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Video Games as a Response to Socio-Political Processes and Events in Serbia

Abstract

The socio-political landscape in Serbia has been marked by a series of crises, protests, and turbulent events in recent years. In such an environment, video games have increasingly emerged as a form of response to current developments, creating digital spaces for the expression of social critique, irony, resistance, and civic participation. The paper analyzes video games developed in Serbia between 2022 and 2025 that engage with socio-political events and processes, addressing issues such as corruption, protests, elections, clientelism, and other aspects of political and social life, as well as game jams as specific environments in which many of these games were produced. The research examines how these games represent and comment on current socio-political realities, how their creators employ procedural rhetoric, satire, irony, and humor to articulate social critique or political positions, and to what extent such games can contribute to political activism, civic participation, or education. Methodologically, the study is based on qualitative content analysis of selected games, focusing on their narratives, mechanics, visual elements, symbolism, and the socio-political contexts of their production, combined with in-depth, semi-structured interviews with game creators and organizers of game jams in which some of these titles were developed. The findings suggest that politically engaged video games in Serbia function as symbolic forms of resistance and, therefore, are an integral part of the public political discourse, representing a form of socially engaged content within contemporary digital media culture. All interviewees emphasized interactivity as a crucial feature of video games, distinguishing them from other forms of digital and multimedia content by enabling players to take on an active role in engaging with and navigating simulated political processes within the game world. Finally, game

jams have proven to be a particularly important environment for creating these games, as they enable greater creative freedom for designers while fostering a sense of community, solidarity, and collaborative production.

Keywords: political video games, newsgames, procedural rhetoric, digital activism, game jams, Serbia, socio-political protest, satire and political cartoons, civic participation, student protests

1. Video Games and Politics

It seems that games and politics have always gone hand in hand, as in the West, we can trace it back to as early as the Greek rule of suspending hostilities and warfare, known as the sacred truce Ekecheiria, and the Roman maxim Panem et Circenses, where games were often instrumentalized for political purposes. But beyond this diachronic and contextual understanding, it can be argued that these two concepts share numerous structural similarities. Before we proceed to explicate this hypothesis, it is necessary to note that the game itself is a concept difficult to grasp— chess is a game (agôn), but so is spinning in circles until we fall (ilinx[1]). To narrow the focus of possible meanings of games and to highlight the aforementioned similarities between politics and games, we will refer to the concept of ‘agon.’ Agon is a Greek word denoting conflict, competition following clearly defined rules, in which players start from equal positions, all to achieve dominance and victory. In addition, the connection between game and politics is visible in contemporary languages, where the words game or play are often used as metaphors for power struggles. Specifically, one of the most frequent metaphorical uses of this word in public discourse is precisely related to politics through phrases such as “political games” or “playing politics.”

The above indicates a functional and conceptual connection between games and politics. When games became digitized, as in the case of video games, the structural connection was significantly strengthened to the extent that play became a political dispositif (Foucault 84), coded, rule-based, and algorithmic, grounded in a formalized procedural logic similar to that which can be observed in institutions (Bogost 74). Video games entered the media scene as products of the entertainment industry and, for a long time (and probably still for the broader public), were viewed in that key as light commercial entertainment devoid of any meaning or significance for culture and the understanding of social processes. Therefore, it must be reiterated that video games are not

neutral technologies intended exclusively for entertainment and leisure but should be considered a medium for conveying certain political messages and meanings whose boundaries are shaped by power relations connected to gender relations, postcolonialism, consumer culture, and other social and cultural spheres. Their potential for ideological manipulation and the acceptance of common-sense hegemonic representations has not gone unnoticed during the quarter-century of game studies as an interdisciplinary field.

While in the academic community, video games are recognized as a medium with significant socio-political implications, in public discourse, there is a perception that, for players, games primarily exist for entertainment, to pass the time, and for enjoyment. It is therefore seen as an activity that distracts from problems, intended for relaxation or diversion—an escapist space that gives players the freedom to immerse themselves in fantastic narratives, incredible feats, and tasks that bring a sense of reward and achievement. However, even as such, they are saturated with ideological messages and values that players unconsciously accept as common sense. Ultimately, even apoliticality is political; it is a symptom of subordination and reproduction of existing hegemonic structures. At the same time, researchers emphasize that video games have the potential to raise awareness about social issues and encourage critical understanding. The portrayal of games as an unproblematic space of escape and relaxation often conceals the fact that games are simultaneously spaces of constituting power, values, and norms, but also spaces of resistance to hegemonic structures. In an era when information is key, video games, through mechanics, rules, narratives, and representations, can be an effective tool for depicting complex social, political, and cultural problems and tendencies.

