

Artivism and Human Rights visibility through ludonarrative and immersive mechanics in indie video games

Montserrat Vidal-Mestre

montse.vidal@uab.cat

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Barcelona, Spain

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6144-5386>

Alfonso Freire-Sánchez

freire3@uao.es

Universidad Abat Oliba, CEU Universities

Barcelona, Spain

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2082-1212>

Abstract

Video games considered indies have known how to exploit ludonarrative possibilities and merge them with different advanced immersive mechanics, thus creating complex, deep and human stories. Some even manage to use artistic expression combined with immersive technologies as a means that contributes to collaborative education. A fact that occurs when propagating a social message that moves to action and change and can be considered digital artistic works with activist discourse, that is, artivism. Following this fact, this manuscript analyzes the main themes and stories that are

present in indie video games aimed at the public and reflects on the didactic nature of their activist discourse in relation to Human Rights. The method is a mixed research methodology based on interdisciplinary coding that combines various variables extracted from specialized literature. The results allow us to conclude that the videogame is a means of artistic and digital educational expression suitable for disseminating messages intrinsic to activist discourse, with special attention to human rights, while it deploys immersive mechanics that allow users to participate in said messages, integrate them naturally into their actions and promote change and social education through

ethical implications and ludonarrative elements based on emotion, awareness and first-person playable experience.

Keywords

Artivism • Ethical implications • Human Rights • Indie video games • Ludonarrative

1. Introduction

Video games are considered art. After an initial phase of self-discovery and technical limitations, technological advances have enabled the creation of deeper narrative layers (Martín-Núñez & Navarro-Remesal, 2021), the development of complex characters, and the incorporation of sophisticated audiovisual elements. Since the early 21st century, scholars such as Wolf and Perron in *The Video Game Theory Reader* (2003) have championed video games’ artistic dimension and even proposed a methodology for analyzing them as artworks on multiple levels or dimensions. Today, they are widely regarded as an artistic medium with great power to educate and move players through stories, ludonarrative experiences, and immersive technologies (Palavecino, 2023) —a common trait of the new arts that inhabit the digital ecosystem: “new-media art refers to all artistic contributions created using new technologies and emerging media” (Fernández-Castrillo, 2021, p. 4).

In this necessary epistemological shift brought about by the impasse of video games as commercial products —which restricts those creations where narrative and art direction play a major role— indie video games, or indie games, gain greater prominence. These titles are produced by independent developers with small teams and very limited budgets (Juul, 2019; Howard, 2022). Beyond limited resources, indie games are characterized by greater creative freedom, a stronger focus on innovation and experimentation (Pereira, 2025), and a closer connection with player

Characteristic	Indie games	AA	AAA
Budget	Typically, under €1 million	Approximately €1–45 million	Typically, above €45 million
Distribution	Primarily digital (Steam, consoles’ stores, itch.io)	Mostly digital; occasional physical releases	Global physical + digital, major marketing support
Developer	Independent studios / small teams	Mid-size studios, sometimes publisher-backed	Large studios, often publisher-owned or strongly financed
Genre	All; often experimental or hybrid	All; balances innovation and marketability	All; often aligned with mass-market expectations
Team size	Small teams, sometimes a single person	Generally fewer than 50 people	Teams larger than 50 people

Table 1. Differences between indie games and AA or AAA video games. Budget ranges expressed in euros are approximate and based on a rounded USD–EUR conversion for comparative purposes. Source: compiled by the author from data in Rocket Brush Studio (2023) and MakeUseOf (2023)

communities thanks to their smaller target audiences (King *et al.*, 2021). The stories they present often draw on real events or current social issues. Some even have biographical ties to their creators —for example *Sea of Solitude* (Jo-Mei Games, 2019), an autobiographical-fiction work that narrates experiences from creative director Cornelia Geppert’s past. It thus becomes a digital, allegorical, and fictional autobiography aimed at helping players understand mental-health problems so frequently stigmatized by the media (Vidal-Mestre & Freire-Sánchez, 2022). Indie games frequently leverage this creative freedom to reflect on economic and political themes or social

concerns such as inequality, racism, homophobia, mental-health disorders, and suicide (King *et al.*, 2021). In contrast, high-budget titles —the so-called AA or AAA games— tend to approach social issues more superficially out of fear of losing commercial appeal or offending parts of their audience. The following section outlines the differences between indie games and AA/AAA video games.

Although indie games were originally conceived as niche products and semi-showcases to attract investors or major industry players, interest in them has risen exponentially over the past decade (Howard, 2022; Goh *et al.*, 2023). This change of course is largely due to the success and acclaim of titles such as *Limbo* (Playdead, 2010), *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012), *Shovel Knight* (Yacht Club Games, 2014), *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015) and *Celeste* (Maddy Makes Games, 2018), among many others. Today, numerous gamer communities, specialized media outlets, industry professionals and content creators have begun to focus their attention on these works. Their impact has enabled developers to introduce a discourse that can be regarded as socially or politically transformative —what might be called activism, given that video games are now considered art.

