VIDEOGAME SPACES AS

POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES

Videogames and affordances for in-game activism

Student Name: Joep Tempelaar
Student Number: 510586jt

Supervisor: Delia Dumitrica

Master Media Studies - Media, Culture & Society
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication
Erasmus University Rotterdam

Master's Thesis
June 2022

ABSTRACT

There is an abundance of studies on social movements and how these employ digital media as a tool for organization, mobilization and dissemination. However, the majority of the literature focusses on social media, while paying less attention other forms of digital media, such as videogames. Studies on in-game activism are scarce, and most studies limit themselves by describing or categorizing in-game repertoire. The experiences of activists and why or how they make use of their videogame environments for activism is overlooked in the literature. Therefore, this study examined how activists experienced the affordances of videogames for in-game political actions. Twelve interviews were conducted with organizers, coordinators and attendees of in-game contentious actions, while affordance theory provided a theoretical model to perform an inductive thematic analysis on the way they engaged with the videogame's features. Based on the findings of this study a model on in-game collective action is proposed that encapsulates the unique dynamic for in-game activism. Participants used the videogame as a social space, logistical space, public sphere and as part of a media ecosystem that supported their in-game contentious actions. The participants employ the space and functionalities of videogames as a social space, setting up communities, formalizing roles, organizing events, gathering in-game resources and acquiring organizational know-how and leadership skills. These structures and skills are, when the need arises, used to appropriate the videogame for contentious action. In-game organizations afforded tools to build coalitions, form consensus and mobilize their members. While group-mechanics, chat functions, pre-events, rewards and social capital facilitated in-game mobilization efforts. Through in-game contentious actions the videogame space turns into a public sphere, which enables the circulation of and discussion on societal issues. Furthermore, in-game activism itself is debated. In this dynamic, participants experienced disruptive acts performed by other players and this, in turn, forced them to develop counter-tactics. The videogame was also seen as part of an ecosystem of media that supported in-game action. External communication platforms were used to support organizational efforts, while social media was used for mobilization and the dissemination of in-game actions. Furthermore, in some cases social media proved to be the space in-game action emerged from.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

In July 2021 hundreds of players of the videogame World of Warcraft organized a sit-in in the in-game city of Oribos to protest the alleged sexual harassment culture in the offices of Activision Blizzard, the game's creator (Marshall, 2021). Players organized themselves through in-game groups, and spread their message on Twitter and Reddit. However, this virtual sit-in was constrained to only 40 visible players, due to server limitations. Furthermore, to join the game, a pre-paid subscription was required. In turn, this subscription allowed protesters take up server space, and motivated them to raise awareness (Messner, 2021). This example of in-game collective action nicely illustrates the focus of this thesis, namely the affordances and limitations of virtual game environments for activist purposes.

The activist use of digital media, like videogames, is not new; research on this phenomenon has picked up steam since the turn of the century (Earl, 2019). Social movements, for example, have been using digital media as a means of organization and exposure (Van Laer & van Aelst, 2011). Contemporary activism has become increasingly hybrid, blending digital and physical elements (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). Earl and Kimport (2011) argue that there are two central affordances in regards to digital activism: reducing the cost for organization and action; and, enabling individuals to engage in political acts without them being physically present. This may be particularly useful for marginalized or minority groups, enhancing their opportunity to make themselves heard and gain exposure for their cause (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, & Wollebaek, 2013).

When it comes to games, their affordances – both in terms of advantages and limitations – offer unique opportunities for political and activist action. The notion of affordances draws from ecological psychology literature and refers to the perceived possibility of actions in regards to technology (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). It is the marriage between the physical properties a technology has, that could enable or constrain action, and the human agency to apply these properties, even outside their intended use. Therefore, these affordances change in different context, for example due to different cultural norms (Hutchby, 2001).

Studies of political and activist use of games tend to focus on describing how videogames are being used for political acts (Jones, 2007; Cermak-Sassenrath's, 2018; Davies, 2020). However, there is less attention to how activists experience the possibilities

of actions in regards to their in-game environment. Therefore, this study will attempt to examine the following question:

How do activists experience the affordances of videogames for in-game political actions?

Answering this question could provide political, media and game scholars insight in how video games are appropriated for activism. This includes which features of videogames constrain or facilitate political action, and how activists make use of them to organize, mobilize, and disseminate their message. The study will also highlight how activists experience their participation in, or organization of, these political acts in regards to the medium. Special attention will also be given to how and why activist see videogames as technology that afford political action. Furthermore, this knowledge could be used by activist groups to make more effective use of in-game spaces in their political struggle.

2. Theoretical Framework

To answer the aforementioned question, this thesis will build on several relevant concepts and perspectives. First, literature on activism, social movements, and social media provide an insight into the adaptation of collective action to digital environments, including videogames. Second, affordance theory, and the affordances of videogames will be examined, in order to understand how videogame properties facilitate or constrain certain action. Third, in-game activist acts and their the political potential will be discussed.

2.1 Activism, social movements and digital media

Activism refers to the range of actions performed by groups of citizens seeking to obtain civic and political goals in opposition to existing social or political systems (Saunders, 2013). Activism is often discussed in relation to social movements, or "networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict on the basis of a shared collective identity" (Diani, 1992, p. 13). However, not all forms of activism take place within the context of social movements. For instance, individuals, citizen collectives, or non-governmental organizations can also engage in acts of activism. Whether or not these entities join a social movement relies on their demand of social change combined with the supply of facilitated political participation by the organizers of the social movements (Klandermans, 2004).

Traditionally, scholars differentiated between conventional acts of activism, such as being a member of a political party, and unconventional acts of activism, like protest, petitions and boycotts (Saunders, 2013). Yet, whether something is conventional or unconventional is context dependent (Norris, 2009). Protests, for example, were once seen as part of the unconventional domain, but participation of the public has significantly increased, and thus propelled it into the mainstream repertoire (Norris, 2009).

Another distinction is drawn in terms of the level of risk and commitment needed to perform certain political actions (McAdam, 1986). Here, the distinction is drawn between low and high-cost forms of action. Participating in protests and having a formal role in an activist organization will take up more time, effort and is potentially more risky, than signing a petition or sharing a social media post.

Finally, some forms of activism are considered contentious, if aimed at the disruption and subversions of everyday life, in order to challenge a current political

situation or achieve a political goal (Tarrow, 2012). This includes a wide array of political acts, like the aforementioned protests, sit-ins and boycotts, but also acts of a more violent nature, such as sabotage and rioting. In contrast, other forms of activism that are not considered contentious are on the rise. Individuals are now able to gather information on certain issues, in order to distribute them to others, informing and supporting other political action (Halupka, 2016). These information activists engage in a highly personalized way, and switching seamlessly between collective and connective action, without maintaining strong collective ties (Halupka, 2016).

Information activism, as a mode for activism, exemplifies how the internet allowed for the creation of new forms of political action that enhanced the repertoire of social movements. According to van Laer and van Aelst (2010), the internet shaped activism is two distinct ways: On one hand it facilitates and supports activism in the physical realm; and, on the other it creates new forms of digital activism. In their typology on the topic the authors differentiated between these facilitating and creating functions and added in the aforementioned low/high cost of action (McAdam, 1986). Low-cost internet-supported action encompassed the donation of money, consumer behavior, and legal protests, while high-cost Internet-supported action concerned transnational meetings or demonstrations, and sit-ins or occupations. Other examples of Internet-based actions with a low threshold are online petitions, email bombs and virtual sit-ins, while internet-based actions with a high threshold could be protest websites, alternative media sites, culture jamming and hacktivism.

Digital media also impact the way social movements mobilize fellow citizens (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Bennett & Segerbrg, 2013), engage in collective decision-making (Earl and Schussman, 2002), respond to opponents and deal with oppression (Eschenfelder & Desai, 2004; Khazree & Losey, 2016). Online environments have also radically decreased the threshold and cost for organization and action and has made it possible for activist to participate, without physically being present (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). Furthermore, they enable the dissemination of the protest to large audiences, and its continuation by providing alternative forms of participation that can be sustained (Castells, 2012). The following sections will address discuss in more detail several important elements of digital activism that can start as a departure point in researching activist

actions in games, namely: identification, mobilization and organization, media dissemination and framing, and, limitations and barriers.

Identification and collective identity

Identification relates to demarking the boundaries of one's self in regards of the other, in order to be able to recognize and be recognized (Melucci, 1995) and is therefore a highly social process, which takes place on an individual and collective level. A large body of research has highlighted identification as a fundamental element for activist behavior (Blankenship et al., 2017; Conlin & Heesacker, 2017; Horowitz, 2017; Pereira et al., 2017; Schmitt et al., 2019). Individuals identify with certain societal issues, and the social movements emerging in reaction to them, on the basis of several factors. Dissatisfaction over collective issues and the belief that action can improve the situation are among them (Bilali et al., 2019). An individual's internalized belief system will also impact which social issues will be seen as legitimate and requiring action (Blankenship et al., 2017). Furthermore, individuals are more likely to join movements if their friends are involved (Hafez & Wiktorowicz, 2004). Another very strong predictor of joining movements and activist action is an individual's identification with a certain collective (Bilali et al., 2019; Schmitt et al., 2019).

According to Melucci (1995), collective identity refers to a shared definition of collective self, constructed by a network of relationships between the actors involved. In activism, collective identity remains a continuous and organic process; it emerges out of the participants' negotiations of what is the issue at stake and who is affected by it. Collective identity is further related to a certain action frame, in the sense that it concerns the means, ends and actions of the collective. These are shaped and evolve in regards to the environment the collective finds itself in, which creates a field of tension which offers opportunities for actions and constraints. Melucci (1995) argues that it is exactly this dynamic that facilitates collective action. Horowitz (2017) proposes that activist identity consists of not just collective identity, but also role-based identity. While collective identity refers to one's social identity in regards to an injustice frame, role-based identity relates to the internalization of certain tasks or responsibilities to the people around an individual. Collective identity is instrumental in mobilization efforts and creating a public image, while role-based identity enables day to day activities (Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

Social media can facilitate this collective identification process in several ways. They can expose an individual to information regarding social issues and social movements (Lance Bennett et al., 2008) and provide a space to debate these topics and form public opinions (Sakariassen, 2020). Furthermore, digital spaces enable new possibilities in forming collective activist identities (Mundt, Ross & Burnett, 2018). While collective identity is a main facilitator for collective activist action, individuals can engage in activism and social movements without identifying with a collective. In networked societies individuals can, facilitated by digital media, opt-in to social movements, without cultivating strong bonds. These fluid networks of activists and their forthcoming actions were conceptualized by Bennett and Segerberg (2013) as connective action. While both collective and connective action are different dynamics in the social movement landscape Bennett and Segerberg (2013) argue that in most modern social movements both organized collective action and decentralized connective action are employed.

However, there is less known about how collective identification processes may either lead to in-game activist action or even take shape within these games. In this study, attention to this aspect of activism raises questions such as: how do collective identities form in videogames and how is action sustained by them?

Mobilization & Organization

Traditionally, activist organizations had a hegemonic role in social movements, taking on most of the responsibility in regards to organization and mobilization. With the rise of digital media the role and relevance of these organizations is challenged, mainly due to the low costs, both in resources and effort, of organizing through digital media (Benkler, 2006; Earl & Kimport 2011). In some cases, for instance, researchers talk about digitally-enabled social movements prompted by groups of dissatisfied individuals who voice their discontent online and group together (Liao, Wu, Chen, 2020). According to Leong et al. (2020) this can consist of two types of emergences. With *clustering emergence,* individuals cluster together and primarily engage in the creation of content and spreading of information. A collective identity or significant resources are not required. While *structuring emergence* occurs when there is a need for standardization and formalization, and it refers to the creation of more stable and organized networks of activist groups. In this the forming of a collective identity and conscious of their community is key (Liao, Wu,

Chen, 2020).

Social media facilitate this organization by providing the structures needed to manage and control the access to the movement and enable participation (Leong et al., 2020). Digital technologies can also be used to coordinate action live enabling participants to quickly adapt to their opponents' tactics (Agur & Frisch, 2019). They also facilitate the creation of a global network of groups, which can work in tandem, to coordinate actions and maximize impact (Leong et al., 2020). Furthermore, certain roles and responsibilities can be attributed to individuals or groups in the movement, which facilitate smoother operations, but also maintains commitment and decreases the chance for internal conflict (Leong et al., 2020).

In turn, these features foreground the decentralization and apparent lack of leadership of social movements. Earl (2007), for example, found that while there often is no formal leadership role in social movements, individuals tend to take on specific tasks and perform specific leadership actions. Furthermore, digital media can also help scale and expand movements internally, by facilitating the building of coalitions, the mobilizing of scarce and disparate resources, and by expanding narratives (Mundt, Ross and Burnett, 2018).

Finally, digital media enable new forms of activism, such as information activism (Halupka, 2016), hashtag activism (Sinpeng, 2021), etc. This enlargement of the repertoire of action is creating a plurality of options for citizens to engage in politics (Lee & Chan, 2015). In that sense, individuals may not need to only go out and protest but could contribute to the cause from the comfort of their own homes, by producing, processing and circulating digital content (Lance Bennett et al., 2008). Importantly, these actions are significantly enhanced by the personal social networks that these participants are able to mobilize in support of a cause (Lance Bennett et al., 2008). The aforementioned ways digital media facilitate organization inform this study of how videogames could potentially be used to organize in-game contentious action.

Media dissemination & Framing
Traditionally, activism needed mass media coverage to get the attention from fellow citizens. Dissemination of information about activist causes and forms of action was done through journalists. This created a dependency on news media institutions, which tend to

have a preference for organized and professional activist groups that are ably to mobilize large numbers of people or causes that are in line with local economic or well-being themes shared by the journalists (Andrews & Caren, 2010). On the other hand, groups encompassing volunteers, employing confrontational methods or advocating for social issues that are not deemed newsworthy and are thus often less covered (Andrews & Caren, 2010). Furthermore, there is a correlation between the social issues behind the acts of activism and how these are being covered. Some protests are more likely to be covered negatively and framed as riots or violent, which can work towards delegitimizing the actions (Brown & Harlow, 2019).