The relations between politics and games are a complex topic that exceeds the scope of this paper; therefore, we will narrow the focus by introducing two main conceptual platforms, which differ according to what is represented in video games and what is negotiated and structured around them:

Politics within video games: representations, narratives, gameplay mechanics, and rules. Games may: a.) reproduce hegemonic order in a common-sense manner (most often highly commercial games), or b.) question or promote existing power relations—games such as those with a clear agenda—activist games and propaganda games.

Politics around video games: players and academic communities, the video game industry, and public policies concerning video games. Conflict of social discourses centered on: a.) video games (production or social reception), b.) playing and/or players.

2. Socio-Political Context in Serbia

The topic of this paper is situated within politics within video games, whose representational and procedural elements are directed toward the critique of social and political processes and events in the period from 2022 to 2025 in Serbia. The paper aims to examine how video games and game jams organized in the context of student blockades thematize and comment on current events, what messages they convey, what strategies they use, as well as their potential for broader social impact. In addition to qualitative content analysis of video games, the research included in-depth semi-structured interviews with the authors and producers of these games, as well as organizers of game jams. These interviews were conducted in January 2026. Regarding the content analysis of video games, it included parameters such as form of expression, socio-political reference and context of production, game genre, form of player engagement, gameplay mechanics, and distribution.

The period from 2016 to the present in Serbia has been marked by civic resistance to the ruling regime, and a series of protests of varying scope and duration, among which it is certainly necessary to mention: “Protiv diktature” ‘Against Dictatorship’ in 2017, launched as a reaction to the results of the presidential elections; “1 od 5 miliona” ‘1 of 5 Million’ (2018–2019), whose immediate trigger was the beating of one of the opposition leaders, Borko Stefanović, and which later evolved into a broader civic front; protests during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 due to the announcement of the reintroduction of a curfew after parliamentary elections had been held; protests against violence that emerged as a reaction to the mass murders at the elementary school “Vladislav Ribnikar” and in the vicinity of Mladenovac (2023); environmental protests against the construction of small hydroelectric power plants and announcements of lithium exploitation in the Jadar valley (“Ne damo Jadar” ‘We Won’t Give Jadar’) from 2021 onward, as well as a series of protests for women’s rights prompted by cases of femicide and obstetric violence (“Hronologija protesta”; Arhiv javnih skupova). The endangerment of basic human rights and civil liberties in

recent years has also been highlighted by non-governmental organizations active in this field: “In Serbia there is no separation of powers and rule of law. The law is applied arbitrarily in accordance with the will of the executive power” (Pokuševski 23).

Civic dissatisfaction culminated in November 2024, after the collapse of a canopy at the recently renovated railway station in Novi Sad, when sixteen people lost their lives. Due to the lukewarm reaction of the authorities and suspicions that corrupt activities led to this tragedy, civic protests were launched. The main driving force of the protests state university students, who blocked access to faculty buildings for eleven months.

In such an environment, video games appear as a form of response to current events, representing digital spaces for expressing social critique, satire, resistance, and civic participation. Several simple games appeared on social networks that can be considered political caricatures, thematizing the unstable political situation in Serbia, as well as games simulating corrupt procedures. Furthermore, game jams were organized, with their main themes being closely related to the ongoing protests.

3. Many Faces of Serious Games: Persuasive Games, Political Games, Activist Games, Newsgames, and Political Cartoons

The literature of the interdisciplinary field of game studies abounds in terms denoting categories of games whose goal goes beyond entertainment itself. The most comprehensive term is ‘serious games,’ which refers to games intended for education, military training, political or religious propaganda, employee training, medical therapy, and even art (Michael and Chen xv). Serious games serve as tools for achieving the goals of state and private institutions: the military, schools, healthcare systems, and corporations. Accordingly, video games can be considered social technologies (Ristić and Maravić 95) and dispositifs that create subjects through material practice. Ian Bogost criticized the use of the term ‘serious games,’ considering it too elitist and pretentious in opposing entertainment to seriousness. However, his main objection is aimed at approaches that focus exclusively on games’ content. To distance himself from that term, he introduces the concept of ‘persuasive games’ for video games that meaningfully use procedural rhetoric, where

persuasion does not function through words and images, but through “the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models” (Bogost 29), that is, through processes and operational procedures “just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively” (Bogost 28).