According to the *International Council of Europe* (ICE) in the *Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People* (2023), within the framework of defending and advancing human rights, activism consists of:

Reacting to injustice, mistreatment, violence, or discrimination —and striving to correct it. It means being willing to help, showing solidarity with the struggles of other peoples, fighting to ensure they are treated with respect and dignity, and facilitating the transition toward a more humane, egalitarian society that respects human rights. Effective activists display persistence, creativity, commitment, and often great courage, but above all, a belief in humanity and in human rights. They believe that a world in which people respect human rights is possible, and they want to make it happen (Council of Europe, 2023).

Therefore, considering the *International Council of Europe's* (2023) definition of activism, video games that adopt a protest-oriented stance against injustice and violence and strive for change can be labelled activist. Although “videogame” and “activism” may seem unrelated, they converge through activism —the use of art as a tool to promote social or political transformation. Historically, activism has been most closely associated with urban expressionism or public artists concerned with environmental issues (Mantoan, 2022), yet video games have also become a suitable medium for activism, aligning with other artistic forms such as music, painting, cinema and literature. Even theatre has long been viewed as a means to transform society and build the future, as the Brazilian playwright and director Augusto Boal (1931-2009) argued; and what is a video game if not a didactic, digital, interactive theatre?

Over the past decade, scholars have begun to explore and emphasize the persuasive, activist potential of video games. Díez (2014) examines indie titles that combat gender-based violence; Urroz (2020) highlights the pioneering role of net-art practitioners in the game industry; and Davies (2022) investigates *gamified activism* —how player communities can transform in-game actions into social protest, as seen during the *Black Lives Matter* movement. Other studies, such as those by Juul (2019), Almacellas *et al.* (2023) and Villasis-Pamos *et al.* (2024), also analyze indie games from various social and cultural perspectives.

Given this view of video games as potential vehicles for activist discourse, the present study focuses on activism in games as a technique whereby the medium is employed to protest and demand social change by weaving human-rights themes into both narrative and mechanics. Accordingly, this article aims to examine the interplay between ludic and narrative functions (Pérez-Latorre, 2023) in activist video game discourse, to determine how such games raise awareness of social issues through the treatment and integration of human rights in their gameplay, and to identify their main storylines, elements, and distinguishing features.

2. Methodological design

To delimit and refine the sample, we carried out a structured search across two widely used game databases —IGDB and GameFAQs— between 10–20 January 2025. We used an advanced-search approach combining controlled keywords and Boolean operators to reduce noise and improve replicability. The core query string was: “activism” OR “activist” OR “hacktivism” OR “protest” OR “human rights”. On IGDB, the query was applied to titles and tags; on GameFAQs, it was applied to title summaries and user-facing metadata. Search results were exported (or manually logged when export was not available) and de-duplicated by title and release year. We then conducted a two-step screening: (1) eligibility screening based on indie status and publication date; (2) substantive screening to verify that activism was not merely a plot device, but a deliberate normative stance aligned with the *Council of Europe’s* definition of activism (Council of Europe, 2023).

The final list comprises 20 video games spanning various themes and approaches to activist discourse. It is worth noting that *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft, 2014) was excluded—even though part of its narrative condemns the harmful effects of war on civilians— because, despite its relatively low budget, it cannot be considered an indie game: it was developed by Ubisoft, one of the industry’s largest studios. Below is a summary of the inclusion criteria used to select and define the cases.

2.1 Sampling criteria and exclusions

Inclusion criteria were: (a) the title is generally classified as indie (independent studio, small-to-mid team, and/or independent funding/publishing structure); (b) release date up to and including January 2025; (c) explicit or strongly implicit activist intent, operationalized as a call to awareness and ethical positioning against injustice or discrimina-

Variable	Inclusion criterion
Type	Indie
Nationality	All
Genre	All
Year of publication	Up to and including January 2025
Platforms	All
Filtering	Search filtered with the keywords “activism” and “hacktivism”
Activist discourse	Must contain an activist discourse. Titles in which activism is merely a narrative device to drive the action—without promoting social or political change— are excluded

Table 2. Inclusion criteria for the videogame video-documentary search. Source: compiled by the authors

tion; (d) a discernible linkage to one or more articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 2023), either explicitly in text/paratext or implicitly through the represented social issue and player tasks. Exclusion criteria were: (a) AA/AAA production conditions that substantially constrain creative autonomy; (b) “activism” used only as an action trope without a persuasive or educative stance; (c) insufficient gameplay or documentation to analyze mechanics and narrative integration. For transparency, we excluded *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* because it was developed by Ubisoft, a major studio, despite its anti-war message.

2.2 Analytical procedure and coding

According to the activist artist Lucy Lippard, in her essay *Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power*, “Activist art is not limited to any particular style, so it is probably easier to define it by attending to its functions” (2001, p. 344). Following this argument, we adopt a mixed-methods research design

that combines an analysis of social themes with the technical and artistic deployment of each work, drawing on the sociotechnical analysis model of Alsina & Rodríguez (2015). Their method integrates social aspects or collective meanings with the interaction of information-and-communication technologies to analyze complex systems. In other words, it focuses on identifying the interactions between technologies and the social contexts in which they are implemented. Accordingly, we considered how technological elements of the video games —game mechanics, forms of interaction, and narrative development— interact with their social contexts. This method allowed us to determine how a game’s narrative and mechanics both reflect and promote specific Human Rights, such as the right to freedom of expression, equality, and privacy, among others.