In regards to social movements, news media are increasingly being viewed as one of the key factors in the movements' ability to influence society and bring about change (Andrews & Caren, 2010). Digital media enables the global dissemination of information regarding social movements and protests, which increases the movements salience in other parts in of the world, making more likely the movement spreads (Garrett, 2006). The digital coverage of certain events results in more online activity of individuals searching for information on the topic, which results in higher awareness (Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2021). This is especially the case when the images or videos of the event in question have certain vividness, such as violent clashes or innocent victims, and thus this vividness can be seen as a currency to acquire attention (Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2021). Furthermore, a continuous stream of content on the issue and its development is needed in order to maintain that public awareness and interest (Garret, 2006).

An important factor in the dissemination of a social movement is framing. Framing is defined as the process in which the meaning of a certain person, object or event is constructed (Davison, 2015). This process has become a fundamental element in understanding how social movements are characterized and develop (Benford & Snow, 2000). Frames simplify, in the case of social movements, certain societal issues or events that make it easier for large audiences to understand in a manner that it instigates and mobilizes to join the social movement (Benford & Snow, 2000). These collective-action frames inspire and legitimize action to further the cause of the social movement (Benford & Snow, 2000). Social movement leaders often deliberately construct these collective action frames in a manner that makes it clear who the victim is of certain societal issues (Benford & Snow, 2000). These injustice frames amplify the idea of victimization and who is

to blame (Benford & Snow, 2000). This too was the case with the Arab Spring revolts throughout the Arab world in 2010. These started when a Tunisian vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, self-immolated, and his death was framed as a symbol for the desperate situation many citizens were in (Garret, 2006). However, these frames are not set in stone. As oppositional forces tend to dispute or bend framing in favor of their own standpoint, while activist actively fight negative discourse surrounding ongoing protests (Agur & Frisch, 2019).

Barriers & limitations

If the sections above outlined the benefits of social media to activism, this section maps the main barriers and limitations. These include algorithmic exclusion of certain demographics, harassment, limited sustained participation and the inability to control the social movements' message. Due to the decentralized nature of digital activism every individual is able to adapt or reframe messages of activistic nature, which results in a multitude of texts, symbols and images (Agur & Frisch, 2019). This enables an explosion of activist media but makes controlling the main message and steering the movement towards a common goal harder to achieve (Agur & Frisch, 2019; Dumitrica & Felt, 2020). Moreover, decentralized movements often result in weak social ties and low long-term commitment (Van Laer & van Aelst, 2011). These two elements can severely impede the longevity of the activist movement in term of mobilization and visibility (Dumitrica & Felt, 2020). For example, in the case of the 2014 Umbrella movement in Hong Kong, digital media played a detrimental role in its emergence and mobilization, as it allowed individuals to share grievances, organize around them, and participate in, and coordinate protests. Acquiring political consensus within the movement was rendered difficult by the several diverse interest groups that formed it and consequently the movement got divided and was not able to continue to claim the global spotlight (Agur & Frisch, 2019).

 Further barriers occur when activists attempt to reach audiences beyond those already supporting or resonating with their cause. First, the exclusive reliance on digital media for activist purposes can exclude certain audiences from the movement, as not everyone may be using these channels. For example, this was also a problem in the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella movement, as activists struggled to gain a foothold with older audiences that preferred tv and radio (Agur & Frisch, 2019). Second, among those

audiences that do use social media, filter-bubbles created by algorithms may have similar effects. Facebook's algorithms, for instance, expose a user only to content that reinforces their current ideas, instead of new messages. This creates echo chambers that are hard to bypass by activist movements (Dumitrica & Felt, 2020).

Digital media is often perceived as a democratizing force, that has an egalitarian effect on power dynamics. However, a large body of research suggest that digital media actually reproduces existing structures and relations of power (Lee, 2018; Michaelsen, 2017; Chitanana,2020; Dumitrica & Felt, 2020). These relations translate themselves to several subversive tactics employed by those in power, such as misinformation and trolls (Dumitrica & Felt, 2020). This enables autocratic governments to sway the discourse in their favor, identify and neutralize activist leaders and organizers, obstruct mobilization of the population and decrease the urge for uncensored media (Singpeng, 2021). These actions are not constrained by national borders, as autocratic governments employ digital media to pressure activists beyond their borders (Michaelsen, 2017). Sinpeng (2019) argues that while digital media has emerged as an important element in activism, political authoritarianism and tighter control on the internet in some nations has even reduced democratic momentum and prospects for future democratic movements. These ideas are in line with the cute cat theory as proposed by Zuckerman (2013). This theory argues that digital consumer products used for mundane means are appropriated for activism and when these actions gain traction it could invite corporate or governmental censorship.

Furthermore, the use and success of digital media for activism can appear more self-evident and effective as it actually is. A study by Dumitrica and Felt (2020) confirmed this by several interviewing activists. The authors found that activists often approach the use of digital media for activism in a positivistic manner, only to be disillusioned by disappointing results. This often resulted in the activists experience feelings of burn-out, and can be considered an often overlooked barrier in digital activism.

In response to these forms of repression activists often adapt their repertoire and modes of activism. For example, by using strategies masking the contentious intent of their causes (Lee, 2018). These can include posing as a neutral party, multi-layered messages with several meanings hidden in plain sight, and non-confrontational posts on societal issues that indirectly target officials (Lee, 2018). When governments restrict internet access, tactics of circumvention are often employed. For example, the use of VPN software

to get access to blocked content or platforms (Earl et al., 2022). Furthermore, activists employ strategies of de-identification, like using pseudonyms on online platforms, to make themselves harder to identify for the forces in opposition (Honari,2018). To further mitigate the risks of their activist, activist often re-work their network. This includes carefully picking the people they associate themselves with, often creating an online activist network that is fully separated from their friends and family (Honari,2018). The examples of barriers, limitations and the tactics to circumvent them mentioned in this subsection could assist during the analysis in being sensitive to similar limitations or tactics or identify new ones.

2.2 Videogames and Affordances

While to some extent similar to other forms of digital media, videogames have the potential to provide different virtual environments and opportunities for activism. In this section, I will first review the theoretical framework of affordances, then move on to a discussion of the possible (activist) affordances of videogames.

Affordances: a theoretical model

Coined by Gibson (1979), a psychologist studying perception and ecological psychology, the term affordances was conceived to conceptualize the dynamic between an organism and its environment. Gibson (1979) argued that this is done through the functions our environment provide us. For example, a cave is first perceived as shelter before it is perceived as stone (Nagy & Neff, 2015). While affordances can be learned they are not merely social constructions but combine subjective and objective elements, or the material and the mental (Nagy & Neff, 2015; Norman, 1999).

What the field of ecological psychology overlooked was that humans shape their environment and create technologies that mediate communication, and therefore have an active role in creating what they perceive (Nagy & Neff, 2015). Most technologies, like digital media, are created with clearly understood functions and usability in mind. Therefore, the complexity of digital media is often invisible to most users, creating *hidden affordances* (Eslami et al., 2015). Norman (1999) thus argued that real and perceived affordances should be differentiated. *Real affordances* refer to what users can actually do with technology, facilitated by the design choices that provide functionalities that users can use. Second, *perceived affordances* refers to the range of actions the user perceives as possible with the technology. Third, the author highlights *feedback*, not as an affordance, but all perceptual information, like symbols, colors, lights and texts, that makes an affordance perceivable and turns it into a real affordance to the user.

Whether or not affordances are attributed to a certain technology by individuals is contextually dependent (Hutchby, 2001). However, context can be a very broad and fuzzy notion as well – it could refer to a range of things, from the age of the users to their emotional state. For instance, Aslam, Brown and Reading (2018) studied the reasoning processes of both students and professors in regards to boardgames. While the older and more experienced professors used logic to deduct what game elements could afford what

actions, the young students intuitively knew what the game element could afford. Emotional state is another factor that can influence affordances. Stress and anxiety can impede the processing of information and can decrease the chance an affordance is perceived (Nagy & Neff, 2015). Furthermore, individuals can perceive digital technologies as being social and emotional entities, which further alters the way they engage with them (Nagy & Neff, 2015).

According to the way affordance is defined by scholars, one cannot state that an affordance is a mere tangible features of a piece of technology, but rather the marriage between these features and an individual's ability to perceive a range of actions with the technology in question. In the case of this study, video games have features, both spatial, mechanical or otherwise that have to be examined for their intended purposes by their designers, but also how individuals playing the game might use them in different ways.

Affordances in videogames

Video games differentiate themselves from other digital media as they can be spatial environments that contain objects and narratives. This creates a different experience in regards to affordances. Phantom affordances, a term coined by Alesja (2019), exemplifies this. It is defined as a feature of the game that seems to be affording a certain action, while that action is not actually possible. For example, some in-game objects might seem to be interactive, while they are not, or some locations look like they can be visited, while this is not possible. Phantom affordances can be experienced as positive or negative, and can even be part of the game's narrative, but either way they disrupt a game's experience (Alesja, 2019).

Perception of an in-game object and its affordance is different from actually understanding how to use it. Building upon Tucker and Ellis' (1998) notion of micro-affordances, Arend and Müsseler (2021) showed how avatars mediated the actions of participants. Micro-affordances refers to the idea of affordances that do not describe a full and coherent action, but rather an element of it (Tucker & Ellis, 1998). In Arend and Müsseler's (2021) study participants in a digital environment were asked to indicate whether objects with a handle were orientated in the proper way in regards to the hands of their avatar. Even when the viewpoint of the participant was rotated, showing the avatars hands from the side, they could still properly indicate how the grab them. This

showed that players are able to take the perspective of their avatar even in regards to micro-affordances.

What are some of the concrete affordances in videogames? Linderoth (2010) offers a model in their study of how players make sense of their virtual environments. The author differentiates two forms of affordances, material and formal affordances, based on the Aristotelian model of plays. *Material affordances* refer to all tangible game elements, like missions, objectives, dialogue options, points of interests, enemies and non-player characters that facilitate the players journey through spatial world or the narrative of the game. *Formal affordance* refers to the, by the designers intended and by the players perceived, pattern of logic which facilitates progression through the game. For example, in most shooter games everything that moves tries to kill you, therefore you kill everything that moves, which lets you progress through the game (Linderoth, 2010). Furthermore, besides progressing through a video game by performing exploratory actions as mentioned above, some actions, such as changing the appearance, equipment or skill of your avatar can facilitate performances like roleplaying (Linderoth, 2010).

Another unique element to Videogame environments that affords players certain actions is music. While not visual, nondiegetic music, aids the player in two different ways: the dynamic transitions in background music often signals certain events (such as an encounter with an enemy), while in high-paced games music is often used as a beat to perform actions to (Kamp, 2014).

Finally, another aspect of affordances that needs to be considered here is the question of how players come to learn about them. Learning about formal and material affordances is fundamental to playing the game, and players do so in several ways (Toh & Kirschner, 2020). Thus, they learn through trial and error, through observation and modeling, and by being reinforced by rewards or other extrinsically motivating elements. Gamers also employ cognitive learning strategies, such as using their own subjective mental representations of in-game situations acquired in previous gaming experiences, reflecting on their actions and iterate on them, and using analytical reasoning. The practical way of learning as described by the previous authors is inherent to the medium and is illustrated by a study done by Denham (2018) in which participants were asked to play a videogame with certain objectives. One group got their instruction up front, one group during playing, and one group after they had played the game for a while. The author

concluded that the group that played around first learned the game faster and was the most effective in reaching their objectives.

However, that does not mean Videogames are perfect learning environments. Perceived affordances can often obstruct real learning (Haggerty, Cosgrove, & Griffin, 2018; Linderoth, 2010). Linderoth (2010) argues that certain perceived material and formal affordances make solutions to self-evident. Certain objective markers, objects that flash, pop-up tips or dialogues that flat out tell you what to do are examples of that. This is further exemplified by a study done by Haggerty, Cosgrove, and Griffin (2018), which let participants navigate a virtual world with or without a HUD. HUD refers to heads-up displays, which are all constantly visible visual elements that provide the player with information of their location, status and skills. While these visual cues did assist players in finding certain objects, it did not enhance the retention of knowledge regarding their virtual environment. The authors argue that in some instances these familiarizing with your virtual environment is detrimental to achieve the games objectives.

The overview of affordance theory, both from the ecological psychology, digital media and video game perspectives given in this section informs this study in its methodological approach. Affordance theory is used as the theoretical lens through which the data is analyzed. While, perceived, real, phantom, material and formal affordances will be used to conceptualize the findings.

2.3 The political opportunity of videogames

As Videogames have steadily become a prominent cultural form in the last decade (Nacke & Detering, 2017), their potential for political participant becomes an increasingly interesting question for scholars and activists alike. Mainstream politics often looks to new forms of media to mitigate low participation rates, lowering thresholds and bridging social divides (Loh, 2019). Due to their ability to immerse a player, Videogames are often seen as a way to create new forms of engagement and maintain motivation for an extended period of time (Loh, 2019). Furthermore, Videogames are used to reach certain demographics of voters that are hard to reach otherwise (Gorman, 2008).

One example of the intersection between games and politics stems from Obama's 2008 electoral campaign which bought the very first in-game political ads (Gorman, 2008), which were spread throughout games like Guitar Hero, NBA live and NFL tour. Gamified campaign apps, like the one for Hilary Clinton's 2016 campaign, followed suit, enabling players to gain points through spreading messages and engaging others in order to spend the points on rewards (Loh, 2019). Furthermore, stand-alone political campaign games were also being developed. Among such games, we can distinguish between adaptations of existing games such as Super klaver, an adaptation or Super Mario Brothers and newly created ones like Fiscal Combat (Bossetta, 2019). Both types of games employ ludic and narrative elements to enforce their rhetoric, and often portray one party or politician as the protagonist, in a struggle with other political forces or issues (Bossetta, 2019). Existing game environments and functions are also being used (Good, 2020). Some games afford political entities to adapt environments, create or modify objects, images and texts, and facilitate access of other players to these materials (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018).