Since computers execute algorithmic processes, they function procedurally, carrying out rules, and are therefore suitable for representing real systems that themselves operate according to certain processes (Bogost 5). Algorithmic procedurality in a video game can thus be understood as a formalized decision-making mechanism in institutions, as it regulates player behavior through tasks, rewards, and progression models, introducing the player into predetermined ideological patterns. Persuasive games can serve as tools for maintaining existing political structures, but they can also function as critiques of dysfunctional policies and political practices (Bogost 85). In other words, they are tools for reflecting on and criticizing business, social, and moral norms.

Numerous authors within game studies, drawing on cultural studies, have based their ideas on poststructuralist optimism in celebrating resistance, which can be expressed through the slogan Vive la résistance. One of them is Miguel Sicart, who argues that Bogost’s understanding of politics is oriented toward the object/plaything. Although video games are certainly political, like any other product on the market arising from specific economic relations, for Sicart, only active, creative, and critical engagement in the act of playing is truly political. In fact, the ‘plaything,’ or the game as object, is inert and passive, as he notes: “Political play takes place when a plaything harnesses the expressive, creative, appropriative, and subversive capacities of play and uses them for political expression” (Play Matters 74). In poststructuralist political theory, one of the key concepts related to politics is resistance and critical questioning, as well as activist subversion of existing power structures. Rancière’s philosophy emphasizes that politics is essentially connected with questioning and resisting hierarchical structures that society establishes, which often exclude certain groups and individuals from dialogue and decision-making. Such resistance may manifest through various forms of activism and social movements that challenge the order by questioning social norms and the distribution of power (Rancière 32).

According to Mary Flanagan, incorporating certain values into the design of video games can be viewed as a form of activism aimed at encouraging social or political change. Flanagan points out

that playing games implies participation in certain ideological frameworks (223). Decisions about game mechanics and narrative design, which shape rules and possible actions within the game, reflect designers' values and beliefs about how the world functions, even when that world is fictional (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 3), and we might add, even when the designer is not aware of their ideological activity. Flanagan conceptualizes activist games and states:

Activist games can be characterized by their emphasis on social issues, education, and, occasionally, intervention, … they are not purely conceptual exercises, but rather, games that engage in a social issue through, most commonly, themes, narratives, roles, settings, goals, and characters; and less commonly, through game mechanics, play paradigms, interactions, or win states to benefit an intended outcome beyond a game's entertainment or experiential value alone. (Flanagan 13)

For her, activist games are primarily spaces for opening debate without necessarily offering concrete solutions to social and political problems. In this sense, she is close to Boal's idea of Forum Theatre, where solutions are not offered, but possibilities for performing different scenarios are presented and later analyzed in discussion.

Gonzalo Frasca, game designer and theorist, in his essay "Videogames of the Oppressed," explores the potential of video games to address social and political issues. Frasca draws on Boal's ideas to highlight the importance of narrative openness in activist games, and their potential for social and personal change. This openness does not focus on "what happened," as in traditional narrative, but on "what could happen" (89). Within this framework, the game serves as a means of opening possibilities rather than closing debate or imposing a conclusion. Frasca was particularly interested in the genre he termed 'newsgaming,' referring to games inspired by real news. As the originator of the term newsgames, Frasca describes journalistic games as a blend of "simulation and political cartoons" ("Simulation" 233), emphasizing their function as video-game forms of political commentary.

Treanor and Mateas build on Frasca's proposal of games as political cartoons by distinguishing between 'social comment cartoons' and 'political cartoons' (2). Social comment cartoons deal with general and easily recognizable social problems, such as global warming, world hunger, or environmental protection, aiming to present the seriousness of the topic humorously. A video game

that could be called a social comment cartoon can be created at a slower pace than a game responding as a political cartoon, because the themes it addresses concern long-term issues. In contrast, political cartoons relate to a specific news event in order to comment on it while it is still current (Bogost et al. 112).