We combined qualitative thematic analysis with structured coding. First, two passes were conducted to identify recurring activist themes and the human-rights issues they articulate (open coding). Second, we applied a focused codebook that linked (a) activist approach, (b) immersive mechanics, and (c) ludonarrative strategy. Immersive-mechanics codes included: embodiment (first-person or strong avatar alignment), scarcity/time pressure, consequence-bearing choice, proceduralized moral dilemmas, diegetic interfaces (in-world UI/artefacts), sensory-affective feedback (sound/music/visual distortion), and constraint-as-message (rules that simulate oppression). Ludonarrative-strategy codes included: direct denunciation, allegory and metaphor, bureaucratic simulation, testimonial framing, cultural preservation, and counter-violence (pacifist play).

2.3 Data corpus, reliability, validation, and limitations

For each included game, the corpus consisted of: (1) primary gameplay experience via playtesting; (2) recorded gameplay videos (YouTube) to trian-

gulate routes and endings; (3) official descriptions and store pages (paratext) when needed to clarify developer intent. To reduce subjectivity, we triangulated playtesting notes with multiple gameplay videos (different play styles) and checked inferences against developer statements where available. We also performed a consistency check: each activist claim reported in Section 3 had to be supported by at least one concrete mechanic or recurring interaction loop. A limitation is that gameplay videos cannot fully capture the embodied, decision-making pressure of an active player; we therefore treat video-only evidence as supporting material rather than a substitute for play. We flag cases where activist impact depends strongly on player agency and subjective experience. The results thus enable us to analyze the games across several independent variables, addressing their ludic-narrative-artistic functions in a holistic, *paraludonarrative* way —that is, beyond the interactive story and playable experience themselves— “by converging the notion of a ludonarrative world/universe with that of an imaginary located between the ludofictional dimension and the realm of social discourses (beyond fiction, play, and video games)” (Pérez-Latorre, 2023, p. 23). To examine the video games, we employed playtesting with annotations (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006) and gameplay viewing on YouTube (Taesiri *et al.*, 2022). Recognizing that video games rely on different mechanics (Villegas *et al.*, 2021), we assessed three variables:

1. Narrative origin —whether the game draws on concrete real events, historical periods, the life or testimony of real people, literary works, or existing social issues.
2. Theme —used to categorize the works by topics such as mental-health problems, consequences of armed conflict, or labor rights in developing countries.
3. Human-Rights articles referenced —identifying which articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2023) appear in the narrative or subtext.

1: We are all born free and equal	7: Right to equality before the law	13: Right to freedom of movement	19: Right to freedom of opinion and expression	25: Right to an adequate standard of living
2: Right to be free from discrimination	8: Right to an effective remedy	14: Right to seek asylum	20: Right to freedom of assembly and association	26: Right to education
3: Right to life	9: Right to freedom from arbitrary detention	15: Right to nationality	21: Right to take part in government and free elections	27: Right to participate in cultural, artistic, and scientific life.
4: Right to be free from slavery	10: Right to a fair trial	16: Right to marry and to find a family	22: Right to social security	28: Right to a free and just world order
5: Right to be free from torture	11: Right to the presumption of innocence and a fair trial	17: Right to property	23: Right to work	29: Duties toward the community
6: Right to recognition as a person before the law	12: Right to privacy	18: Right to freedom of religion or conscience	24: Right to rest and leisure	30: These rights are inalienable —no one may take them away

Table 3. The 30 Articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Source: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 2023)

To facilitate the link between video games and Human Rights, Table 3 enumerates all 30 articles of the declaration.

3. Results

Based on the digital search carried out according to the methodological design described above, we identified 20 indie video games that qualify as activist titles and incorporate the defense of one or more of the 30 Human-Rights articles into both their narratives and gameplay mechanics. Table 4 classifies these games —listed in order of publication— by three variables:

1. The works, situations, or real-world events that inspired them.
2. The social themes they address.
3. The specific Human-Rights articles woven into their stories and mechanics.

3.1 Activist approaches and immersive ludonarrative strategies

Beyond thematic content, the analyzed games enact activism through distinct ludonarrative configurations —specific ways in which rules, feedback, and narrative framing make an ethical claim actionable. The results show that the video games analyzed deploy differentiated activist strategies depending on how they articulate immersive mechanics and political positioning. In the cases of *Darfur is Dying* and *Phone Story*, player action is deliberately constrained through repetitive loops, constant pressure, and the risk of failure, turning awareness into an experience of sustained fatigue and vulnerability. *Papers, Please* and *This War of Mine*, by contrast, display a shared pattern based on resource management and decision-making under conditions of scarcity, where progression depends on accepting ethically problematic compromises, thereby reinforcing the moral dimension of the ludic experience. In *Orwell*, the accumulation of permissions and