In addition to political usage, videogames can also be sites of activism. Cermak-Sassenrath (2018) argues that the adoption of Videogame environments for political purposes rests upon five features of the games themselves. First, the videogame needs a large amount of diverse objects and locations. Second, the game needs to facilitate players in the creation and sharing of content. Third, players need to be able to import external media, such as photos or videos. Fourth, changing the skins of objects or characters. Finally, the mechanics need to facilitate the programming of objects and bots.

Cermak-Sassenrath (2018) further developed a taxonomy of in-game political acts, can also be extended to thinking about in-game activism. First, some games facilitate the

creation of objects, imagery or locations that can be employed in support of, or are themselves, political or activist acts. Second, games may also provide alternative environments for demonstrations or other types of social events that (may or may not) disrupt gameplay itself. Players perform actions that are expected in a physical protest, gathering in one place, shouting messages and carrying protest materials instead of weapons or other tools. These protests can gather in multiple locations, move along a route, or gather at a recreated location. In-game protests, like their physical counterparts are often facilitated by organizations, both in-game organizations, such as guilds and clans, or real-world activist groups (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018). Third, games can also afford the development of new forms of activism and potentially disruptive live performances encompassing a wide array of actions such as satirical performances, sing-alongs, mock terror attacks and avatar skinning, the modification of the appearance of the avatar. These performances often disrupt gameplay by using game features to perform actions that are not intended as gameplay and can be performed by individuals or groups. Fourth, certain videogames afford sending textual or audio messages to individual players or groups, which can be re-appropriated for creative forms of activism, such as reciting poems, performing plays, (Cermak-Sassenrath) or reading the lists of names of deceased American soldiers (Delappe, 2007). These actions are distinct from the aforementioned category performances, for they do not entail interaction with other players (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018). Finally, special plays, challenges or runs are variations of playing a game. The player progresses through the game, does not disrupt the gameplay of other players, but limit themselves through a self-imposed challenge. These can be pacifist plays, in which the player does not kill game characters to advance through the game, vegan plays, in which a player only consumes digital vegan food, or gender bending, dressing their character up in a gender unintended by the makers. These plays are often recorded and disseminated through video platforms (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018).

In addition to these five types of in-game political and activist actions, Galloway (2006) brings up the idea of counter gaming. Rather than using existing virtual infrastructure for activist purposes one can also fundamentally modify these environments and mechanics to the point they no longer facilitate the gameplay intended by the makers. The videogame is merely used as material for a piece of art. Untitled game by the artist Jodi is such a game, which is based on the popular videogame Quake. Instead of shooting aliens the players are

confronted with a deconstructed version of the game containing abstract patterns (*Electronic Arts Intermix: Untitled Game, JODI*, 2001). Galloway (2006) argues that most of these works are avant-gardist and political in nature.

Importantly, the political and activist potential of videogames does not end with the medium itself. The physical and game world are intertwined. Games tend to include existing cultural patterns from other media, like stereotypes, and political issues (Schleinler, 2017). Moreover, most in-game activism concerns issues from the physical world (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018). However, this is not a one-way street. Videogames have the ability to create imaginaries that manifest in the physical world, as a study by Demirbag-Kaplan and Kaplan-Oz (2017) found. Gamers project in-game experiences on their real-life protests, and use them for contextualizing the environment and themselves, but also their roles and strategies. Furthermore, activists are able to take certain pop culture elements and turn them into symbolic resources that help increase visibility and reach audiences (Dumitrica, 2021). This too was the case with D.Va, a character in the popular video game Overwatch, which became the symbol of a Korean feminist movement (Krishna, 2017).

To conclude

The created theoretical framework informs on developments and practices regarding activism, social movements and the way digital media has influenced these. This knowledge provides the study with material for reference and comparison. This is needed for video games provide unique environments and functions not found in other digital media. Therefore, videogames potentially afford others forms of mobilization, organization and forms of expression for political purposes. While there are studies that describe forms of activism in videogames, the experiences of the activist themselves are largely overlooked. This study contributes knowledge to the field on how activists appropriate video game spaces and mechanics in order to express their point of view, organize around them and mobilize others to join in their actions. Affordance theory provides the theoretical framework to analyze these processes.

3. Research design

This study will examine how activists experience affordances of videogames for in-game political actions. To answer this question the personal experiences of activists that either organized or partook in in-game activism need to be collected. Therefore, a series of qualitative in-depth interviews will be held. This method is chosen for it allows a researcher to gather in-depth data on personal experiences, opinions, motivations, worldviews and assumptions (Healey-Etten & Sharp, 2010).

3.1 Data collection

The population for this study is individuals that either have organized or participated in in-game collective or connective contentious activism. These individuals, who can be part of an activist organization or not, or identify as an activist or not, understand their own in-game actions as part of a larger social movement or cause, as defined by Diani (1992). There will be no further exclusions based on nationality, cultural identity, location or gender, because of the transnational character of most political acts in digital environments (van Laer & van Aelst, 2010). However, due to the researcher's language competencies, only English and Dutch speaking individuals were contacted.

The political acts will encompass the categories proposed by Cermak-Sassenrath (2018), namely protest, collective performances and the creation of political imagery that either formed or supported the activist action. Thus, an important criterion for identifying and including in-game activism is the collective nature of the mobilization and participation. Thus, making in-game protest signs will be included for it supports collective action, but isolated individual acts of activism, such as individual performances or 'special plays' (e.g. vegan or pacifist playthroughs) will be excluded.

The project relies upon 12 interviews, as a study by (Guest et al., 2006) showed that after 12 interviews no new meaningful data was collected, and that a point of saturation was reached. Participants were selected by means of a two-stage non-probability sampling method. First, a list of in-game political acts is created (See Appendix 1), which is formed by searching through news media focusing on video games, Twitter hashtags referring to certain Videogames and/or social movement and Reddit pages dedicated to specific video games. These cases are spread over several videogames, social movements and activist topics. To ensure feasibility of this project, I have selected five cases based on their recency

and availability of participants. I aimed to recruit two to three participants from each, with an eye to including both organizers and participants. To identify and recruit these participants, I started from the details provided by the news media, Twitter hashtags and Reddit pages mentioned above, making contact through messaging features of social media, or, when available, personal e-mail addresses. Upon recruiting some participants, I have also used snowball sampling to access new participants as this form of sampling allows access to populations that are harder to reach (Babbie. 2016). This is especially practical when contacting members of a certain activist group or getting in contact with activist that were at the same event.

The interviews were held through Skype or Discord, lasted between 45 min and 2,5 hours and were audio recorded. Before the interview, participants received an informed-consent form, informing them of their rights concerning privacy. In the first few minutes of the interview these rights were again explained, and the participant were asked to verbally restate their consent. All participants were over 18 years old, and their identities were protected by assigning them pseudonyms.

The interviews were semi-structured, with topics and corresponding questions asked in the interview based upon contemporary research on the affordances of digital media and politics (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Van Laer & van Aelst, 2011; Bennet & Segerberg, 2013; Earl, 2019). First, participants were asked to give an overview of their experience with in-game activism. Second, they were asked to elaborate on their motivations for choosing videogames, or the particular videogame in question, as a space for political action. Third, the topic of mobilization and organization was discussed. Specific attention was given to which game features facilitated or constrained which actions, and what role the participant fulfilled in this protest. This topic was more elaborately discussed with the organizers of political acts. Fourth, the specific barriers and limitations experienced in game environments were discussed. Furthermore, when relevant, attention was given to repression and censorship. Fifth, participants were asked to explain how they experienced the dissemination of their political message within the game and beyond. Again, the emphasis was on the games features and potential actions. Sixth, participants reflected on the impact of their political act, and if relevant, the role of the act in regards to the wider social movement. Finally, the potential for future acts of activism in video games was explored.

3.2 Cases and participants

The following subsection gives an overview of the selected cases and the participants that organized, coordinated or attended these in-game contentious actions. First an overview per case will be given. Second a table will provide information on the participants in terms of the case they were a part of, their role, previous activist experience and other relevant personal information.

Ukraine Peace March – The Eldar Scrolls Online

In the early days of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine players of The Eldar Scrolls Online organized a peace march that traversed the central region of the game. This region was normally reserved for player vs player combat between the three different factions. The march de its way in a circle around the imperial city in the center of the map, as a sign of solidarity and demand for peace.

The Oribos Sit-in – World of Warcraft

In 2021 Blizzard, the company behind World of Warcraft, was sued for having an unsafe working environment, in which sexual harassment was the norm. This led to a series of protests and employee walkouts. A sit-in was organized in the in-game city of Oribos to inform other players of these issues and stand in solidarity with the victims of Blizzards culture. For most participants the sit-in was their final act in the game and stopped playing afterwards.

Tryia Pride – Guild Wars 2

Starting in 2015 as an effort to claim an inclusive digital space, Tryia pride grew out to a big yearly event with serious organizational know-how. The pride march traverses several sections of the in-game world with hundreds of players in an effort to claim the digital space for LGBTQ players.

Ukraine Rally – Guild Wars 2

On the first day of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine an organically formed protest rally emerged in the in-game city of Lion's Arch. Players would march in a heart shape, sporting Ukrainian colors, in opposition of the invasion.

Black Lives Matter rally - Minecraft

At the highpoint of the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2020, Minecraft players organized an in-game rally in remembrance of George Floyd and in support of reforms.

Figure 1. Overview of participants

	Social movement	Videogame	Role	Gender	Age	Occupation	Location	Activist experience
#1	Ukraine war	The Eldar Scrolls online	Attendee	Cis female	/	Cinema manager	United Kingdom	Petitions & rallies
#2	Sexual harassment Blizzard	World of Warcraft	Organizer (connective action)	Cis male	18	student	United Kingdom	/
#3	Sexual harassment Blizzard	World of Warcraft	Organizer (collective action)	Cis female	/	sensitivity reader	United States, Hawaii	Charity
#4	Sexual harassment Blizzard	World of Warcraft	Attendee	Cis female	23	Digital artist/desk job airline	United states	Petitions and charity
#5	Pride	Guild Wars 2	Organizer (collective action)	Cis male	28	Streamer	Slovenia	/
#6	Ukraine war	Guild Wars 2	Organizer (connective action)	Cis male	/	Student	Denmark	/
#7	Sexual harassment Blizzard	World of Warcraft	Attendee	Trans female	36	Audio technician	United States	Protests
#8	Sexual harassment Blizzard	World of Warcraft	Coordinator	Trans female	38	Freelance writer	United States	/
#9	BLM	Minecraft	Organizer (collective action)	Cis male	/	Startup	United States	Protests, Canvassing
#10	Sexual harassment Blizzard	World of Warcraft	Attendee	Cis female	34	Photography	United States	Organizer charity events

#11	Pride	Guild Wars 2	Coordinator	Cis female	/	Student	Sweden	/
#12	Pride	Guild Wars 2	Coordinator	Cis male	/	Physician	Germany	/

3.3 Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed by means of a thematic analysis. This method enables the identification of recurrent and marginal themes in a qualitative dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). This is done by identifying patterns, through matters of frequency, magnitude, structures, processes, causes and consequences (Lofland et al., 2005). Furthermore, the method is known for its flexibility, both in its execution and theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis requires a deep dive in the dataset, going back and forth, constructing the themes both during the process of analysis, making it an organic process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step according to Braun and Clarke (2006) is to familiarize yourself with the data and transcribing the dataset. Second, initial codes are being created, and from these codes the first themes are identified. Semantic themes encapsulate data that was explicitly present in the dataset, while latent themes describe data that was implicitly present (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes are then reviewed and compared with existing studies, and afterwards defined and named.

Since there is little literature specifically focused on the affordances of videogames for activism, the analysis remained inductive but preserved the results of the literature on the affordances of digital media for activism as a base for comparison. Furthermore, the analysis focused on semantic themes—or ideas explicitly expressed by interviewees—as my goal was to map participants' experiences and views of in-game activist action. All interviews were uploaded in Atlas.ti, where the coding was performed. Sentences of the transcript were marked, since the analysis focusses on ideas and experiences, and one or several codes were attributed to them. For example, the different ways the participants imagined the Videogame to afford activism were marked, but also material affordances such as coloring systems or chat functions were marked when used to engage in, or support activist action. These individual codes were clustered into groups and during the process these reshaped organically, changing names and encompassing more codes.

3.4 Limitations and generalizability potential

Several limitations are linked to this research design. Due to the aforementioned language constraints experienced by the researcher, only participants that are proficient in either English or Dutch were approached, and all interviews were conducted in English. Furthermore, all participants originated from either the United States or Europe. This skews the study towards Western political contexts and videogame usage, and, as such it cannot be easily generalized to non-Western scenarios. While there is a healthy balance in the sample in regards to the role participants had in the cases, the sampling relied heavily on snowballing. Therefore, the participants are largely clustered around two cases, which results in some cases not being equally flushed out as others. Further limitations come with the type of videogame. All but one of the cases took place in a Massively multiplayer online game (MMO) and generalization to other types of Videogames, such as builder games, shooters or open world adventure games will be difficult. As is inherent to qualitative data analysis, its reliability is not to be taken for granted, and the reflexivity of the researcher is essential in the process of qualitative research (Markham, 2008; Pousti et al., 2020). Being a gamer myself and being enthusiastic for the cases studied, it was important to be carefully and not to resort to positivist or technological deterministic viewpoints in the analysis.

4. Findings

To map the experienced affordances of videogames in regard to contentious in-game activism, the thematic analysis of the interviews has produced several themes: *the videogame as a social space*, *the videogame as a logistical space*, *the videogame as a public sphere* and *the videogame as part of an ecosystem*. Based on the findings of these themes a *model on in-game collective action* is proposed and will be discussed in the last subsection.