Ferrari makes a clear distinction between journalistic and editorial games. By 'journalistic games,' he refers to games that convey and comment on current events in accordance with journalistic principles, particularly objectivity and the temporality of public relevance. They are designed to be played and understood within a very short period (Treanor and Mateas 5). Sicart defines newsgames as "serious computer games designed to illustrate a specific and concrete aspect of news by means of their procedural rhetoric, with the goal of participating in the public debate" ("Newsgames" 28). He further emphasizes that they should be "ephemeral as the news they illustrate" (28), meaning that after conveying their message, they should quickly disappear. Editorial games represent playable versions of columns and editorial cartoons, conveying a particular stance with the aim of persuading players to accept embedded biases or view a problem from a different perspective. So far, the idea of newsgames has proven most useful as regards political cartoons, especially in programs designed for rapid game creation with very simple mechanics. Unlike journalistic practices, political cartoons do not aim to convey facts but primarily express the author's subjective editorial opinion through rhetorical figures and metaphors. Cartoonists use verbal and visual rhetorical tools to influence readers to adopt their ideological position as a perspective for understanding social and political issues. Unlike traditional political cartoons that rely solely on images and text, journalistic games employ additional rhetorical possibilities provided by interactivity—a distinctive feature of video games. Well-known examples of video games with political messages include Kabul Kaboom!, September 12th, Darfur is Dying, McDonald's Videogame, and Madrid, which emerged as reactions to significant global events, while cases of games related to local political contexts in smaller countries are generally less researched. Some examples of such games, situated at the boundaries between activist games and political cartoons, emerged as critiques of Vučić's regime in Serbia.

4. Ćaci Saves Ćacilend as a Political Cartoon

Most of the aforementioned games could be described as casual games because they have simple gameplay, without complex mechanics or elaborate narratives. This does not necessarily mean they are easy or quick to create. However, for newsgames, speed of production is important in order to remain relevant to the referenced topic. Filip Pavlović, a final-year student at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, used FlowLab Game Creator,[2] a web application for rapid video game development, to design the video game Ćaci spasava Ćacilend 'Ćaci Saves Ćacilend.' The game was published in 2025 and satirically refers to "Ćaci"[3] as a symbolic and gradually established nickname for supporters of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and pro-government students who opposed student protests and faculty blockades. They established a camp in the park in front of Parliament in Belgrade as a response to the ongoing student protests. This camp soon became colloquially known as Ćacilend. In the video game Ćaci Saves Ćacilend, the task of the character controlled by the player, Ćaci, is to collect as many tents and money as possible while moving through the park and avoiding student indexes; that is, to collect as many sandwiches as possible while avoiding tractors and ensuring that journalist Nemanja Šarović[4] does not catch up with him. In this context, the objects function as presumed symbols: tents – Ćacilend; money – corruption; indexes – the student movement and protests; sandwich – a symbol of the easy bribability of supporters of the ruling regime; tractors – a reference to farmers' support for student protests and blockades. Pavlović was motivated to create the game by the sense of the absurdity of the entire political situation and the authorities' reaction to the student blockades, as he states:

I couldn't believe that the state, which we should be able to rely on … could behave that way and so obviously have a media agenda against what we started. … So that was my main focus for the game—how to make something as absurd as possible, something that would make sense to anyone who sees it … so that people understand that this absurdity is what we are living right now and that it is our current reality. … That was somehow the initial idea—to make something we would laugh at the faculty, to ease things up at least among ourselves. How it came to spread to that extent… … I'm not sure. … That's why I think the game accidentally turned out to be a good idea, because young people like something interactive, short, and simple, something that can be shared. (Pavlović)

The game spread across the internet literally overnight, but regarding its longevity, Pavlović says that his idea was for it to remain as a kind of memory of events from a certain period, as one small element of the broader story of the student protests.

That's precisely something that is crucial for modern media and content today—everything comes very quickly and goes very quickly. … The very choice of the game type, that kind of infinite runner, is exactly that—it holds attention briefly, is briefly interesting, and once all the content is absorbed, it quickly fades into oblivion. (Pavlović)

We can connect Pavlović's comment to phenomena related to hyperproduction of media content in the context of platform capitalism, referred to in the literature through terms such as 'scroll-culture' or 'infinite scrolling' (Jovicic 498), denoting the encouragement of continuous content consumption, as well as 'content saturation' and 'information overload' (Kashlot et al. 249), referring to the consequences of these processes and the overload of digital media users.

Interestingly, the sandwich as a symbolic object appears in another video game, Jedi Parizer (Eat Polony). In this game, one of the player's tasks is to "make a sandwich" by catching necessary ingredients falling from the top of the screen into a shopping cart – bread, mayonnaise, and sliced parizer—while simultaneously avoiding detergent[5] . Depending on the object the player catches, they hear Aleksandar Vučić's voice, approving or disapproving of the action, with these quotes taken from previously known public statements of the President of Serbia. Ćaci Saves Ćacilend similarly uses sound effects, giving a "voice" to Nemanja Šarović and using some of his earlier statements made while reporting from protests.