Videogame, developer & year	Works, situations or events that inspire it	Educational message & social theme	Implicit Human-Rights articles
<i>Darfur is Dying</i> (MTV, 2006)	Concrete real-world events	Humanitarian crisis in Darfur (Sudan) and refugee conditions	1, 2, 3, 14
<i>Phone Story</i> (Molleindustria, 2011)	Realities in certain Asian countries	Labor exploitation	23, 24, 25
<i>Dys4ia</i> (Anna Anthropy, 2012)	Social issues	Sexual orientation and intolerance	1, 2
<i>Papo & Yo</i> (Minority, 2012)	Social issues	Alcoholism and domestic violence	12
<i>Papers, please</i> (Lucas Pope, 2013)	Contemporary political and economic contexts	Labor rights in a fictional communist republic	13, 23, 24, 25
<i>This War of Mine</i> (11 Bit Studios, 2014)	Consequences of real —but unspecified— armed conflicts	Impact of war on civilians	3, 13, 14
<i>Never Alone</i> (Upper One Games, 2014)	True stories	Defense of Indigenous culture	15, 27
<i>Undertale</i> (Toby Fox, 2015)	Social issues	Promotion of non-violence	1, 2
<i>Life is Strange</i> (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015)	Social issues	Bullying, child abuse and suicide	2, 12, 26
<i>Orwell</i> (Osmotic Studios, 2016)	George Orwell's novel <i>1984</i> (1949)	Political conspiracies and social control	5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
<i>That Dragon, Cancer</i> (Numerous Games, 2016)	Social issues	Childhood cancer and grief	25
<i>1979 Revolution: Black Friday</i> (iNK Studios, 2016)	1979 Iranian Revolution	Human-rights abuses against the Iranian people	1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 18, 19, 21
<i>Night in the Woods</i> (Infinite Fall, 2017)	Social issues	Depression, anxiety and lack of opportunities among youth	25
<i>Finding Home</i> (UNHCR, 2017)	Real refugee stories	Inhumane conditions faced by refugees	1, 2, 3, 14
<i>Life is Strange 2</i> (Dontnod Entertainment, 2018)	Social issues	Racism and social inequalities	1, 2, 12
<i>Celeste</i> (Maddy Makes Games, 2018)	Social issues	Mental-health struggles	25
<i>Return to the Obra Dinn</i> (Lucas Pope, 2018)	Unspecified real events	Slavery and colonialism	1, 2, 3
<i>Sea of Solitude</i> (Jo-Mei Games, 2019)	Autobiographical fiction	Loneliness, depression and bullying	2, 26
<i>Patch Out</i> (UNHCR, 2022)	Syrian refugee crisis	Inhumane conditions faced by refugees	1, 2, 3, 14
<i>Rights Arcade</i> (Amnesty International, 2022)	Real testimonies	Respect for human rights	1, 2

Table 4. Indie video games (chronological order) whose narratives center on activist discourse and meet the ICE (2023) definition of activism. Source: compiled by the authors from multiple databases and documentation

the use of surveillance-center interfaces generate a gradual normalization of control, while *Never Alone* structures its proposal around cooperation and the incorporation of documentary materials that connect gameplay with living cultural practices. Finally, *Sea of Solitude* introduces an allegorical model in which spatial exploration and audiovisual modulation allow emotional states to be translated into playable trajectories. Consequently, the results indicate that artivism, rather than manifesting itself homogeneously, is reproduced through different modes of ludic intervention, ranging from direct denunciation to experiential allegory, all of them grounded in mechanics that actively involve the player.

In general, these indie video games share a willingness to tackle social and political issues and to spark awareness, reflection, and ethical considerations in players. Each one offers a different gameplay design, yet all of them seek to deliver a socially oriented —at times openly moralizing— message and to prompt change in society or, at the very least, make players conscious of certain realities and injustices, whether global or “glocal (global + local)” Such is the case of *Darfur is Dying* (MTV, 2006), which raises awareness of the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, highlighting several Human Rights currently being ignored, such as the right to life, to food, to security, and to health. Its ludonarrative centers on showing, through the player’s experience, the refugees’ daily struggle and the hardships they face—absence of medical care, dehydration or malnutrition, and separation from their families and homes.

UNHCR, in turn, has funded two indie titles that likewise aim to expose the inhumane conditions endured by refugees: *Finding Home* (2017) and *Patch Out* (2022). The former focuses on the general problems of refugees and the complex situation faced by those who flee their country in search of safety and asylum. The latter sets the player on a perilous survival path, mirroring the real story of its developer, who escaped from Syria (Schöffl, 2022), and thus blends autobiographical elements into the

experience. By contrast, *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013) also deals with migration, yet places players in the shoes of an immigration inspector in the fictional state of Arstotzka. Their ludic goal is to examine migrants’ documents and decide whether to let them enter, while the game gradually introduces —through its ludonarrative— issues such as discrimination, corruption, labor exploitation, and governmental oppression. The indie highlights the difficulty of making these decisions and the consequences they carry for those who are turned away.

