of the genuine views of the game's overall playerbase. Nevertheless, by integrating such a direct feedback mechanism into the context of the game – the questions are asked by a contextually appropriate, fully rendered, and voiced in-game android – outside of a specifically research-based context, developers could gain some valuable information about the impact of their message on players.

Videogames have had observable benefits in relation to climate change and threats to non-human animals. Soekarjo and van Oostendorp (2015) found that by having young people concentrate on the meaning of the games, they develop a greater awareness of and willingness to change their behaviour in response to environmental issues. For example, individuals who played the 'Animal Crossing' series had improved knowledge on ecological issues and species identification, indicating its utility as a tool for conservation education and delivering pro-conservation knowledge (Fisher et al., 2021). Players corroborate these themes, with a United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP, 2022) survey exploring environmental themes in games finding that 81% of players wanted to see more environmental content in videogames. In particular, with younger generations moving away from traditional sources of media, videogames can play a role in bringing issues like environmental crises to public attention (Amadori, 2020). This not only suggests that in-game activist content has the potential to be absorbed by players, but that it could also lead to further activism as a result. This motivation to onward activism is disputed, however, with some studies finding little or no correlation between education and certain types of social and political engagement (see Persson et al., 2016; Aaronson et al., 2024).

### *Recognising the Potential*

Entities within and outside of the videogame industry have increasingly recognised its potential beyond simple entertainment value and escapism. A variety of programmes have used videogames to support various causes. Fundraising platform Tiltify is used to support 24-hour 'gameathons', wherein players livestream a day-long session to raise awareness and funds for a range of causes, including medical research (e.g. Macmillan) and help for children in conflict zones (e.g. War Child). The British Government previously have

asked YouTube personalities to use their platform in discussing the positive impact that videogames can have on mental health (Games Are Good for You – Trailer, 2020).

UNEP's Playing for the Planet Alliance is a collective of game companies committed to taking positive action to protect the environment by using their games to encourage environmental conscientiousness in their players and to raise money in support of conservation efforts (UNEP, 2024). There are even movements to foster civic responsibility in the next generation of game creators. The Student Challenge, hosted by Games for Change – a gaming-focused social advocacy group – tasks and helps students to design games that promote social changes that contribute to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Pollack and Pierre-Louis, 2019). Engaging young people – a key demographic for both videogames and sustainability messaging – and embedding sustainability in their design philosophies may help to find creative and entertaining ways to deliver activism through game design, which can influence both the mindset of future developers to more actively interweave these messages into their work and the games that young people may choose to purchase and play.

On the other side of the ecological divide, oil company Shell has paid popular streamers on 'Fortnite', a shooting game with a large young player-base, to refuel virtual vehicles at Shell petrol stations as part of a marketing campaign for their fossil fuel products (Luscombe, 2023). Indeed, using videogames to reach the same target audience as some of the activist messaging we've discussed throughout this chapter could be an innovative and impactful approach to corporate greenwashing (Luscombe, 2023) or, as Harry Lang (2023) puts it, 'gameswashing'. A variety of stakeholders, then, have seen the value of videogames and related platforms in promoting and enhancing – or in this case counteracting – social movements.

## Conclusion

In this period of the Anthropocene, characterised by continued political and social strife in a global context, videogames have grown as a platform where both creators and players can engage in spreading messages to motivate change. As discussed throughout this chapter, the games themselves have the potential to confront players with moral and ethical dilemmas, exposing them to real-world issues and potentially inspiring activist responses, while players can use in-game tools as a hub to engage in disruption and spread messages for various causes.

More broadly, videogame activism offers opportunities to engage wider audiences who may not traditionally be exposed to such messaging, immersing players in social and political discussions. This can; however, risk alienating more casual players and trivialising or gamifying serious topics. Technical



restrictions such as online game server capacity and political censorship, as well as general accessibility to the games where activism can be found, can present additional barriers. Moreover, measuring the effectiveness of this form of activism in facilitating actual social and political change is challenging, bringing into question the real-world validity, viability, and impact of this type of digital activism.

Overall, videogame activism is a complex but expanding form of activism seated within a growing section of the entertainment industry. As videogames continue to develop in both technical capability and social interconnectedness, their potential to engage players in social issues, raise awareness, and act as tools for education and civic engagement will expand in kind. As such, further discussions and exploration on the impacts of different kinds of games and ways in which they are used for activism should be explored to garner a better understanding of the possibilities and limitations in using videogames as a tool for social and political change.

## Notes

- 1 Cinematic video segments that remove control from the player, usually to deliver and progress the plot of the story.
- 2 Specific videogames will be referenced throughout this chapter because their intention and content align with the purposes of our discussion. Their inclusion should not necessarily be considered an endorsement from the authors.
- 3 Some games have been refused classification in some countries for reasons other than depictions of violence, such as for showing nudity, homosexual activity, or perceived anti-State sentiments.
- 4 The authors recognise, however, that the people playing the game, as well as their attitudes and receptiveness to activism, may have changed since this research.

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