However, both visual and audio symbols in this context achieve a satirical effect only if the player is familiar with the context in which they emerged and the events they refer to. Although someone unfamiliar with the social and political situation in Serbia could easily understand the rules and play the game, its symbols would not carry deeper meaning or a satirical/comic effect for them. Filip Pavlović states that "that comic effect is precisely what shows our condition as a country," adding that series such as South Park or Jet Set were a kind of "subliminal reference" in that context, since satire itself has "the greatest power to bring something down to a lower level" (Pavlović).

Satire as an artistic form has proven to be very flexible regarding transmedial possibilities. Its critical edge is well known in literature, but it has also proven to be an effective means of questioning and mocking political events in films, series, and now video games. Satire in video games is closest to newspaper political cartoons, as it relies on exaggeration, symbolism, and analogy (Medhurst and Desousa 219). For example, the use of characteristic audio and visual references such as bodily disproportionality, short clips of Vučić's statements, Ćaci avoiding indexes as symbols of the student movement, and the analogy embedded in the game environment itself—Ćacilend, whose name suggests that the state is not a community of citizens but a private possession or "playground" of the most powerful man in Serbia.

During the interview, Pavlović emphasized the key advantage of video games as a medium of resistance: "Video games have mechanics that help you influence something." In other words, he points to the fact that video games enable agency, transforming the player into an active subject. On the other hand, the author of an activist game does not disappear in the interactive process but assumes a politically explicit and normatively determining position. Player participation has often been interpreted within game studies as co-authorship, precisely due to interactivity, frequently invoking Barthes' famous thesis on the death of the author (Bowman and Banks 215). Games as political cartoons may actualize the rebirth of the author as the bearer of a clear political stance. Like a newspaper cartoon, such a game reduces the interpretative horizon and directs meaning toward a precisely defined position, thereby making the author visible as a political actor responsible for the produced discourse.

5. Procedural Rhetoric of the Game: Good, Bad, Corrupt

If we follow Bogost's idea that "procedural media like video games get to the heart of things by mounting arguments about the processes inherent in them" (339), and that they can support or question processes, offering us a new experience of understanding them in greater detail, then the video game Dobar, lošs, korumpiran 'Good, Bad, Corrupt,' created by the Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia (CINS), is a good example of procedural rhetoric. Unlike the other analyzed games, which mostly emerged in the context of student blockades and were created by individuals, Good, Bad, Corrupt was developed within a journalistic newsroom to present the topic of corruption

in public procurement to the audience in an engaging and accessible way. As CINS communications manager Anđela Jovanović explained in the interview, the main goal of the game was to inform and educate citizens so that they could make informed decisions concerning their lives.

Jovanović also emphasized the simplicity and interactivity of video games as one of their key positive characteristics, and thus their potential to encourage participation by citizens who might otherwise not be interested in certain topics. As she noted, CINS as a newsroom is always oriented toward innovation and the use of new, creative ways to tell stories of public interest, and the use of the video game Good, Bad, Corrupt to inform and educate about public procurement is one such example. However, certain limitations exist; no game, however simple, is accessible to absolutely everyone: “First of all, the players have to be at least somewhat media literate and know how to access the game, extract the underlying motive, and recognize certain patterns, which, on the one hand, is good and productive. But on the other hand, it may mean that it excludes a segment of people” (Jovanović).

The video game Good, Bad, Corrupt places the player in the role of a city manager tasked with resolving ethical and legal challenges in such a way as not to lose their job, while simultaneously maintaining the support of tycoons and politicians. “Be careful not to get caught with your hand in the cookie jar!” is the message the player receives at the beginning of the game. The game is text-based and relies on choosing among offered options, that is, challenges to which the player, as manager, must respond. Several parameters affect success: achieved profit, level of corruption, distrust of businessmen, and loss of political support. The characters, as well as the situations in which the players find themselves, are fictional, with invented names and titles. However, as Anđela Jovanović stated, “the cases themselves are not so important, but what stands behind them, that is, the systemic problem about which citizens are not sufficiently informed, where journalists can influence the public availability of data about that problem” (Jovanović). She adds that the game has repayable value—through different choices, players can learn different things. Although it seems impossible to successfully pass all thirteen levels of the game, that is, “the game can end, but that does not necessarily mean the player wins” (Jovanović).