In addition to UNHCR, Amnesty International also promoted the title *Rights Arcade* (2022) to raise awareness of respect for Human Rights. This game draws on a series of real statements and testimonies from people who have endured inhumane conditions—victims of war-time exile or of maltreatment. Unlike the titles mentioned above, its gameplay mechanics revolve mainly around narrative choices and moral decisions that players must handle from a highly subjective standpoint. *Phone Story* (Molleindustria, 2011), for its part, likewise hinges on real events, though with less precision and detail, placing strong emphasis on labor exploitation and corporate policies in developing countries through the manufacture of mobile phones. The title casts the player as an overworked laborer with no employment rights or social protection. By means of mini-game mechanics and the constant presence of a narrator, players receive information about the human and labor rights the character sees violated as the working day unfolds. The video game’s activist discourse therefore centers on a call to awareness of this very real problem in countries where citizens lack labor rights and are defenseless in the face of exploitation.

In *Papo & Yo* (Minority, 2012) we find certain parallels with the previous title, because it also focuses its activist discourse on situations experienced by poor families in South American countries. Specifically, it tells the story of a boy living in a shanty town in South America. The narrative develops through the boy’s relationship with a monster

that represents his father's drug addiction. The indie offers gameplay built around challenges and adventures while aiming to make players aware of issues such as addiction, domestic violence, and the consequences of poverty in developing nations.

Within the sphere of interpersonal relations and social problems, many indies have concentrated on mental-health issues, *Sea of Solitude* being one example, and others —*Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), *Life is Strange 2* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2018), *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017), or *Celeste* (Maddy Makes Games, 2018)— approach the narrative treatment of social questions that affect a large part of the population yet until recently were taboo in the sector: depression, anxiety, and the effects that loneliness, bullying, and racism can have on adolescents and children. *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016) likewise centers on children; the title recounts the true story of a family's struggle against childhood cancer. The work deals with themes such as loss and hope through the unfolding of the characters' story and stark reality. It confronts players with the problem of medical treatment and the need for adequate healthcare, and it also addresses a deeply human theme —grief and despair— and the lack of support some groups receive when facing the loss of a loved one. *DisAia* (Anthropy, 2012), for its part, focuses on self-acceptance and gender discrimination and how these can affect personal resilience. As with other titles already discussed, it is grounded in the creators' own experiences, making it a highly self-expressive and vindicatory work—almost an example of autobiographical fiction.

The theme of war in certain indie games touches on issues that go well beyond refugees. Such is the case of the struggle to survive in a post-war —indeed, apocalyptic— context after a hypothetical nuclear conflict, as portrayed in *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios, 2014). This indie title focuses on civilians who must scavenge for resources and make drastic decisions to protect their family and stay alive once the fighting has ended. It deals with violence,

loss, despair and the moral complexity involved in life-or-death choices. In a similar vein, *Orwell* (Osmotic Studios, 2016) also presents its activist discourse in a hypothetical, fictional setting. The game builds on a society inspired by the Orwellian dystopia *1984*, and its plot and sub-text explore personal privacy and how crossing certain lines can undermine fundamental rights. *Orwell* criticizes the constant exposure of private life and the harvesting of personal data; although it frames its mechanics within a loose adaptation of George Orwell's novel, it digs deeper into depersonalization and the rise of totalitarian regimes. Another indie that offers an unreal scenario, though rooted in historical events, is *Return to the Obra Dinn* (Pope, 2018). This award-winning title gives players an experience centered on narratives of slavery and the consequences of colonialism through mechanics such as exploration, puzzle-solving and discovery.

There are also other indies that can be seen as artistic statements in declarative form. *Never Alone* (Upper One Games, 2014) lets players guide an Inuit girl from Alaska while she explores the origins, history and cultural traditions of her region. Its activist narrative is aimed at defending cultural identity, preserving history and valuing nature. Finally, *Undertale* (Fox, 2015)—one of the most decorated indies—offers an apology for non-violence and for solving problems through dialogue. Its discourse contains a metanarrative, criticizing real-world violence and, in parallel, the prevalence of violence as a core gameplay mechanic within the video-game industry.

Below, the percentages are summarized for those video games that narrate or are inspired by events (1) concrete real events, (2) non-specific real events, (3) the testimony or lives of real people, (4) contemporary social problems such as racism, for example, (5) political and economic problems such as labor exploitation, for example, and (6) adaptations of literary works that denounced a social problem such as slavery. In this case, social problems are the most common, whereas adaptations of literary works are almost residual.

Concrete real events and occurrences	25%
Non-specific real events	15%
Testimonies of real people	10%
Social problems	40%
Non-specific political and economic problems	5%
Literary works	5%

Table 5. Percentage of the works, situations, or events that inspire the narrative of indie video games with an activist discourse. Source: the authors

Fundamental human rights	335%
Economic issues and labor rights	110%
Historical situations and the defense of culture	55%
Raising awareness about war	55%
Mental-health narratives	115%
Political issues	55%
Social issues	225%

Table 6. Percentage of the themes on which the narrative of indie video games with an activist discourse focuses. Source: the authors

Likewise, the following table summarizes the percentages of the themes on which the discourses and narratives of the video games focus. As can be observed, the result is quite heterogeneous, with 35% standing out for those that center on fundamental human rights such as the right to life or freedom.