      The participants encountered the in-game contentious actions in various ways. Some, like participants 3, 5 and 9 were organizers and were triggered by the salience of the social movement at that time and used their in-game social space to organize their event. Participants 1, 4, 7, 8 and 11 were part of the social spaces of these organizers and came into contact with the idea through them. Participant 2 saw images of in-game collective action online and decided to organize his own version of the same event, while participant 6 felt the need to do something an responded to a comment under a reddit post. Participant 12 was the only one that encountered the action in the game itself and decided to join.

4.1 Experiencing the game as a social space

The participants indicated that the Videogame, for them, was a social space first and foremost. All participants mentioned having extended social networks throughout the game they conducted their activism in, and some indicated these social ties played an important role in their lives. The social space in Videogames is constructed by its designers and facilitated by the tangible features in the game, but also by the players who use these features to build communities, create organizational structures and organize events. This social space was, in most cases examined, the fertile ground from which collective action sprung up. This section will elaborate how the Videogame's material affordances facilitated social connection and organization, but also how the participants appropriated these in-game features to build up this social space. This will be discussed in the subsections *the mechanical dimension* and *the socially constructed dimension.* Further attention will be given to the *social capital* acquired by participants through these social structures in the game, which would later on be used to organize and mobilize others for activism. According to the participants, the Videogame also functions as *an inclusive social space* and this section will elaborate on how Videogames are seen as inclusive and which features make it so, while also reflecting on its limitations.

The mechanical dimension

All of the games examined provided players with features to communicate and organize themselves. Chat systems were mentioned by all participants as the main in-game feature that enabled communication. Participants active in both Guild Wars 2 and World of Warcraft described several specialized chats based on location or group mechanic. These chat systems come with their own limitations as Participant 2 illustrated. In World of Warcraft two factions are in opposition of each other and when they attempt to communicate through the chat their sentences will turn to gibberish, creating an artificial language barrier. This can be overcome, as mentioned by participant 3 and 10, but comes at a high cost of in-game currency.

The majority of participants mentioned the central role of guilds or other communities in the organization of in-game contentious action. A guild is an in-game organization of players that binds them together under one collective identity. These guilds often are dedicated to a certain playstyle, language or idealized culture, which will be

elaborated on in the next subsection. While every game has a different guild system, in general it provides players with several functions for organization, such as improved communication, trading, shared funding and the creation shared symbols. However, the function most referred to by participants was the role system. Both in World of Warcraft and Guild Wars a player can be assigned a certain role in the guild. These often include one or more guild leaders and several supporting positions. These roles often come with certain privileges within game. Participant 3 mentioned that, having the role of officer in World of Warcraft, she had certain privileges regarding the guild's chat function. This enabled her to reach out to other guild members more efficiently. In Guild Wars a similar role, that of the commander, enabled players to organize larger groups of fellow players, and broadcast their location on the mini map according to participants 5 and 11. Participant 9 also mentioned the use of a creator role that had certain privileges in Minecraft that enabled players to modify their surroundings to a greater extend. Not every game examined had a guild system, for it is most common in Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMO RPG's). However, external platforms supplemented the lack of in-game organizational tools. This will be discussed in the final section of the findings.

The formation of groups is something that exists outside of the guild system too and two in-game formations were mentioned. A smaller group, consisting of around 5 players, which facilitates players to share experience points, communicate in a separate chat and teleport to each other's location. In both World of Warcraft and Guild Wars 2 these groups are referred to as party's and they enable players to work together and engage in certain missions or challenges. The second formation is a larger group, consisting of between 10 and 50 players. These formations are known in World of Warcraft as raids and in Guild Wars 2 as squads and are designed to facilitate interaction with specialized challenges, not achievable in smaller groups.

The socially constructed dimension
All participants had a well-developed social circle through the videogames they played. Some even viewed the videogame world as their main social hub or attributed some personal development to the game and its social world. The commitment shown by the participants to these social circles, both in time, money and effort positioned the videogame as a social space they were a part of and which was worth fighting for, or

combat societal issues in. Furthermore, most guilds and communities that the participants mentioned had some politically awareness and several participants stated they had engaged in physical protests or fundraising before.

The functions mentioned in the previous subsection afforded certain actions perceived by the participants which might not have been intended by the game's designers. The guild system affords joining a group of people with similar interests, playstyles or ideologies and these collective identities are constructed by the players themselves. Participant 5 mentioned that the guild he created in Guild Wars 2 revolved around the idea of inclusivity, while other guilds were constructed around competition and player-vs-player combat. Participants 3, 4, 7 and 8, who are all part of the same guild in World of Warcraft, stated that inclusivity was also one of their key tenets. In addition, the guild revolved around roleplaying, using the videogame world as a background to act out the roles they ascribed to their avatars. The participants described creating backstories, illustrations and professions to flush out their character. Participant 4 stated that her character was a seamstress, selling self-designed clothing, while participant 8's character was a storyteller.

The guilds are often engaged in organizing social activities withing the game and thus have some organizational know-how. The most common events are those in the game by design, such as certain missions or story campaigns mentioned in the previous subsection. However, guilds also utilize the in-game spaces for self-designed events. Participant 5 called these non-mechanical events, since they were not mechanically incorporated in the game by designers. Participants 3 and 4 mentioned that their guild organized in-game auctions, holiday-based events, marketplaces, festivals and performances, while participant 8 recalled tavern-based roleplaying events and participants 5, 7 and 10 mentioned several events regarding charity.

The guilds also attributed additional meaning to the role system, building on its mechanical basis. The guild often assigns tasks and responsibilities to certain positions, as mentioned by participant 5, 8 and 12. Participant 8 stated that she was a deputy, a role not explicitly present in the guild system of World of Warcraft. She mentioned that she performs supporting actions during events, such as coordinating a section of an event or taking on the role of security. Some guilds even employ a semi-formal training program to train players for a certain role. Participant 5 mentioned that his guild had trainees, who

shadowed the players in the role of commander for a certain period time in order to learn how to use the chat functions properly and organize events or other players. These opportunities facilitated the development of leadership skills as several participants pointed out. Participant 5 also regarded videogames as spaces for socialization and a semi-safe playground for young people to get exposed to the adult world.

Social capital

Through participating in the social space, illustrated in the previous two subsections, players or the characters they played with could acquire some social standing from their in-game social environment. As mentioned before participants 3, 4, 7 and 8 belonged to a guild that specialized in roleplaying and the server this guild was formed in was also dedicated to roleplaying. According to participant 7 their guild and some of the characters involved had quite some renown throughout the server and their names were fairly well recognized in the roleplay community. This renown assisted in attracting players to their events. While not being in the guild participant 10 confirmed this renown the guild enjoyed. Participant 5 mentioned that he started off in one guild in which he became well known. However, when he expressed to the guild leaders that he wanted to address inclusivity, they were not interested. Therefore, he used his connections, acquired knowledge and renown to start his own guild based on the idea of creating an inclusive space for the LGBTQ in Guild Wars 2. These examples show how social capital can assist in influencing one's social surrounding and better one's position in it (de Zúñiga et al., 2016) How the participants used their acquired social capital to further in-game contentious action will be discussed in the next section.

The Videogame as an inclusive space

When asked to reflect on the medium many participants stated that Videogames are an inclusive space. Several participants mentioned that the social spaces in Videogames bridge geography and other physical limitations, such as physical disabilities, which is in line with theory on other forms of digital participation (Earl & Kimport, 2011).

> *"It allowed people to participate who normally could never participate in a physically way", "it was more accessible", "We were all dealing with the pandemic rolling*

around. Suddenly a lot of things weren't accessible to people. We were certainly able
to be accessible" – Participant 3

For participant 5 the social space he created through his community was about claiming a space in the videogame for the LGBTQ community. He felt that this space enabled people to connect and develop their LGBTQ identities, even when this was not possible in their own physical social spaces.

"That [community] is also something you need as a queer person. Especially you
know, we would have people from Russia, from the Middle East, where there's a
death penalty for being gay. They would be like; this is the first time in my life that I
could speak to other queer people." – Participant 5

However, this inclusivity had its limits and several barriers in participation in the social space were mentioned. To start with, games and the hardware they run on cost money and some games, like World of Warcraft employ a subscription-based revenue model. Some of the expansions of World of Warcraft and Guild Wars 2, containing new locations, items and other functionalities also had to be purchased. Oribos, the in-game city in World of Warcraft were the sit-in, that several participants attended, took place in was such a location and therefore not accessible to players without having purchased the expansion. Furthermore, some content is not available for players based on their progression through the game. For example, players below level 30 cannot enter cities in Guild Wars 2, including Lion's arch, the location of the pro-Ukraine protest attended by participant 6. Furthermore, some items or functionalities are only accessible after the player has made some progression or acquires them by spending in-game currency. Some of these items or abilities are required to partake in the social space or take on a certain role. For example, the role of commander in Guild Wars 2 and all its organizational features need to be purchased for a sizable amount of in-game currency. The following section will elaborate on whether the inclusiveness and the barriers of the medium assisted or limited in-game contentious actions.

4.2 Experiencing the game as a logistical space

Many in-game features were mentioned and/or employed by the participants in organizing in-game activism and mobilizing people or resources. The considerations taken into account by the participants were many and varied from which route to walk, to limitations on server capacity. This section will highlight which material affordances of Videogames were used for organizational, mobilization and dissemination efforts in regards to in-game activism. These will be discussed in subsections on *the existing social space and organization, format-based considerations, location-based considerations, server-based considerations, in-game mobilization and in-game dissemination.* Further elaboration will be given on the rationale mentioned by participant to appropriate certain in-game features and how they used their knowledge of formal affordances in the Videogame in mobilizing other players. Furthermore, this section will also highlight how participants experience barriers in organizing, mobilizing or disseminating and which tactics they conceived to circumvent these limitations.

The existing social space and organization

The social space as mentioned in the previous section proved to be key in many cases in organizing collective action, through the use of acquired social capital, existing roles and guild resources. The majority of participants mentioned the central role of guilds or other communities in the organization of contentious action. The eventual organizers, participants 3, 5 and 9, acquired standing within their social space. All experience a sense of opportunity that encouraged them to take action.

> *"it's like in life you kind of spend your life looking for ways to make the world a better place and I found there's this one place where I have a more than usual amount of power and influence almost."* – Participants 5

All but one case originated in this way and it signals that not everyone is able to effectively organize in-game collective action, but that it is reserved for individuals who enjoy some status either through their formal role or social standing in their community.

Being at the head of guild also meant access to in-game resources and for some formats of activism or forms of expression these were needed. Participants 10 and 11 mentioned their communities managed in-game funds or a storage full of items for players to engage. Participant 10 stated that pieces of clothing were handed out to players to

create a sense of uniformity and to purchase the expensive rank of commander in Guild Wars 2, participant 11 mentioned the community raised in-game funds to support players.

While the organizers enjoyed some privilege, organizing an event did came with its downsides. Some organizers explained they felt a lot of responsibility and took on a lot of tasks.

"Essentially the more challenging stuff was um juggling all the different plates of uhm, I'm both running the event in game, I'm commanding you know a map, and then I'm also talking to the other volunteers, I'm also sorting through the donations, I'm also keeping you know like complaints" – Participant 5

Participant 5 explicitly mentioned this was his greatest source of stress and he tried to mitigate it by employing spreadsheets and taking sufficient breaks.

During the collective action the supporting roles, that helped organizing and coordinating in regular events, often transferred one-to-one to the contentious actions. The trained commanders in Tyria Pride coordinated big groups of fellow-players through the squad mechanic. The commanders made sure that all players knew the norms of the march and helped players find their way and answered their questions. This coordination enabled the greater march to remain consistent in its shape and speed. Officers and deputies at the Oribios sit-in helped organize the event and coordinate it while it was running. These supporting roles organized players through the raid mechanic, provided them with emotional support, reported disruptions and answered questions or provided information to bystanders.

"I was there to assist because I'm a deputy. The officers have a more directing role." – Participant 8

This confirms the idea of role-based identity in in-game collective action as defined by Horowitz (2017). Both examples illustrate that the roles that keep the already existing social structures running translate to both activities and responsibilities in in-game collective action. These sense of responsibly to the event and its surround community could also take a heavy toll on the players in supporting roles. Participant 5 described feelings of burn-out that occurred to some of his fellow players.

"So, we would get a lot of burnout, because people would spend so much time and dedicate themselves to commanding and doing an event" "and then they would realize they don't care about Guild Wars anymore. They were only doing it for the

people and then they would kind of get burnt-out. They would say they'd take a

break, but then they would never come back" – Participant 5

This observed sense of burnout is one of the barriers to mediated activism as defined by Dumitrica and Felt (2020). The discrepancy between the passion felt for the community but not for the Videogame, as source of burn-out, adds on to this theory.

Format-based considerations

The format for the protest was conceived and adjusted by the participants according to what the game practically afforded, visibility and perceived activist repertoire. Participant 5 mentioned that the march as a form of activism, in part, was chosen for visibility reasons. The march moved through several areas, which made sure that more bystanders were able to see it. Participant 6 attributed the success of the pro-Ukraine rally in Guild Wars to walking in the shape of a heart, which made it stand out. Participants 3 and 4 mentioned similar considerations, as a group of sitting avatars in World of Warcraft was considered very salient. Furthermore, the march as format is something participant 5 observed in real life and endemic to the wider social movement of pride. Participant 7 also rationalized why a sit-in was chosen in the quote below. Both these examples illustrate how formats and repertoires for in-game activism are heavily inspired by activist repertoire in the physical or mediated environment.

