Observers of recent Hong Kong protests, including some local social activists, have been greatly impressed by the young protesters. There is reportedly no strong leadership or organisational support behind the protests, but since early June 2019 the young protesters have successfully mobilised numerous participants and coordinated various street activities during the protests. Their ability to counter changing police strategies with innovative protest tactics allows them to not only sustain but also escalate the weekend protests. Popular explanations attribute the unusually large scale and sustainability of the protests to society’s rising discontent with key livelihood issues, such as unaffordable housing prices, and deepening resentment towards the central government’s erosion of Hong Kong’s autonomy. Some deeper interpretations suggest that Hong Kong youth’s rising civic identity based on post-materialism values, such as liberalism, democracy and role of law, is the underlying reason for the protests. These are motivational factors that may help in the understanding of why Hong Kongers, especially the youth, protest. Factors contributing to how they protest are also of interest.

The younger generation who grew up in the digital age have been called digital natives. Various online platforms, such as social media and online games, have played important roles in the digital natives’ daily life. This is the case for their protests too. Understandably, apps and social media, such as Telegram, WhatsApp, LIHKG and Facebook, are the young protesters’ major communication and organisation tools before and during the protests, significantly shaping how they protest. Some observers are also beginning to cite similarities between how the young protesters organise and coordinate protests and how the digital natives play their online games.

Recent studies are gradually breaking the public stereotype of online gamers as disengaged from civic life. Stokes and Williams’ (2018) study of over 9,000 American players of the popular Multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game, League of Legends, shows that these gamers had relatively typical civic lives, such as donating, volunteering and advocating. Surprisingly, compared to American parents whose participation in civic actions was higher than the rest of the population, these “gamers had substantially higher rates of protest participation and for staying informed on civic and political events… More than twice as many MOBA gamers reported having ever protested (25.7% versus 10.4% for American parents)” (p. 336).

If the correlation between online gamers and their civic behaviours including peaceful protest also applies to Hong Kong, the implication for the city might be significant, as Hong Kong is a gamer society. The PayPal 2018 Global Gaming report indicates that about 90% of Hong Kongers play
video games at least once a week. A 2013 survey of students of two secondary schools (average age of 14.6) in Hong Kong found that an overwhelming 94% of them played video or internet games and 46.7% preferred playing MOBA. Interestingly, the MOBA game, League of Legends, is the most popular game among Hong Kong youth, and both online gamers and protesters are mostly young males, which might not be a coincidence.

Some studies have found many similarities between video games and protests. Games might become a training ground for potential protesters to cultivate resistance spirit and practice tactics and skills in future offline protests. During Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement in 2014, some observers were surprised by the young protesters’ effective tactics and skills in confronting the police force and could not fathom where they learned these military-like manoeuvres without formal military training. The young protesters of the recent protests also impressed observers, including some older generation social movement activists, with their resilient and sophisticated spirit, and innovative and efficient skills in planning, mobilising and coordinating the protests. Some of these observers tentatively attributed the skills to the playing of online games.

While non-protest games, such as League of Legends, might help prepare potential peaceful protesters, some games have been developed specifically for protests. For example, during the Umbrella Movement, a young protester developed a smartphone video game, Yellow Umbrella, to encourage its players to show stronger support for the movement. During the current wave of protests, a gamer recommended a video game, RIOT – Civil Unrest, to protesters, highlighting that protesters could better understand protests and employ many of the protest tactics in the game. Moreover, a document named H City Online Game Manual has been placed online and updated regularly for protesters, simulating a game and providing rich instructions on how to play the game of protest. The manual covers a range of topics, such as lessons from previous protests, instructions for new protesters, a safety manual for dealing with police, how to dress and equip oneself for the protest, detailed protest maps and so on.

Hong Kong’s protesters are not alone in making use of games to support protests. A website named Casual Games for Protesters was launched in early 2017 by two Western social activists and game designers for the same purpose. The website compiles a variety of games which may be played during protest to craft “exhilarating, social, intellectually and physically stimulating, liberatory and fun” collective experiences. They hope that the gaming experience could prevent protesters from protest fatigue and further their political engagement.

Some studies find that in many western countries the generation of digital natives and gamers have significantly lower trust in government and traditional political institutions than the older generations, which might have contributed to their rising participation in protests. While the reasons for their protest could be derived from investigating their distrust and discontent, the question of how they protest might require more study. A deeper understanding of the young protesters’ digital experiences, especially their gaming experience, might shed light on the latter question.

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