4. Discussion

Just as in the 2022 study *Gamification Through Mobile Learning in University Students: A Teaching Innovation Proposal* the authors Aznar-Díaz, Reche, Trujillo-Torres and Romero-Rodríguez demonstrate that learning through gamification elements such

as self-assessment and reinforcement yields benefits and improves academic performance, the ludonarrative variables and the immersive technology proposed by video games can also be considered suitable for didactics and learning around social issues. Activist art “is not merely oppositional, although it is generally critical in one way or another” (Lippard, 2001, p. 344). Artist video games are designed to move the player emotionally and employ advanced gameplay mechanics to create immersion in the experience and achieve greater empathy with the characters and situations presented. For the didactic message to be transmitted, the player’s activism is sought, as in the so-called active education, which seeks “the active participation and involvement of students in their own learning process” (Aznar-Díaz *et al.*, 2022, p. 7).

Thus, the aim is for the player to feel part of the problem and to identify with discrimination, violence or social exclusion. Specifically, as can be seen in Table 5, 40% of the titles are inspired by social problems such as mental-health issues, racism or discrimination, whereas one quarter of the results focus on real events and occurrences. The rest of the categories have a similar representation, although only one title is based on a work of fiction, while the remainder, with greater or lesser specificity, are inspired by real events. Therefore, the activist indie videogame generally tends to be based on real facts, whether historical or current, as well as on real testimonies or situations experienced even by the developers themselves.

On the other hand, in the same vein as Urroz (2020) we consider that, because of its narrative, its capacity to exist online and its features, the video game is a very suitable medium for the public and, specifically, for fostering education and teaching on social issues. Likewise, following Díez (2014), we also believe that it is an optimal medium for denouncing contemporary problems such as gender violence. In this sense, artivism in video games addresses Human Rights in a direct and explicit way, using the medium as denunciation and protest in

defense of equality and justice, and it seeks to raise players' awareness of the importance of respecting Human Rights and the need to take measures to defend them. As can be seen in Table 6, the most represented themes (with 35% and 25% of the cases studied) are fundamental rights (life, freedom and security) and those related to social problems (abuses, racism, intolerance, etc.). By contrast, the defense of culture and war are the least treated themes, it being understood that migration does not always occur because of war.

We therefore consider that these results coincide with the proposals of Vilasís Pamos, Fernández Ruiz and Sora Domejó (2024) regarding how the indie videogame can thrive in the economic and artistic sphere, but also as a driver of social and cultural impacts. This phenomenon is due largely to its transgressing the frontier between leisure product and ascending to the category of artistic work, as authors such as Goodlander & Mansfield (2013), Palavecino (2023) or Freire-Sánchez *et al.* (2025) posit.

5. Conclusions

After analyzing the sample of video games according to the established methodology, we consider that activist video games display a series of common elements that orient them to be regarded as tools for making visible and understanding the complexity of social issues. Firstly, they possess a clear social theme and a concrete message to convey. About the plot, activist video games are based on real events and present rigorous, well-documented information, avoiding falling into misinformation or fake news. They also tend to present well-defined characters from marginalized minorities, which have been historically under-represented in the medium by AA or triple-A video games. The inclusion of these characters in the game's storyline gives voice to those minorities and affords them the opportunity to deliver their message to a wider audience. As in other art forms, activism in video games also resorts

to various techniques to communicate its message, such as music, cinematics, and art direction. The positive emotional and visual effects that these offers when combined can help to create a much deeper connection between the player and the didactic and awareness-raising message that is intended to be transmitted.

Another area of the conclusions concerns the role of players. In activist video games, the gamer has an active participation in the discourse, the plot, and the decisions. In the same way, the gameplay mechanics are effective tools for stimulating reflection and dialogue insofar as they allow the user to participate in the social cause and become involved in a more emotional and subjective manner. The ludonarrative and the gameplay mechanics respond to moral decisions and their consequences and to alternative endings, collectively providing a holistic immersive experience. They propose an innovative gaming experience that emotionally involves users yet is also sufficiently accessible to achieve awareness-raising about Human Rights. Through the interaction and the gameplay experience that mirror real-world situations, players can better understand the problems related to Human Rights and develop greater empathy towards those whose rights are violated.

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that indie video games that meet these characteristics are an optimum medium for defending Human Rights and, although it is important to highlight the budgetary limitations faced by indies, it is noteworthy the impact that these games can have on society in general, some reaching hundreds of thousands of players, making them a highly important medium as an activist tool for social change. Video games are changing; they now form part of a more polyhedral and multicultural dimension in which manifestations concerned with establishing themselves as a didactic medium begin to appear, taking advantage of ludonarrative elements, artistic features, and immersive technologies to bring people closer to social problems and to learning about complex and profound topics.

Finally, we believe that the analytical methodology proposed in this article can open new studies on the didactic and pedagogical message in this digital medium and, indeed, can be expanded to the analysis of other digital media that use game elements to help and educate, such as serious games.