Audience reactions were positive, and the game was promoted through a campaign in which it was played by public figures such as actress Jelena Stupljanin and lawyer and former Commissioner for Information of Public Importance Rodoljub Šabić. In addition, Good, Bad, Corrupt is listed among the games of the Serbian Games Association (SGA). In the interview conducted for this research, Anđela Jovanović pointed out that the reach of this game was comparable to that of their most-read investigative stories. Nevertheless, regarding the role of video games in encouraging civic participation, Jovanović believes they do not directly stimulate activism: “They create interest and awareness of problems, and interaction contributes to the desire for some kind of action. Ultimately, the job of journalists and what we wanted to do with our video game was to explain and reveal. The subsequent processes are beyond us” (Jovanović).

This view is close to Sicart’s understanding of the political game. According to him, politics does not reside in the games themselves as objects, but in the social contexts of playing – in interpretations, lived experiences of play, and collective activities, or as he states: “Politics happens when play becomes political action” (Play Matters 73).

According to the latest Corruption Perceptions Index report, Serbia ranks 116th out of 182 countries in the world (“Indeks percepcije”). A game such as Good, Bad, Corrupt is not merely an entertaining simulation of irresponsible and illegal management of public works; it has an educational character, as it points to the most common mechanisms and activities of officials in high positions within city and local administrations. This social problem materialized tragically when the canopy collapsed in Novi Sad, which has often been marked in public discourse as a direct consequence of criminal activities.

There are proposals that newsgames should be integrated into news organizations rather than remain an add-on with which journalists have no deep connection. However, this would mean that newsrooms must either have the resources to employ designers and developers or that journalists themselves become such professionals. One of the more serious attempts to develop episodic games about current news was the collaboration between Bogost’s game development company, Persuasive Games, and The New York Times. However, in the context of Serbia, apart from CINS’s Good, Bad, Corrupt, there are no such examples. The reason may lie in the lack of time, financial, or human resources in newsrooms for developing innovative content, but also in the fact

that video games are not created quickly, which creates a gap between their publication and the timeliness of news. In this context, Good, Bad, Corrupt is a good example of a game dealing with a systemic problem that is, unfortunately, always a current topic.

6. SKC and Blokejd: The Activist Potential of Game Jams

The origins of game jams outside the industrial context can be traced back to the 1980s and 1990s and are linked to demoscene parties organized as multi-hour programming competitions. A game jam is an event involving the team-based creation of video games around a given theme, and most often lasts from one to three days. During this period, teams compete in developing games that, after the deadline, are reviewed by a jury that decides on awards. This format implies continuous work in which participants often sleep little and eat poorly, and critics argue that it reproduces some of the most problematic aspects of industrial labor—intense time pressure, late-night work, and poorly paid, time-limited creative labor that, under the guise of innovation, is increasingly normalized in the gaming industry (Kennedy 709). For our argument on the potential of game jams as forms of resistance and activism, it is important that these events have always implied great passion, dedication, perseverance, and readiness to sacrifice time, even health, for a collective endeavor. These are all demands that connect game jams with social activism.

In the contemporary socio-political context of rising populism and right-wing movements worldwide, ideas of political resistance increasingly permeate gaming culture. As significant examples of resistance to the emergence of such a new world order, Ruberg and Phillips cite #resistjam, an event that gathered developers to create games in accordance with its core idea, to make games that “resisted oppressive authoritarianism” (2). It is symptomatic that the event was organized shortly after Donald Trump’s first inauguration as President of the United States in 2017.

During the student blockades in 2025, two game jams were held—the Blokejd Game Jam in Novi Sad and the SKC Game Jam in Belgrade,[6] primarily involving students. The organizers of the SKC Game Jam, Ivan Notaroš and Mihailo Bogdanović, state that they aimed to choose a theme that reflects the current state of society while allowing multiple interpretations that would lead to production of different video games. Specifically, the chosen theme, “Armchair,”[7] refers to the

phrase “armchair students,” a term frequently used by the pro-regime tabloid television channel Informer to describe students who blocked access to the Student Cultural Center (SKC) in Belgrade.

