Playing Protest:
An Online Game for Teaching Social Movements/Collective Action

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Analyzing protest is important for understanding society. A brief tour of current events in the media supports this proposition. However, teaching about this topic is challenging and becoming more so. Like many social phenomena we discuss, students have not experienced them directly. The ongoing pandemic makes this more difficult. This spring, most colleges abruptly shifted from in-class to online instruction, a reality we must adjust to.

Given this obstacle, the goal of this article is to briefly overview and discuss an online game we have developed to teach about social movements and collective action. Our game is anchored in the history and analysis of protest in the United States, especially the post-WWII period. However, the game is adaptable to a variety of international and historical contexts. We further focus on nonviolent protest. Protestors typically choose nonviolent tactics and, within capitalist democracies, the police usually respond with nonviolent methods of control.

We begin by theoretically anchoring our simulation in game theory using Dennis Chong's book, Collective Action, and the Civil Rights Movement (1991). He considers solutions to the collective action "dilemma" in the production of problem goods. Chong applies this approach to the nonviolent strategy of the civil rights movement and its tactical choices. He views this as a strategic interaction between protestors and police defined as a "public relations" game. The key choice for each actor is whether to engage in nonviolent or violent collective action.

This framework is useful for several reasons. The game is active and participatory. Students are able to role play as one of two actors and see the world from their perspective. This includes assessing their internal constitution and surveying the external environment. The game focuses on decision-making, which is the raison d'etre of individual and social actors. Students can use their fellow protestors or police officers and the actions of their opponents to evaluate the costs and benefits of their collective action choice. Further, the game incorporates two helpful features. It allows the actors to communicate with each other through a chat function. The game also enables the protestors and police to interact over an extended period through repeated play.

What follows is a quick game overview. Prior to play, students are assigned to the role of protestors or police. Playing the game assumes students have a smartphone, tablet, laptop, or desktop computer to use, and internet access is available. The professor then asks the students to access the game online, giving them a URL.

Two types of information are provided before play begins. One is the historical context for the game. Currently, we are using Hong Kong as our backdrop. The professor can adapt the case study to his/her educational goals. Background and information can easily be moved in and out of the game. Another is the game instructions. Upon login using an email address as an identifier, their role is revealed. They are told what the objective of their player is and the choice they need to make. The former means they are opposing or supporting a particular policy proposal. The latter both involve acting and reacting nonviolently or violently. The choices are aggregated from individual selections, and the most popular one is assigned to the player. There is a scoreboard on the game dashboard identifying the accumulated points for each side.

Play is sequential with the protestors acting first and the police reacting second. As we discussed, players can use the chat function to signal and speak to their fellow players and opponents. Once the final round is played, the final score is displayed with a win, lose, or draw as outcome possibilities. A prize of some sort can be attached to play to incentivize commitment to the game.

Following the game, play can be debriefed in a number of ways. So far, we have focused on three questions of interest. First, why do protesters engage in nonviolent protest? This is a high-cost activity given, if it proceeds predictably, police will eventually target protesters with violence, including beatings, tear gas, and arrests (see McAdam, 1986). Second, why is nonviolent protest effective? An emerging consensus is that non-violence is preferable to violence related to a range of social movement outcomes (see Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). Third, what happens when nonviolent protest becomes violent? This is perhaps the most important and more complicated question (see McAdam and Tarrow, 2000).

So far, we believe there are three significant upsides to our game. The first is flexibility. While our original and primary intent was to teach protest, the game can be adapted to different purposes and scenarios. The game's built-in feedback mechanism is helpful as well. Given the importance of assessment, the post-game survey allows for immediate feedback. The third advantage is engagement. The authors, one professor and one student are acutely aware of the shift from in-class to online education. This is a short-term reality and perhaps a long-term trend. This game is useful adaptation to these developments.

References

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