Bibliographic references

- [1] 11 Bit Studios (2014). *This War of Mine* [Video game]. 11 Bit Studios.
- [2] Almacellas, A., Anyó, L., Arnedo, J., Calvo, A., Fernández, M., Fonts, E., Fuentes, M. A., Grau, T., Martínez, K., Martínez, N., Méndez, R., Oceja, J., Pérez, R., Raventós, C., Saumell, A., Villasís-Pamos, J., & Villegas, E. (2023). *Actas del 1r Simposi sobre Investigació a la Indústria Indie del Videojoc (I3V 2023)*. UPCommons. <https://upcommons.upc.edu/handle/2117/397488>
- [3] Alsina, P., & Rodríguez Granell, A. (2015). Art Matters II. *Artnodes*, 16, 34–42.
- [4] Amnistía Internacional (2022). *Rights Arcade* [Video game]. Amnesty International.
- [5] Anthropy, A. (2012). *Dis4ia* [Video game]. Independent.
- [6] Aznar-Díaz, I., Reche, M. P. C., Trujillo-Torres, J. M., & Romero-Rodríguez, J. M. (2022). Gamification through mobile learning in university students: A teaching innovation proposal. In M. Martínez Hita, C. J. Gómez Carasco, & P. Miralles Martínez (Eds.), *Cases on historical thinking and gamification in social studies and humanities education* (pp. 142–157). IGI Global.
- [7] Consalvo, M., & Dutton, N. (2006). Game analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games. *Game Studies*, 6(1).
- [8] Council of Europe (2023). *Compass: Manual for human rights education with young people*. Council of Europe. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass>
- [9] Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- [10] Davies, H. (2022). The revolution will not be gamified: Videogame activism and playful resistance across the Sinophone. *British Journal of Chinese Studies*, 12(2), 76–100. <https://doi.org/10.51661/bjocs.v12i2.200>
- [11] Díez, E. J. (2014). Video games and gender-based violence. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 132, 58–64. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.04.278>
- [12] Dontnod Entertainment (2015). *Life is Strange* [Video game]. Square Enix.
- [13] Dontnod Entertainment (2018). *Life is Strange 2* [Video game]. Square Enix.
- [14] Fernández-Castrillo, C. (2021). La condición transreal: información expandida y hacktivismo en el Media Art. *Artnodes*, 28. <http://doi.org/10.7238/a.v0i28.377879>
- [15] Fox, T. (2015). *Undertale* [Video game]. Toby Fox.
- [16] Freire-Sánchez, A., López-González, J., & Vidal-Mestre, M. (2025). Introducción a la propuesta de análisis interdisciplinar y multimodal de los estilos de arte en el videojuego. *Kepes*, 22(31), 157–184. <https://doi.org/10.17151/kepes.2025.22.31.7>
- [17] Goh, E., Al-Tabbaa, O., & Khan, Z. (2023). Unravelling the complexity of the video game industry: An integrative framework and future research directions. *Telematics and Informatics Reports*, 12(100100). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.teler.2023.100100>
- [18] Goodlander, G., & Mansfield, M. (2013). Press start: Video games in an art museum. *Journal of Interactive Humanities*, 1(1), Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.14448/jih.01.0004>
- [19] Howard, J. (2022). *Quests: Design, theory, and history in games and narratives*. AK Peters/CRC Press.
- [20] Infinite Fall (2017). *Night in the Woods* [Video game]. Finji.
- [21] iNK Studios (2016). *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* [Video game]. iNK Stories.
- [22] Jo-Mei Games (2019). *Sea of Solitude* [Video game]. Electronic Arts.
- [23] Juul, J. (2019). *Handmade pixels: Independent video games and the quest for authenticity*. The MIT Press.
- [24] King, M., Marsh, T., & Akcay, Z. (2021). A review of indie games for serious mental health game design. In *Serious games: Joint international conference* (pp. 138–152). Springer International Publishing.
- [25] Lippard, L. (2001). Caballos de Troya: Arte activista y poder. In B. Wallis (Ed.), *Arte después de la modernidad: Nuevos planteamientos en torno a la representación*. Akal.
- [26] Maddy Makes Games (2018). *Celeste* [Video game]. Maddy Makes Games.
- [27] MakeUseOf (2023). *AAA games vs. indie games: What are the differences?* <https://www.makeuseof.com/aaa-games-vs-indie-games-differences>
- [28] Mantoan, D. (2022). The public artist as a fringe agent for sustainability: Practices of environmentalist driven art-activism and their digital perspectives. In A. Schwan & T. Thomson (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of digital and public humanities*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [29] Martín-Núñez, M., & Navarro-Remesal, V. (2021). La complejidad narrativa en los videojuegos: Un doble boomerang. *L'Atalante*, 31, 7–30. <https://doi.org/10.63700/902>
- [30] Minority (2012). *Papo & Yo* [Video game]. Minority Media Inc.
- [31] Molleindustria (2011). *Phone Story* [Video game]. Molleindustria.