"Because that [the sit-in] is a historically proportionate response" "Well, I mean

different protests have different level of severity" "Because it's historically good at

getting attention and it's very non-inflammatory" - Participant 7

The consideration to keep the level of disruption to a minimum was also mentioned by participants 3 and 4. This was done by not visually blocking essential features of the locations, such as non-player characters (NPC's). Both participants stated that being visible and spreading information were the main goals of the sit-in and disruption would only hinder that. Participant 8 also mentioned that in light of the short timeframe, organizing a sit-in was simply easier than organizing a march with a route and several locations. The in-game format of collective action also provided inspiration and a template for others to organize their own events. The images of the Oribos sit-in participants 3,4,7 and 8 engaged in disseminated throughout reddit. These pictures were picked up by participant 2, who decided to take the format and organize a copy of the event in the European server.

Location-based considerations

Several considerations were also taken into account in regard to the location of the protest and how these afforded collective action. Participant 6 states that Lion's arch, as the location for the pro-Ukraine rally, was chosen for its size and being a main hub through which a lot of players move. Both participant 6 and 5 also mentioned the presence of nearby teleportation points were important factors. The same considerations were made for the Oribos sit-in, since both factions can enter the city and the area is heavily populated. Accessibility was mentioned by participant 1. The peace march was organized in the main area in The Eldar Scrolls Online for player vs player combat and thus the location afforded players from all factions to join. The route for Tyria pride was also carefully chosen. It began at a well accessible city on one side of the map and moved to a city on the other side of the map. Participant 5 also stated that no sections of the route went through areas belonging to an expansion. Expansions need to be purchased and therefore choosing otherwise would have excluded some players from joining. The march also passed two locations that had symbolic value and afforded a moment of contemplation and significance.

> *"It's called field of the fallen. It's a memorial to fallen soldiers." "It's sort of used as an extended metaphor for like remembering a few people who have died and who fought for our rights and so on. Then we also walked past this NPC that was confirmed as trans."* - Participant 5

Participants 3 and 5 both stated that a peaceful location without enemies or player-vs-player combat is key to organizing collective action, for these features would only disrupt the event. Some locations in a game afford this neutrality, while others do not. The participants stated that the locations chosen for the Oribos sit-in and the Pro-Ukraine rally were neutral to all factions, all parties could enter, no enemies were present and combat with other players was not possible.

Server-based considerations

Another element the organizers had to take into account were the servers the online games in question run on. These servers have a certain capacity and videogame designers employ several tricks to get the best performance out of them. Some games employ servers that are dedicated to a certain gaming platform or geographical region, like Europe

or North America. Participants 1 mentioned this as a factor that obstructed players from joining, since a character could not be transferred between servers in The Eldar Scrolls online. Other games like World of Warcraft and Guild Wars 2 do enable character transfers, but this option is behind a paywall, and accessible by paying either in-game or real-world currencies. Furthermore, servers are pieces of technology and thus prone to hardware or software issues. This was illustrated by participant 10, who's charity event had so many players on one spot the server crashed, and players were thrown out of the game. Participant 12 mentioned a server fallout during a pre-event he hosted to promote Tyria Pride, which essentially canceled the event because nothing could be done but wait. The examples show how dependent in-game activism is on the game's infrastructure.

Shards are partitions of servers, which enables games to systematically scale up player capacity based on the number of players. When the first shard has reached capacity, a second one will open up. However, being in a different shard prevents players from seeing or interacting with players from different shards. For some participants this was seen as a challenge. For example, some in-game contentious actions spanned several shards, as mentioned by participant 1 and 3. According to these participants this hampered the mustering process, with some players standing in the exact same locations, but not seeing any others. Organizers needed to work around these limitations and did so by employing the aforementioned Raid and Squad mechanics. Being in a raid or squad enabled players to transport to other the instances of other players, thus making it easier to join the event.

Another trick employed by videogames to prevent overloading the servers is the generation of instances. Where shards are partitions of servers facilitating thousands of players, an instance is piece of content, like a certain location, generated for a relativity small group of players. Participant 1 mentioned that a queue formed for the instance the peace march in The Eldar Scrolls Online was taking place, which caused a delay for certain players or even prevented them from reaching the march's location. Further limitations were mentioned by participant 5 that stated that the Tryia Pride had reached the capacity of instances in Guild Wars 2. When the pride moved into an area, there would be no more room for other players. Participant 5 experienced this affordance as an obstacle, for it prevented other players from seeing the march, being informed or joining in. In order to increase the visibility of his pride march, participant 5 experimented with partitioning Tyria

pride into several smaller marches, all in their own instances. He reasoned that this would not fill up the instance and leave room for other players that could be exposed to the march.

In-game mobilization

The participants mentioned six tactics for mobilizing fellow players in the spaces of the game in which the contentious action took place: Guild messages, pre-events, rewards, group and role-based mechanics, chat functions, and using social capital. To the mobilize fellow guild members into joining the event the guild systems and corresponding message systems were utilized, as described by participant 3 and 5. Both these organizers send newsletters or messages through the guild messaging system, informing their communities of the planned event. According to several participants this was highly effective and many of their fellow-guild members showed up. Another guild-based tactic mentioned by participants 5 and 12 were pre-events. These are non-mechanical events are organized by individual guilds related to Tyria pride and take place in the days leading up to the main event. During the pre-event participant 12 organized a fashion show took place, games were played, prizes were won and donating to the chosen charity was enabled. The use of prizes was mentioned by participants 5, 9, 11 and 12, in both Tyria Pride and the BLM Minecraft rally. In both cases rewards were given to players that donated a certain amount to charity. The rewards mainly consisted of in-game items, like weapons or armor in the case of Tyria Pride, or a BLM banner in the case of the BLM Minecraft rally. For players that donated more than 20 dollars, participant 5 had mugs, buttons and a handwritten letter. According to participant 9 the BLM banner reward was very effective to mobilize other players and during the rally many of them donned it, displaying it above their avatar's head. The banner was created, not by in-game tools, but by coding a plug-in that changed the appearance of the in-game object.

Figure 2. The BLM Minecraft rally and banners

(Provided by participant 9)

To lower the threshold for fellow players to join the events, several group and role-based mechanics were used, like the aforementioned squad in Guild Wars 2. This formation, only available to the commander role, enabled players to teleport to the starting location of Tyria pride and participant 5 referred to this as 'taxiing'. A similar way of mobilization was mentioned in regard to the Oribos sit-in. There, the raid function was used. Teleportation to other players' locations is also possible and the raids were used in the coordination of the event. During Tyria pride the role of the commander was also used to create visibility on the mini map through the use of a commander tag. This tag is a symbol on that appears on the mini map and above the head of the avatar, indicating the location of a commander. Participant 11 explained that when players observe a commander tag on the mini map, they assume a group of players are engaging in a challenge and would be eager to join. Using the knowledge of this formal affordance, the pattern of logic created by the game (Linderoth, 2010), the organizers employed the commander tag to attract other players to the march. Furthermore, every commander can change the color of their tag and thus they changed it to all colors of the rainbow, which was considered very salient according to participants 5, and 11. For participant 12 it was the sole reason he came into contact with Tyria Pride.

Figure 2. The rainbow commander tags of Tyria Pride

(Provided by participant 5)

To mobilize bystanders while the event was going on several participants mentioned using the chat functions. Participants 2, 4, 6 and 8 stated they actively encouraged other people to join. This was either done by engaging with them through a local chatroom, visible for anyone near their location, or a 1-to-1 chat. In Guild Wars the localized chat was more visible than most games. A text bubble would appear over the avatar when typing something in the chat. According to participant 6, this made it very visible and this helped in bystanders recognizing the protest, but also helped him recognize potential participants that expressed questions or intentions of joining through the chat.

While the role of commander came with some status in the game, it was of a mechanical nature. Several participants mentioned employing social capital acquired by engaging in the aforementioned social space of the game. Participant 7 stated one of her characters was well recognized in the roleplaying community. She continued by stating that by using this relative fame in the roleplaying scene she hoped to further the Oribos sit-in and the cause it was supporting. She continued to elaborate that she owned several characters but choose the one that was most famous and that this was the norm throughout the event.

> *"Because in role playing the only economy that really matters is attention. So, what I contributed to the cause was my position in the community as a widely known role-player"* – Participant 7

Participant 10 enjoys some renown being the organizer of several of the largest charity events in World of Warcraft and the alias she uses in the game is well known. She employed her status and social connections to mobilize other players for the Oribos sit-in.

In-game dissemination

The dissemination process in the game was quite limited and most of it occurred outside the game on social media platforms where the audience was bigger. The role of social media in dissemination will be discussed in the last section of the findings. However, there was one in-game element that was used by several participants to disseminate the protest to a larger audience. After the Pro-Ukraine rally and Tryia Pride a photo opportunity was organized. The players lined up and a screenshot was taken. These screenshots were then spread through social media platforms.

Figure 4. The photo opportunity after Tyria Pride
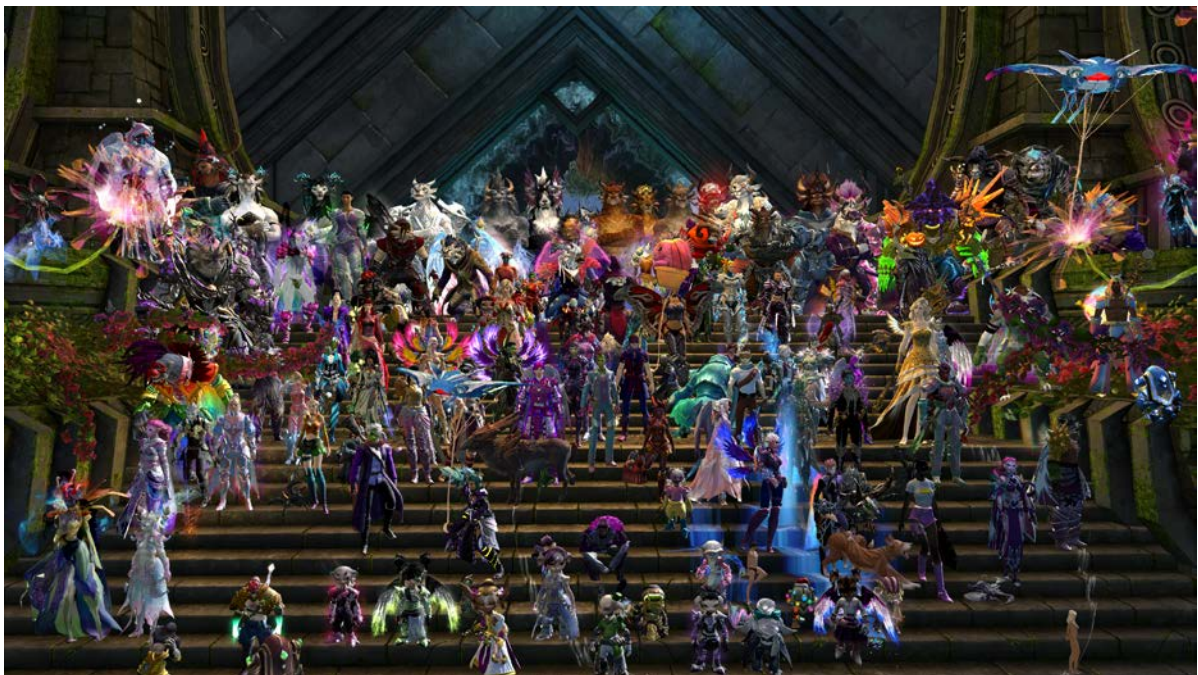
(Provided by participant 5)

4.3 Experiencing the game as a public sphere

The Videogame, according to the participants, is a space in which one can voice their opinion on societal issues, provide information to others on these issues and debate them. It can therefore be seen as a public sphere, a Habermasian idea defining areas of a society in which the public can debate issues and form and shape public opinion (Habermas et al., 1974). This section will elaborate on which in-game features the participants mentioned for voicing or visualizing their opinion. These will be divided by *avatar-based expression* and *chat-based expression.* Furthermore, the participants experienced that their actions created tensions with other players. This led to other players conducting disruptive actions and in reaction to these disruptions the participants conceived tactics to deal with them. This dynamic and these tactics will be highlighted in the subjection on *Player-based disruption and countertactics.*

Avatar-based expression

At the center of visual expression during the acts of activism stood the avatar. In all the games examined the avatar was main element through which the player engaged with the game world and all avatars were 3D characters. The avatar-based tactics employed by the participants varied greatly and were adapted based on the social movement and the in-game options. Various coloring systems were utilized in the contentious actions of the participants, especially the two events that regarded Ukraine and Tyria Pride. Participant 6 mentioned he changed the color of his avatars armor to the national colors of Ukraine, while Participant 1 recalled changing her armor to white to represent peace. This was also the shared norm throughout both protests and players sported various variations of the colors blue, yellow, or white. In the case of Tyria pride, the players involved sported the colors of the rainbow. The coloring system also was applied to mounts, the animals that players use for transportation. These are summonable and therefore extensions of the avatar. Participant 6 explained that most players engaged in the rally would ride their dinosaurs and dragons, sporting Ukrainian colors. These mounts were big and fairly large, increasing the visibility of the rally. It also made sure that players would keep a consistent pace in walking the heart-shaped route.

Figure 5. The pro-Ukraine rally in Guild Wars 2

(Provided by participant 6)

The various coloring systems were complimented with matching accessories according to participant 1, and she recalls players wearing jewelry, facial tattoos, crowns and flowers in their hair that matched the peace march. This was combined with carrying no weapons, in line with the pacificist nature of the march. This is considered an uncommon sight in The Eldar Scrolls, contributing to its salience. Participant 9 mentioned the use of black banners that read BLM in the Black Lives Matter rally in Minecraft. These appeared above the heads of the avatars and were very visible.

Further examples of avatar-based expression came in the form of abilities. In the case of the Oribos sit-in the ability to sit was essential, and according to participants 2,3 and 4 seeing a big group of people in World of Warcraft was not the norm, and thus salient. The same salience was considered by participant 5, by marching through several sections of the world, and by participant 6, by walking in a heart-shaped pattern and thus being mobile could also being seen as a means of expression. Other abilities that were used by gamers attending the Oribos sit-in were dancing, toys and attacks that would result in visual effects. During the Eldar Scrolls Peace march shielding abilities were also used. The color of these barriers is related to the faction the players belongs to, and these were incidentally yellow, blue, and less used, red.