Aleksa Manja, one of the organizers of the Blokejd Game Jam held in the Rectorate building of the University of Novi Sad, which students had taken over, explains that they chose the theme “Deception/Illusion” due to the perceived effects of propaganda and fake news on society at that moment, aiming to motivate students to create a form of critique through video games. He emphasized that game jams are significant because they offer greater freedom to creators compared to the possibilities for realizing new ideas in a commercial context:

In studios, it’s really difficult, especially if they’re larger companies. As creators, our ideas usually get filtered multiple times. Something is allowed to pass, something is not; the whole studio may not agree with something, especially if it’s a larger commercial project… But these small game jam games are created very quickly, and people literally make whatever kind of game they want to make. (Manja)

Unlike the usual practice of awarding the best games, the organizers of the SKC Game Jam aimed to encourage a collaborative rather than competitive spirit. This approach aligns with the core principles of the student movement, such as solidarity and gathering around a common idea. As Mihailo Bogdanović emphasized, “a jam should be a place where you come to enjoy making games, collaborating. … Then there is knowledge sharing and curiosity about what others are doing, which doesn’t exist in competitive game jams.” Another specificity of the SKC Game Jam was the very space of the Student Cultural Center in which it was held. While game jams usually take place in corporate companies, here it was a 150-year-old space that during the blockades became a gathering place for artists from various fields, so game design stepped out of its usual narrow circle of designers and developers: “SKC was very alive, there were always people from all kinds of fields—music, film, art… And it was interesting for them to see game developers who ‘occupied’ SKC for two days” (Notaroš).

Holding activist game jams in SKC and in the Rectorate building of the University of Novi Sad was not merely a logistical decision, but a subversion of the produced cultural and politically regulated space. By taking over and blockading these institutional state spaces, students demonstrated that

they are not neutral buildings, empty "containers," but essentially political places. Following Lefebvre, it can be concluded that through these emancipatory discourses and ideas, space is not merely used but further produced. His key idea is that "[s]ocial relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. Their underpinning is spatial … Knowledge of space so understood implies the critique of space" (404-405). Lefebvre emphasizes the dialectical nature of space, stating that it is "always fertile – always full of antagonisms and/or harmonies" (130), in this case between the normed state place and the produced student space of resistance. Such a dialectic opens the possibility of continuously reshaping meanings and power relations, that is, the dynamic production of space through changing regimes of its use.

The organizers of both game jams highlighted the artistic aspect of video games. Aleksa Manja emphasized that video games are a suitable medium for expressing social critique and encouraging activism, comparing them in this context to other works of art:

Games are a very good form of artistic work for critique precisely because the player who plays faces moral dilemmas. As viewers of films or series, we are passive observers who see someone else's critique of something. But as players, we see the creator's critique, and we often play through that critique, and it changes us and creates a dilemma within us … In my opinion, games are the best medium for something like that. (Manja)

Frasca similarly explained his motivation for choosing a video game when creating September 12th to express his stance toward American military doctrine: "For political video games, September 11 was the trigger … If it had happened in the Sixties, people would have grabbed their guitar and written a song about it. Now they're making games" (qtd. in McClellan). For him, video games are a new artistic medium that, like already established media, serve as activist tools for promoting social change.

If these activist games are viewed in the context of art, this does not mean we should return to the extensively debated question within game studies and the broader public of whether video games are art. If the question is reversed to ask whether art can be play, a more productive framework for understanding these games created at game jams may emerge. Avant-garde (surrealism, futurism, dadaism) and neo-avant-garde art (Fluxus, performance art, happenings) of the twentieth century are full of ludic examples in which artists used elements of play such as chance, improvisation,

rule-based procedures, collectivity, and subversion of seriousness for the purpose of social critique (Šuvaković 175). Mary Flanagan followed a similar logic when conceptualizing critical games, drawing numerous references from contemporary art analogous to video games with critical tendencies. In fact, the ontological question of whether video games are art is less important than considering their social function as an artistic medium (Maravić 20). When observed in continuity with the tradition of social and political critique of previous artistic movements, an analogy in critical strategies becomes apparent.

7. Conclusion

The relationship between games and politics is highly complex and operates on many levels, such as historical (the political function of play), metaphorical (use in language), and structural (observance and violation of rules, competition), the detailed explication of which would exceed the scope of this paper. Games have always had a strong connection to politics, and with video games as procedural algorithmic systems regulating rules and mechanics, this connection has been further strengthened. Numerous theorists have recognized this and attempted to highlight nuances of this relationship within broader or narrower conceptual frameworks by introducing various terms—serious games, newsgames, editorial games, political cartoons, political games, activist games, critical games, etc. The video games analyzed in this paper are difficult to fit into a single conceptual category; for example, Ćaci Saves Ćacilend could be placed in all of the abovementioned categories. Rather than focusing on theoretical rigidity and classification, our primary interest was to examine the scope, potentials, and limitations of using video games as a means of social critique in the concrete local Serbian political context. What all our interlocutors emphasized is interactivity, whereby the player is placed in an active relationship with the game and thus influences its course. This is a commonplace when discussing the distinctive characteristics of video games compared to other media, but it is also a fact that we live in an age of interactivity, and media consumption is linked to user choice.