- [32] MTV (2006). *Darfur is Dying* [Video game]. MTV Networks.
- [33] Numinous Games (2016). *That Dragon, Cancer* [Video game]. Numinous Games.
- [34] Osmotic Studios (2016). *Orwell* [Video game]. Surprise Attack.
- [35] Palavecino, L. (2023). Juegos, videojuegos y artes: Historia, conceptos y redefiniciones en la relación entre los universos lúdicos y las prácticas artísticas contemporáneas. *Jangwa Pana*, 22(1), 91–102. <https://doi.org/10.21676/16574923.4885>
- [36] Pereira, L. S. (2025). The elusive “indieness”: Measuring the defining characteristics of indie games. *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, 14(23). <https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/315>
- [37] Pérez Latorre, Ó. (2023). *Imaginario ludonarrativo: Análisis intertextual de juegos, videojuegos y ficción audiovisual*. Ludografías - Shangrila.
- [38] Playdead (2010). *Limbo* [Video game]. Playdead.
- [39] Pope, L. (2013). *Papers, Please* [Video game]. 3909 LLC.
- [40] Pope, L. (2018). *Return to the Obra Dinn* [Video game]. 3909 LLC.
- [41] RocketBrush Studio (2023). *AAA, AA, indie games: Different routes in game development*. <https://www.rocketbrush.com/blog/aaa-aa-indie-games-different-routes-in-game-development>
- [42] Schöffl, R. (2022). UNHCR video game lets pupils experience a refugee’s perilous journey. *The UN Refugee Agency*. <https://bit.ly/3N5f91g>
- [43] Taesiri, M. R., Macklon, F., & Bezemer, C. P. (2022). Clip meets gamephysics: Towards bug identification in gameplay videos using zero-shot transfer learning. In *Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on Mining Software Repositories* (pp. 270–281). <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2203.11096>
- [44] Thatgamecompany (2012). *Journey* [Video game]. Sony Computer Entertainment.
- [45] Ubisoft (2014). *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* [Video game]. Ubisoft.
- [46] UNHCR (2017). *Finding Home* [Video game]. UNHCR.
- [47] UNHCR (2022). *Patch Out* [Video game]. UNHCR.
- [48] United Nations (2023). *The 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. <http://bit.ly/3GkipCf>
- [49] Upper One Games (2014). *Never Alone* [Video game]. E-Line Media.
- [50] Urroz, A. (2020). Art games: Acción lúdica reflexiva. *Arte Creación*, 8(1), 4–19. <https://doi.org/10.17583/brac.2020.3084>
- [51] Vidal-Mestre, M., & Freire Sánchez, A. (2022). XIII. Creadora, antiheroína y gamer: El triple rol de las nativas digitales en la industria del videojuego y sus redes sociales. In J. L. del Olmo Arriaga, C. Ruiz Viñals, & M. Vázquez Martínez (Coords.), *La mujer y redes sociales* (pp. 249–276). Eunsa.
- [52] Vilasís Pamos, J., Fernández Ruiz, M., & Sora Domejó, C. (2024). *El sector del videojoc indie a Catalunya: Anàlisi d’un ecosistema en creixement i amb projecció internacional*. CITM-UPC; Generalitat de Catalunya, Departament de Cultura.
- [53] Villegas, E., Fonseca, D., Peña, E., Bonet, P., & Fernández-Guinea, S. (2021). Qualitative assessment of effective gamification design processes using motivators to identify game mechanics. *Sensors*, 21(8), 2556. <https://doi.org/10.3390/s21082556>
- [54] Wolf, M., & Perron, B. (2003). *The video game theory reader*. Routledge.
- [55] Yacht Club Games (2014). *Shovel Knight* [Video game]. Yacht Club Games.

Bio

Montserrat Vidal-Mestre holds a PhD in Communication Sciences, a Master’s degree in Corporate and Institutional Communication Management, and a Master’s degree in Audiovisual Postproduction. She also holds a Bachelor’s degree in Political and Administrative Sciences. She is accredited as Profesor Titular by ANECA and Profesor Agregat by AQU (equivalent to Reader), and has one recognized six-year research period (sexenio). She is currently a lecturer and researcher at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) and has previously taught at the International University of Catalonia (UIC), the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), and the University of Barcelona (UB). Her research focuses on communication and audiovisual narratives.

Alfonso Freire-Sánchez holds a PhD in Communication Sciences from Abat Oliba, CEU Universities. He received the Best Scientific Article Award at the 2nd FlixOlé–URJC Awards for Research in Spanish Cinema and the Ángel Herrera Award for Outstanding Teaching (2013–2014). He is

accredited by ANECA as Profesor Titular and by AQU as Profesor Agregat (equivalent to Reader), and has one recognized six-year research period (sexenio). From 2018 to 2022 he was a member of the research team of the R&D&I project “Making Pain Visible: Visual Narratives of Illness and Trans-

media Storytelling” (VISIBILIZÁNDOLO). He is currently Director of the Advertising and Public Relations Degree at Abat Oliba, CEU Universities. His research focuses on mental health narratives in the creative industries, audiovisual imaginaries, and narratology.

Artigo recebido em 2025-09-30

Artigo aceite em 2026-01-13

Artigo publicado em 2026-02-23

© 2026 Montserrat Vidal-Mestre, Alfonso Freire-Sánchez

Vidal-Mestre, M., & Freire-Sánchez, A. (2026). Artivism and Human Rights visibility through ludonarrative and immersive mechanics in indie video games. *Rotura – Revista de Comunicação, Cultura e Artes*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2026.v6i1.510>

© This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)