Chat-based expression

The chat functions of the different games were very often mentioned by the participants as a means to voice their opinion or contribute to the event in other ways. The first major way the participants utilized the chat functions was by giving information to bystanders. Participant 6 recalled bystanders asking what their rally was for and that he started explaining it was for Ukraine. Furthermore, participants 3, 7, and 8 stated that informing other players of the issues regarding Blizzard, the company behind World of Warcraft, was one of the main goals of the Oribos sit-in. Providing information through the localized chat functions was seen an important element of the event.

Chants and slogans were also utilized and spread throughout the chat systems. Participant 9 recalled fellow players chanting "Black Lives Matter" or "Say his Name" in support of the BLM cause. Participant 5 mentioned a humanoid plant race in Guild Wars 2 who live by the tenet "All things have the right to grow". This sentence was adopted by the Tyria Pride march as a unifying slogan and was spread through the chat.

Player-based disruption and countertactics.

Almost every participant mentioned disruption caused by other players. This came in three major forms: trolling, discussion and in-game violence. Trolling refers to making antagonizing remarks or content in a digital environment in an attempt to delegitimize or make fun of others. This is the most commonly mentioned form of player-based disruption, which expressed itself in multiple ways. Trolls used the in-game chat systems to send discrediting remarks to the participants, as exemplified by participant 3.

> *"What you're doing, it is pointless, and they're like calling us snowflakes, or this isn't doing anything" "you're just doing it for clout. We have a lot of people who are just saying we're just doing it for internet points"*- Participant 3

Further trolling came in the form of Jokes that, according to participant 5, were used as also used as a means to delegitimize the participants.

> *"There are also a lot of like, there are only two genders. I identify as an attack helicopter"* – Participant 5

Other forms of trolling encompass the use of abilities to break with the norms of the protests. For example, participant 3 recalled trolls jumping around and using in-game toys,

while participant 8 recalled a player using a growth potion to make themselves bigger, to make themselves stand out and distract from the sit-in.

In reaction to these trolls, some participants mentioned tactics to deal with them. The most common tactic mentioned by participants 3,5,6 and 8 was simply ignoring and/or using in-game blocking functions to prevent the players engaged in disruptive actions in contacting them. Organizers of the larger events, such as participant 3 and 5 also mentioned that they also encouraged fellow players in ignoring and blocking disruptive players. Tyria pride had a more formal and pre-meditated set of reactions embedded in the organization. First, the organizers encouraged fellow-players to report disruptions to the officer's present, employing the players in these roles to counter the disruptions. The officers would then engage with disruptive players where needed but were encouraged to never blocked them to maintain an eye on what they said in the chat. Furthermore, in response to the aforementioned jokes, the organizers and coordinators of Tyria pride agreed to a premeditated response.

> *"We decided that if they say one of the two jokes that we always hear, like the attack helicopter or like pronoun jokes or whatever. We would just all shout in chat "drink!", like it's a drinking game. So that's one way that like that troll kind of can get disarmed, because they don't know what's happening and suddenly there's just like, everybody is having fun and they're not getting the reaction that they want"* – *Participant 5*

The participants differentiated between trolls and other players that where sincerely in ideological opposition of the participants actions. However, these were less frequently mentioned. Several participants recalled players starting discussions with the main argument that politics should not be in their game and that they play the game to escape real-life issues. It indicates that whether a Videogame is a public sphere is still on debate for some and this leads to tensions. The participants countered this argument and stated that societal issues are pervasive and can materialize in two different ways. First, through design choices made by the developer, for example through the depiction of stereotypes based on real-world ethnicities or social groups. Second, by the way players conduct themselves in Videogame spaces and several participants described discriminatory interactions or harassment.

" So, you're not really escaping any societal issues and racism within the world of fantasy. You are not escaping any politics, except quote unquote real-world politics and you are avoiding a conversation that has to exist." - Participant 4

In-game violence was less frequent, as most locations of the contentious in-game acts where chosen for their neutrality or absence of player vs player combat. The peace march in The Eldar Scrolls Online as described by participant 1 took place in the main player vs player zone and therefore combat was possible. The in-game violence mainly occurred near the end of the march at a bridge crossing a river. Normally, this bridge would function as a chokepoint and players would fight to gain control over it. This chokepoint was utilized by some players to attack the march, killing its participants and severely halting the march's progress. Participant 1 described a specific set of combat-related characteristic that enable a player to do high damage to a certain area, instead of a specific player and this enabled them to kill several players in a short amount of time. According to participant 1 this could have severely disrupted the march, since a participant that was killed had to restart at a point nearby and try again. However, because the march was nearing its end it did little to the overall event. Furthermore, in response to this in-game violence participant 1 described two ways players tried to mitigate the disruption. First, by using protective abilities such as magic barriers to shield them from the incoming attacks. The players would not resort to offensive abilities, because it would break with the pacifist norm of the protest. Furthermore, when fellow players were killed, resurrecting abilities were used to revive them. The revived players would be able to continue on the spot they had died instead, which prevented them from having to traverse a section of the map in order to rejoin the march.

Figure 6. The chokepoint in the Eldar Scrolls Online peace march

(Provided by participant 1)

Participants reflected in several ways on how the disruption impacted the event or themselves. Some participants experienced circumventing the aforementioned disruptions as easy feat and did attribute to much attention towards it, explaining that the trolls did not have the means to truly disrupt the event. The participants that played World of Warcraft explained that an avatar cannot block another avatar in terms of mobility and therefore real disruption was limited according them. Some did not even view trolls as a disruption, but rather as a means of visibility. Both participants 3 and 8 reflected on the trolls present at the Oribos sit-in and stated that more people standing near the sit-in, using abilities to garner attention for themselves would only benefit the sit-in in terms of salience.

While most participants managed to cope with the harassment, several participants did mention they were sensitive to other players for whom this might not be the case.

> *"I'm fine with being sworn at and I can just move on. For a lot of people this is the first time they've been doing something like that, and it can get scary you know. Even though they're just they're pixels I mean it's pixels but there are real people on either side of the screen"* – Participant 3

Participant 3 continued by stating she felt it was her responsibility to engage with people that felt uncomfortable and reminded them that they were not in any real danger. To finalize, participants did mention other forms of harassment through social media. This will be discussed in the next section.

4.4 Experiencing the game as part of an ecosystem

According to the participants in-game activism does not restrict itself to the medium. The participants mentioned several external digital media that were related to organizing in-game action or facilitating mobilization and dissemination efforts. The relations in-game activism has to other media was evident for the participants and several stated that without these media in-game activism would become much harder to organize, grow and/or make an impact. The media ecosystem build around the Videogame would make in-game activism part of a hybrid media-system (Chadwick, 2013). This section will discuss how, according to the participants, the aforementioned in-game social structures transcend the Videogame and materialize on other platforms and how these platforms were used to organize in-game activism. This will be discussed in the subsection *Organization beyond the Videogame*. Certain social media was used for *Mobilization and dissemination beyond the Videogame* and will also be discussed. Furthermore, in some cases, external digital media can function as the birthplace of in-game connective action. This will be discussed in the subsection *Social media as an emerging space*.

Organization beyond the Videogame

While Videogames afford some organizational tools, these are limited in function but also limited to the game itself. To supplement the in-game features used for organization gamers adopt external digital platforms and one in particular was mentioned by almost all participants. Discord, a communication platform that enables the formation of groups, chats and voice/video calls, takes a central role as the main social hub for many gamers. Several participants stated the vital role of Discord in organizing in-game contentious action. Both participants 5 and 9 stated that the communities they spearheaded manifested primarily on their dedicated discord server. Discord was also used, according to participant 4 and 8, to discuss organizational matters and reach consensus on how the contentious action should pan out. Furthermore, Discord was used as a tool to coordinate the event while it was running. During the Oribos sit-in all the coordinating officers were in one voice chat facilitated by Discord in order to maintain instant contact, maintain an overview of the protest and coordinate responses. Participant 5 also stated he used Discord during Tyria Pride to answer questions, process complaints and look for any disruptions. The same was experienced by participant 9, while coordinating the BLM rally in Minecraft.

51

Other platforms that could function as a social hub or assisted in organization were not mentioned.

Another element outside the game present in the organization of the events was Charity. The impact contributing to charity could create was seen by the organizers, participants 3, 5, 9 and 10, as legitimizing the event and as a means of justification towards themselves. Being able to contribute to charity was mentioned by participants 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9 and 10 as one of the biggest motivators to participate or organize the event and thus also contributed to mobilizing players for collective action. According to the organizers the charity organizations were very carefully chosen to match the cause. All four stated that their event was responsible for donations in the thousands of dollars, with some events managing to collect 13.000 to 16.000 dollars. In the case of Tyria Pride and the charity events organized by participant 1, which turned into yearly events, these amounts were raised yearly.

> *"I would guess some years like 10, 13 thousand. We are probably one of their single largest donors besides like the military. That's some competition from some girl in a video game"* – Participant 10

Charity and its impact were mentioned by several participants as a way to legitimize videogames as a means for activism. This would be used to counter arguments disputing its impact or accusing it of being slacktivism.

Mobilization and dissemination beyond the Videogame

External platforms play an extensive role in mobilizing fellow players for the contentious actions described by the participants. Social media platforms like Reddit and twitter were used to spread information regarding the time and location of the event, and Participants 5, 6 and 7 mentioned they engaged in these practices. In the case of reddit, the posts were posted in subreddits related to the game. On twitter posts were created and relevant hashtags were used and community websites or fora for the game were also utilized to spread information according to participant 1, 3 and 5. Participant 3 created a graphic to accompany the series of posts she made, so that it would stand out between other posts.

Figure 7. The Oribos sit-in promotional graphic
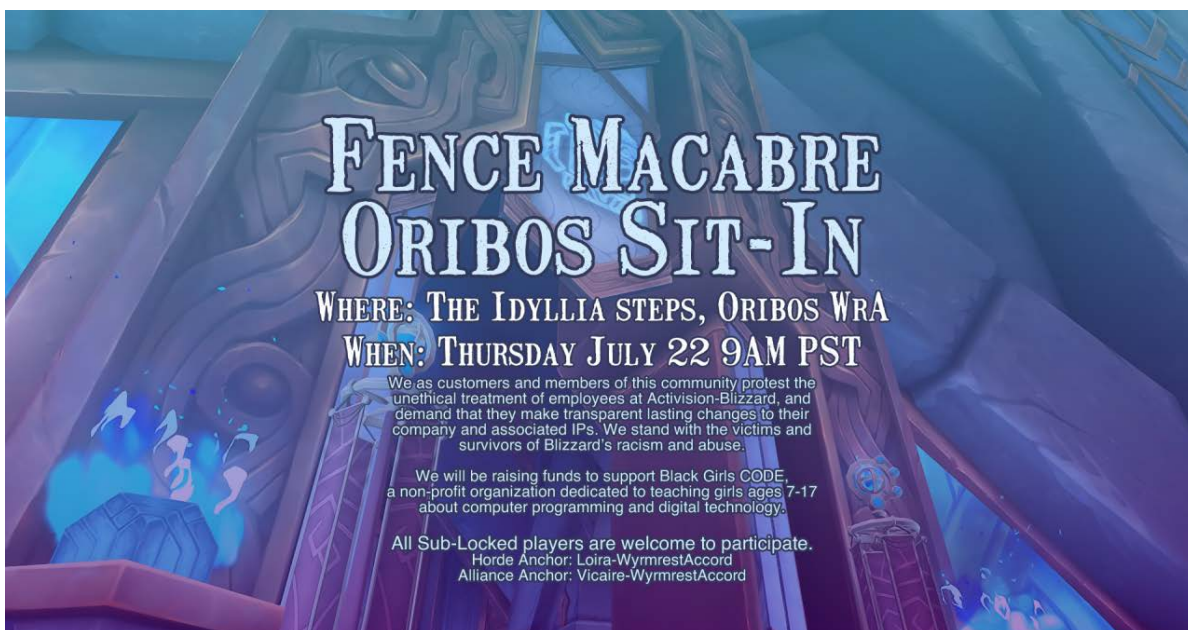
(Provided by participant 4)

In the case of Tyria Pride, the BLM Minecraft rally and the Oribos sit-in, organizers highlighted the detrimental role Discord also played in their mobilization efforts. As mentioned before the three participants found themselves at the head of an already existing community that manifested on Discord and used the platform as the main social hub. Participant 3 mentioned that the big advantage of Discord is that it enables reaching out to fellow players even when they are not logged into the game. Participant 5 confirmed this and stated that a lot of the players in his community did not even play the game at the time, being in hiatus, but still showed up because of his messages in Discord.

After the event several participants took the screenshot mentioned in the previous section and used Reddit and Twitter to disseminate it. Participant 5 posted it on the Guild Wars 2 sub-Reddit, and he stated that it reached a sizable audience. Similar use of screenshots was observed in regard to other events like Tyria Pride, the BLM Minecraft Rally, and the Oribos sit-in. Apart from screenshots, the majority of participants mentioned using external platforms such as reddit or twitter to spread the existence of the event beyond the game itself. Participant 8 stated that she felt that it was her responsibility to make sure the social issue was not forgotten by disseminating it online. Maintaining the spotlight on the social issue was also being mentioned by participant 4. Furthermore, one highly specific example of dissemination occurred with participant 3, who organized the

Oribos sit-in. She mentioned that during the event she was contacted by a well-known videogame news outlet. While she was still participating and coordinating the event she was simultaneously being interviewed by this party. The article that came out of that was reproduced by several well-known videogame news websites and according to participant 3 this boosted the visibility and money raised for their chosen charity significantly.