Dissatisfaction with Vučić's regime among a large part of Serbian society has lasted for years, but the trigger for the largest and longest protests so far, led by students, professors, farmers, war veterans, and lawyers, was the tragic event in which "corruption," embodied in the concrete canopy

of the railway station in Novi Sad, collapsed onto people's heads. Therefore, it is not surprising that the analyzed games and game jams adopted an unequivocal critical tone toward the current regime and sought, through various means, to point out its shortcomings.

Game jams are a particularly interesting phenomenon, as the values accompanying "standard" apolitical game jams—dedication, burnout, passion, collaboration, community, and solidarity—fit well within the context of political activism and resistance. It is also important that game jams are always organized in physical spaces, most often those provided by industry or universities, i.e., regulated and institutionalized spaces. Game jams held in the blockaded spaces of SKC and the Rectorate have a rebellious character reminiscent of gatherings of the first hackers at American universities during the 1960s and 1970s. In our specific cases, participants actively subverted spaces of public and state institutions that were inert toward the actions of the ruling regime.

Considering the above, it is not surprising that our interlocutors—students who developed games or organized these gatherings—connected their activities with art. Social engagement and politicality of contemporary art are important legacies of twentieth-century artistic movements. Video games, like preceding media, can be a useful channel for conveying critical messages, and the satirical character of newspaper political cartoons can be well expressed in this new medium without losing its essential elements. Today, printed newspapers are rarely read, and young, media-literate people most often satisfy their information needs online, which enables rapid transmission and reach of messages. All analyzed games, as well as those created at game jams, spread their influence via social networks or specialized game distribution platforms. On the other hand, after reception, such messages quickly fade into oblivion in the "sea" of new information.

It may seem overly optimistic to claim that video games can be a significant space for discussion of political problems, and perhaps we should not exaggerate their subversive potential. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter argue that it is easy to dismiss this symbolic resistance when compared to real activism on the streets, but at the same time, "few political activists consider reading or watching films as always just time-wasting distractions" (194). Playing deserves to be treated with equal seriousness, and once we accept that, it may seem strange that it took us so long to realize that games have always been part of public political discourse (Bogost 120).

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[1] One of the most thorough categorizations of play in relation to rules and competition to date was provided by Roger Caillois in his famous classification: agôn, alea, mimicry, ilinx (12).

[2] FlowLab Game Creator is an online tool for creating 2D video games that runs directly in a web browser and is intended both for complete beginners and for those who want to quickly prototype ideas without writing traditional programming code.

[3] The very term ćaci originates from a graffiti inscription written in front of one of the blockaded high schools in Novi Sad, where, due to a spelling mistake in Cyrillic, instead of “Đaci u škole” (“Ђаци у школе”), meaning ‘Pupils to schools,’ it read “Ćaci u škole” (“Ћаци у школе”). The graffiti was probably written by supporters of the regime with the intention of opposing the class boycott by pupils who had joined the student protests.

[4] Šarović is a Serbian journalist and politician, a former member of the Serbian Radical Party, and today the leader of the movement “Ljubav, vera, nada” ‘Love, Faith, Hope.’ During the student protests and blockades, he gained public popularity due to his distinctive style of interviewing and questioning supporters of the ruling party.

[5] The symbols in the game refer to events from September 2023, when Aleksandar Vučić announced a price reduction for certain products, including parizer ‘polony,’ mayonnaise, yogurt, and dishwashing detergent. Shortly thereafter, he released a video in which he prepares a polony sandwich together with two ministers (N1 Beograd). As a result, polony became one of the more prominent topics in the domestic public sphere at the time.

[6] In addition to the aforementioned events, the Global Game Jam was also held in Belgrade (2025), whose alternative theme referred to the ongoing protests: “Corruption (kills).”

[7] In Serbian slang, the word “armchair” carries connotations referring to a managerial or leadership position in companies, public enterprises, ministries, and similar institutions.

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