Engaging in mobilization and dissemination efforts on Twitter and Reddit does come with its risks. The aforementioned trolling and harassment did not stop at the borders of the game and the majority of participants experienced negative comments or harassment on their posts and tweets. Some harassment became quite creative as participant 8 mentioned a satirical twitter account based on her guild that was used to harass guild members. Participant 6 mentioned that the continuous reddit notifications of negative comments gave him feelings of anxiety, which gave a negative twist to his experience and he did not talk about the event up until participating in this study. This is in line with the findings by Dumitrica and Felt (2020), who suggest that the emotional toll harassment can have on activists can be considered one of the barriers of mediated activism.

While the findings above may suggest the use of external platforms as logistical tools for organizing in-game contentious action may seem evident participant 5 stated otherwise.

"*There was a point in time where video games represented the main social hub for a lot of people*". "*but now with the rise of discord especially people are able to create their own little pockets of communities outside of video games*" - Participant 5

It suggests that the social spaces within Videogames are dynamic, have evolved over time and migrate based on the media infrastructure that affords organization most efficiently.

Social media as an emerging space

Not all participants engaged in in-game contentious action that was organized by players belonging to a guild or other community. Some events, like the pro-Ukraine rally in Guild Wars 2 emerged organically through an external platform and were in line with the connective action dynamic proposed by Bennett & Segerberg (2013). Participant 6 explained the rally emerged through a comment under a reddit post in the Guild Wars 2 subreddit, asking other players to join at the in-game city of Lion's Arch. This happened on the first day of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, so there was no organization in a

formal sense and no collective identity to bind the players engaging in the event, making it an excellent example of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Participant 6 met a very small group of five players who responded to the comment. He recalled that none of the players present knew what to do but wanted to do something. Then a developer, an employee of the company that made the game, joined in and started walking around in a heart shape. This kickstarted the event and the others joined in. Participant 6 stated that he took on a coordinating role at that point, assisting in mobilizing nearby players and providing information. The dynamic of connective action does not enable sustained action, and this was also the case in the pro-Ukraine rally. The rally ended when the developer had to leave, and the group of strangers disbanded, never to have contact again. In contrast to the other cases there was no clear plan or goal and participant 6 only shared links to charities after the event and thus he found it hard to reflect on the impact of the rally.

Another example of the connective action dynamic came from participant 2, who saw images of the Oribos sit-in organized by participant 3 and decided to organize one himself on the European server. Participant 2 enjoyed some advantages in contrast to participant 6 in terms of organization, since he could copy what he saw happening on the North American server and his version of the sit-in could contribute to the same charity. It illustrates how in modern social movements both the dynamics of connective action and collection action work alongside and complement each other (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

4.5 The in-game collective action model

Based on the findings a model for in-game collective action is proposed. This model encapsulates how the social space of the game facilitates a logistical space, while engaging in organized in-game collective action turns it into a public sphere. Moreover, the model illustrates how external digital media facilitate and support the social and logistical spaces, while the in-game public sphere is being shaped by and shaping the public sphere on social media.

Figure 8. The in-game collective action model
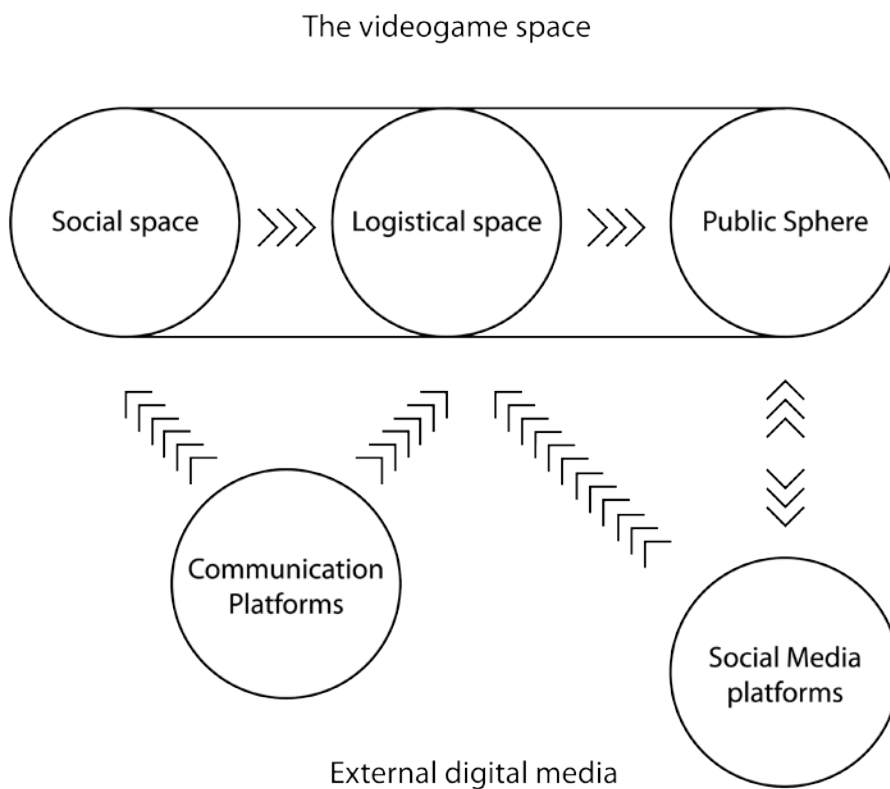
5. Discussion and conclusion

This study examined how activists experienced the affordances of videogames for in-game political actions. Twelve interviews were conducted with organizers, coordinators of in-game contentious action. Affordance theory provided a theoretical framework in performing an inductive thematic analysis. The findings of this analysis imply that the participants appropriated the videogame space for social, logistical means and as public sphere, while connecting it with a larger ecosystem of media in support of their contentious actions. Based on these findings a model for in-game collective action is proposed that can provide scholars insight into this unique dynamic. The model illustrates how the social spaces created in the game played an important part in in-game activism. As by argued Hutchby (2001) whether an individual affords certain actions to a technology is contextually dependent and the findings imply the context of these social spaces can be seen as a main driver in perceiving the videogame as a space for activism.

The social space turned into a logistical space and the central role of in-game logistical tools, such as guilds, as argued by Cermak-Sassenrath (2018) was confirmed by the findings of this study. Whether others would join the movement in the game depended in most cases on the modes of participation supplied by the guilds, which is in line with how social movements operate in general (Klandermans, 2004) and this was observed in both collective and connective action dynamics. The guilds in videogames afford, like other digital media (Mundt, Ross and Burnett, 2018), the building of coalitions, acquiring consensus and the mobilization of resources and therefore function similarly to activist organizations in the physical realm. However, most of the selected cases took place in games where guilds were present, and this made them more salient in the analysis.

Digital spaces afford the creation of new collective activist identities (Mundt, Ross & Burnett, 2018) and for videogames this is no different. It is this collective identity that binds players together and motivates them to (re)join or engage in mobilization efforts. This confirms research arguing that participation of friends (Hafez & Wiktorowicz, 2004) or identification with a collective (Bilali et al., 2019; Schmitt et al., 2019) are strong predictors of engaging in activism.

The seemingly low effort it takes to participate in in-game contentious action is often used by critics to label it as slacktivism according to several participants. Because of the different ways players participate in the events this might be a legitimate claim in

regards to some, but definitely not all. Both low-cost and high-cost forms of engagement (McAdam, 1986) were observed in the participants. Organizers and coordinators were found spending a sizable amount of time and effort into the event, its preparation and iteration. Organizers of yearly events formalized several organizational elements such as training, rewards and the format for activism. While players that simply participated did put in less time and effort, it is still not comparable to activities associated to slacktivism on social media, such as liking, or sharing. The least amount of effort observed in a participant was being active for half an hour, while some participants attended for 6 to 12 hours.

Some affordances of in-game activism seemed to be perceived intuitively based on previous experiences in the game, like changing armor color to match the Ukrainian flag. Others had to be learned or even practiced, like coordinating a group of people and making them walk in a column without breaking cohesion. Also, formal affordances, as defined by Linderoth (2010), played an important role. Participants used their extensive knowledge on the patterns of logic that emerged in players by interacting with the game in their own advantage. This helped some participants in their mobilization efforts. However, these formal affordances are logics that need to be learned through playing the game, by observation and/or trial and error (Toh & Kirschner, 2020). Therefore, some of these formal affordances might not be self-evident to new players and thus mobilization tactics towards them could be less effective.

In the majority of the cases studied mainly the dynamic of collective action was observed, while connective action was fairly rare or hand to find. This is a limitation of this study, but it is also a testament to the longevity and impact of connective action in Videogames. The pro-Ukraine rally attended by participant 6 illustrates the weak ties in these decentralized movements as mentioned by Van Laer and van Aelst (2011). This is in line with the way this dynamic manifests in other digital media and it impedes the longevity and visibility of the movement as argued by Dumitrica and Felt (2020). In contrast, the participants engaged in collective action still maintain large communities, raised thousands for charity, some sustain yearly participation and some enjoined serious media coverage. While most cases studied displayed either collective of connective action, some events consisted of both and this confirms Bennett & Segerberg's (2013) idea that modern social movements contain both dynamics.

By engaging in in-game activism the participants perceived the videogame as a public sphere. However, whether digital media are perceived as a public sphere varies greatly and many view digital media as exclusively social or private spaces (Sakariassen, 2020). This is also the case with videogames and the main argument used by other players against the actions of the participants was that videogames are places for escapism and leisure. This in line with how many younger people view social media as spaces for positive actions and interactions only (Kruse et al., 2017). The findings of this study are also partially in line with the cute cat theory proposed by Zuckerman (2013). When activists engage in in-game activism they expose themselves and their avatars to trolls and harassment. Corporate or governmental censorship was not mentioned and in some cases the videogame was even used to circumvent government restrictions. However, this does not mean videogames are censorship-free as a fairly recent example showed. The videogame Animal Crossing was appropriated by pro-Hong Kong democracy activists for a rally and in response the Chinese government banned the sales of the videogame in the entire country (Davidson, 2020). Whether in-game activism will be subjected to censorship will depend heavily on the level of visibility it garners and how using the medium for activism will transfer from the unconventional to the conventional, a shift some forms of activism, such as physical protests already have gone through (Norris, 2009).

The ecosystem of media build around the in-game contentious actions functioned in support of it, compensating the videogame for its lack organizational tools, direct lines of communication and acces to a larger audience. This positions the videogame in a hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013) and participants would switch between, and blend the logics of the videogame, Discord and social media for organization, mobilization and dissemination efforts. The use of photo opportunities illustrates this perfectly, as social media logic was applied to contentious activism in the space of the game. Furthermore, according to Chadwick (2013) power in political communication is based on relations and the external media platforms helped the participants in managing these relations, both internal and external.

The results of this study are limited in several regards. The aforementioned limitations in its research design, resulted in sample of participants that is exclusively coming from either Europe or the United States. This skews the findings in a western perspective. Furthermore, the use of snowballing in the sampling process caused clusters

of participants that knew each other. This could have resulted in similar experiences that are not generalizable to other contexts or other types of videogames. Future studies could confirm the model on in-game collective action in other types of games, such as shooters, builder games and open world adventure games or could explore different cultural contexts. While this study provides a model on in-game collective action, the dynamic of connective action is not studied extensively and more research on it could provide a similar model.

Despite its limitations this study provides a fresh insight in a field that is severely understudied and contributes substantially to fill this gap in the literature. Moreover, it provides a model that illustrates the unique dynamic of in-game collective action that could springboard future studies.

Reference list

Agur, C., & Frisch, N. (2019). Digital disobedience and the limits of persuasion: social media activism in hong kong's 2014 umbrella movement. *Social Media Society*, *5*(1), 205630511982700–205630511982700. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119827002

Alesja, S. S. (2019). Phantom affordances in video games. *Галактика Медиа: Журнал Медиа Исследований*, *4*, 86–107. https://doi.org/10.24411/2658-7734-2019-10038

Andrews, K. T., & Caren, N. (2010). Making the News: Movement Organizations, Media Attention, and the Public Agenda. *American Sociological Review*, *75*(6), 841–866. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25782169

Arend, M. G., & Müsseler, J. (2021). Object affordances from the perspective of an avatar. *Consciousness and Cognition*, *92*, 103133. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2021.103133

Aslam, H., Brown, J., & Reading, E. (2019, September). *Player Age and Affordance Theory in Game Design*. 19th International Conference on Intelligent Games and Simulation, GAME-ON, Dundee, Scotland. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327679753_Player_Age_and_Affordance_Theory_in_Game_Design

Babbie, R. (2016). *The Basics of Social Research*. Cengage Learning.

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2013). The Logic of Connective Action. *Information, Communication & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139198752

Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *26*(1), 611–639. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611

Benkler, Y. (2006). *The Wealth of Networks*. Amsterdam University Press. https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/lib/eur/reader.action?docID=3419996

Blankenship, B. T., Frederick, J. K., Savaş, Z., Stewart, A. J., & Montgomery, S. (2017). Privilege and Marginality: How Group Identification and Personality Predict Right- and Left-Wing Political Activism. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, *17*(1), 161–183. https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12132

Bilali, R., Godfrey, E. B., & Freel, S. H. (2019). How an election loss leads to a social movement: Reactions to the 2016 U.S. presidential election among liberals predict later collective action and social movement identification. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *59*(1), 227–247. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12335

Bogost, I. (2006). *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (First Edition). The MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/6997.001.0001

Bossetta, M. (2019). Political Campaigning Games: Digital Campaigning With Computer Games in European National Elections. *International Journal of Communication*, *2019*(13), 3422–3443. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10477/2729

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brimacombe, T., Kant, R., Finau, G., Tarai, J., & Titifanue, J. (2018). A new frontier in digital activism: An exploration of digital feminism in Fiji. *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, *5*(3), 508–521. https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.253

Brown, D. K., & Harlow, S. (2019). Protests, Media Coverage, and a Hierarchy of Social Struggle. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *24*(4), 508–530. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219853517

Castells, M. (2015). *Networks of Outrage and Hope*. Wiley. https://voidnetwork.gr/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Networks-of-Outrage-and-Hope-Social-Movements-in-the-Internet-Age-Manuel-Castells.pdf

Cermak-Sassenrath, D. (2018). On political activism in digital games. *Mediekultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, *34*(64). https://doi.org/10.7146/mediekultur.v34i64.96924

Chadwick, A. (2013). Hybrid norms in activism, parties, and government. In The hybrid media system. Politics and Power (pp. 187-210). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199759477.001.0001

Chitanana, T. (2020). From Kubatana to #ThisFlag: Trajectories of digital activism in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *17*(2), 130–145. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2019.1710644

Conlin, S. E., & Heesacker, M. (2017). Feminist men?: examining men's feminist self-identification, activism and the impact of language. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *27*(8), 928–942. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1371007

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research (3rd ed.): Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. SAGE Publications, Inc. https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452230153

Davidson, H. (2020, June 17). *Animal Crossing game removed from sale in China over Hong Kong democracy messages*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/14/animal-crossing-game-removed-from-sale-in-china-over-hong-kong-democracy-messages

Davies, H. & DiGRA Australia (Eds.). (2020). *Spatial Politics at Play: Hong Kong Protests and Videogame Activism* (Vol. 2020). https://digraa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DiGRAA_2020_paper_46.pdf

Demirbag-Kaplan, M., & Kaplan-Oz, B. (2017). We beat the cops in GTA: Po(ludic)al activism in the age of video games. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, *24*(6), 623–647. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856516686481

de Zúñiga, H. G., Barnidge, M., & Scherman, A. (2016). Social Media Social Capital, Offline Social Capital, and Citizenship: Exploring Asymmetrical Social Capital Effects. *Political Communication*, *34*(1), 44–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2016.1227000

Eslami, M., Rickman, A., Vaccaro, K., Aleyasen, A., Vuong, A., Karahalios, K., Hamilton, K., & Sandvig, C. (2015). *"I always assumed that I wasn't really that close to [her]."* ACM. https://doi.org/10.1145/2702123.2702556

Diani, M. (1992). The Concept of Social Movement. *The Sociological Review*, *40*(1), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954x.1992.tb02943.x

Dumitrica, D. (2021). "Chuck Norris, Please Help!" Transnational Cultural Flows in the 2017 Anti-Corruption Protests in Romania. *Media and Communication*, *9*(3), 439–248. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i3.4260

Dumitrica, D., & Felt, M. (2020). Mediated grassroots collective action: negotiating barriers of digital activism. *Information, Communication & Society*, *23*(13), 1821–1837. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2019.1618891

Earl, J. (2007). Leading Tasks in a Leaderless Movement. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *50*(10), 1327–1349. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764207300161

Earl, J. (2019). Technology and Social Media. In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (2nd ed., pp. 289–305). Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119168577

Earl, J., & Kimport, K. (2011). *Digitally Enabled Social Change*. Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262015103.001.0001

Earl, J., Maher, T. V., & Pan, J. (2022). The digital repression of social movements, protest, and activism: A synthetic review. *Science Advances*, *8*(10). https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abl8198

Earl, J., & Schussman, A. (2002). The new site of activism: on-line organizations, movement entrepreneurs, and the changing location of social movement decision making. *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, 155–187. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0163-786x(03)80024-1

Electronic Arts Intermix: Untitled Game, JODI. (2001). Electronic Arts Intermix. Retrieved 12 May 2022, from https://www.eai.org/titles/untitled-game

Enjolras, B., Steen-Johnsen, K., & Wollebæk, D. (2012). Social media and mobilization to offline demonstrations: Transcending participatory divides? *New Media & Society*, *15*(6), 890–908. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812462844

Eschenfelder, K. R., & Desai, A. C. (2004). Software as Protest: The Unexpected Resiliency of U.S.-Based DeCSS Posting and Linking. *The Information Society*, *20*(2), 101–116. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972240490422987

Garrett, R. (2006). Protest in an Information Society: a review of literature on social movements and new ICTs. *Information, Communication & Society*, *9*(2), 202–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180600630773

Gibson, J. J. (1978). The Ecological Approach to the Visual Perception of Pictures. *Leonardo*, *11*(3), 227–235. https://doi.org/10.2307/1574154

Good, O. S. (2020, October 16). *How to visit Joe Biden's island in Animal Crossing*. Polygon. Retrieved 28 January 2022, from https://www.polygon.com/2020/10/16/21519632/joe-biden-animal-crossing-island-dream-code-merch-signs-shirts-swag

Gorman, S. (2008, October 18). *Obama buys first video game campaign ads*. Reuters. Retrieved 28 January 2022, from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-politics-videogames-idUSTRE49EAGL20081017

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How Many Interviews Are Enough? *Field Methods*, *18*(1), 59–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822x05279903

Habermas, J., Lennox, S., & Lennox, F. (1974). The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964). *New German Critique*, *3*, 49. https://doi.org/10.2307/487737

Hafez, M. and Wiktorowicz, Q. (2004). "Violence as Contention in the Egyptian Islamic Movement." In *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Q. Wiktorowicsz, (Ed.). Indiana: Indiana University Press: 61-88.

Haggerty, K. C., Cosgrove, P. J., & Griffin, J. G. (2018). Using virtual worlds to investigate perceived affordances on learned navigation and objective location performance. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, *55*(1), 819–820. https://doi.org/10.1002/pra2.2018.14505501131

Halupka, M. (2016). The rise of information activism: how to bridge dualisms and reconceptualise political participation. *Information, Communication & Society*, *19*(10), 1487–1503. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2015.1119872

Healey-Etten, V., & Sharp, S. (2010). Teaching Beginning Undergraduates How to Do an In-depth Interview. *Teaching Sociology*, *38*(2), 157–165. https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055x10364010

Honari, A. (2018). "We Will Either Find a Way, or Make One": How Iranian Green Movement Online Activists Perceive and Respond to Repression. *Social Media + Society*, *4*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118803886

Horowitz, J. (2017). Who Is This "We" You Speak of? Grounding Activist Identity in Social Psychology. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, *3*, 237802311771781. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023117717819

Hunt, K., & Gruszczynski, M. (2019). The influence of new and traditional media coverage on public attention to social movements: the case of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests. *Information, Communication & Society*, *24*(7), 1024–1040. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2019.1670228

Hutchby, I. (2001). Technologies, Texts and Affordances. *Sociology*, *35*(2), 441–456. https://doi.org/10.1177/s0038038501000219

Jones, R. (2007). Saving Worlds with Videogame Activism. *Handbook of Research on Effective Electronic Gaming in Education*, *2007*. http://www.waffler.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/saving-worlds-with-videogame-activism.pdf

Kamp, M. (2013). Musical Ecologies in Video Games. *Philosophy & Technology*, *27*(2), 235–249. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-013-0113-z

Khazraee, E., & Losey, J. (2016). Evolving repertoires: Digital media use in contentious politics. *Communication and the Public*, *1*(1), 39–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047315625076

Klandermans, B. (2004). The Demand and Supply of Participation: Social-Psychological Correlates of Participation in Social Movements. In *The Demand and Supply of Participation: Social-Psychological Correlates of Participation in Social Movements* (pp. 360–379). Blackwell Publishing Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999103.ch16

Krishna, R. (2017, January 27). *A Video Game Character Has Become The Symbol Of A Badass Feminist Movement*. BuzzFeed News. Retrieved 12 May 2022, from https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/krishrach/a-Videogame-character-has-become-the-symbol-of-a-badass-fem

Kruse, L. M., Norris, D. R., & Flinchum, J. R. (2017). Social Media as a Public Sphere? Politics on Social Media. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *59*(1), 62–84. https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2017.1383143

Lance Bennett, W., Breunig, C., & Givens, T. (2008). Communication and Political Mobilization: Digital Media and the Organization of Anti-Iraq War Demonstrations in the U.S. *Political Communication*, *25*(3), 269–289. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600802197434

Leonardi, P. M., & Vaast, E. (2017). Social media and their affordances for organizing: a review and agenda for research. *Academy of Management Annals*, *11*(1), 150–188. https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2015.0144

Lofland, J., Snow, D. A., Anderson, L., & Lofland, L. H. (2005). *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis* (4th ed.). Wadsworth Publishing. https://pages.nyu.edu/jackson/soc.honors/Readings/Lofland%20-%20Developing%20Analysis%20-%2095%20Chp.pdf

Loh, W. (2019). The Gamification of Political Participation. *Moral Philosophy and Politics*, *6*(2), 261–280. https://doi.org/10.1515/mopp-2018-0037

Markham, A. (2008). The Methods, Politics, and Ethics of Representation in Online

Ethnography. In *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (pp. 793–820).

SAGE Publications, Inc. http://annettemarkham.com/writing/denzingalleyproofs.pdf

Marshall, C. (2021, July 22). *Why World of Warcraft players are protesting developer*

Blizzard in-game. Polygon. Retrieved 28 January 2022, from

https://www.polygon.com/22589046/world-of-warcraft-players-protest-blizzard-

lawsuit-california-discrimination-harassment-allegations

Mateas, M. (2001). A preliminary poetics for interactive drama and games. *Digital*

Creativity, *12*(3), 140–152. https://doi.org/10.1076/digc.12.3.140.3224

McAdam, D. (1986). Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer.

American Journal of Sociology, *92*(1), 64–90. https://doi.org/10.1086/228463

Melucci, A. (1995). The Process of Collective Identity. In H. Johnston & B. Klandermans

(Eds.), *Social Movements and Culture* (NED-New edition, Vol. 4, pp. 41–63).

University of Minnesota Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttt0p8.6

Messner, S. (2021, July 22). *World of Warcraft players are staging in-game protests against*

Activision Blizzard. Pcgamer. Retrieved 28 January 2022, from

https://www.pcgamer.com/world-of-warcraft-protests/

Michaelsen, M. (2017). Far away, so close: transnational activism, digital surveillance and

authoritarian control in iran. *Surveillance & Society*, *15*(3-4), 465–470.

Nacke, L. E., & Deterding, S. (2017). The maturing of gamification research. *Computers in*

Human Behavior, *71*, 450–454. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.062

Nagy, P., & Neff, G. (2015). Imagined Affordance: Reconstructing a Keyword for

Communication Theory. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2), 205630511560338.

https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603385

Norman, D. A. (1999). Affordance, conventions, and design. *Interactions*, *6*(3), 38–43.

https://doi.org/10.1145/301153.301168

Norris, P. (2009). Political Activism: New Challenges, New Opportunities. *Oxford Handbooks*

Online. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566020.003.0026

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic Analysis.

International Journal of Qualitative Methods, *16*(1), 160940691773384.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Pereira, A., Green, E. G. T., & Visintin, E. P. (2017). National Identification Counteracts the Sedative Effect of Positive Intergroup Contact on Ethnic Activism. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *8*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00477

Polletta, F., & Jasper, J. M. (2001). Collective Identity and Social Movements. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *27*(1), 283–305. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.283

Pousti, H., Urquhart, C., & Linger, H. (2020). Researching the virtual: A framework for reflexivity in qualitative social media research. *Information Systems Journal*, *31*(3), 356–383. https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12314

Sakariassen, H. (2020). A digital public sphere: *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, *36*(68), 126–146. https://doi.org/10.7146/mediekultur.v36i68.118440

Saunders, C. (2013). Activism. In The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements (eds D.A. Snow, D. Della Porta, B. Klandermans and D. McAdam). https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm002

Schleiner, A. M. (2017). *The Player's Power to Change the Game*. Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048525645

Schmitt, M. T., Mackay, C. M., Droogendyk, L. M., & Payne, D. (2019). What predicts environmental activism? The roles of identification with nature and politicized environmental identity. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *61*, 20–29. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2018.11.003

Schofield, D. (2020, August 17). *Black Lives Matter meets Animal Crossing: how protesters take their activism into video games*. The Guardian. Retrieved 28 January 2022, from https://www.theguardian.com/games/2020/aug/07/black-lives-matter-meets-animal-crossing-how-protesters-take-their-activism-into-Videogames

Sinpeng, A. (2021). Hashtag activism: social media and the #FreeYouth protests in Thailand. *Critical Asian Studies*, *53*(2), 192–205. https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2021.1882866

Tarrow, S. (2012). Social Movements and Contentious Politics. In *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (2nd ed., pp. 16–34). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511813245.003

Thiel, S. K., Reisinger, M., Röderer, K., & Fröhlich, P. (2016). Playing (with) Democracy: A Review of Gamified Participation Approaches. *JeDEM - eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government*, *8*(3), 32–60. https://doi.org/10.29379/jedem.v8i3.440

Toh, W., & Kirschner, D. (2020). Self-directed learning in video games, affordances and pedagogical implications for teaching and learning. *Computers & Education*, *154*, 103912. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.103912

Tucker, M., & Ellis, R. (1998). On the relations between seen objects and components of potential actions. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, *24*(3), 830–846. https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-1523.24.3.830

van Laer, J., & van Aelst, P. (2010). INTERNET AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT ACTION REPERTOIRES. *Information, Communication & Society*, *13*(8), 1146–1171. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691181003628307

Zuckerman, E. (2013). Cute Cats to the Rescue? Participatory Media and Political Expression. *Youth, New Media and Political Participation*. http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/78899

Appendix 1: A list of cases

- The Oribos Sit-in, World of Warcraft
- Pro-Hong Kong rally, Animal crossing
- BLM rally, The sims 5
- Tyria Pride, Guild Wars 2
- Independence Day protest Philippines, Animal Crossing
- BLM rally, Animal Crossing
- Murder of Diana Raygoza, Femicide Mexico, Animal Crossing
- BLM rally, GTA V
- Pro-Ukraine Rally, Final Fantasy XIV
- Pride, Final Fantasy XIV
- Ukraine peace march, The Eldar Scrolls Online
- Pride, The Eldar Scrolls Online
- BLM rally, Minecraft
- Pride, World of Warcraft
- BLM trailride, Red Dead Redemption
- Pro-Ukraine Rally, Guild Wars 2