

Game Lexicon and Gamification in the Hong Kong Protest

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INTRODUCTION

In the early June 2019, the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement in Hong Kong has begun with a peaceful million-strong protest march. The major aim of this movement is to make the government redraw the extradition bill which would allow the Hong Kong government to extradite local suspects to Mainland China. Because the legislative council of Hong Kong is largely indirectly elected, the bill is expected to pass despite it is against by the majority (Project Citizens 2019). As the original demand was not being answered after the rally, the protesters have soon expanded the demand to five which including universal suffrage and an inquiry into police misconduct.

Since then, the forces using by the police have been intensified while mobs under unclear leadership have also stepped in and attacking protesters as well as civilians. Under these circumstances, the actions of the protesters have also gradually become more and more radical. Specific public and private properties have been targeted for vandalization as they are being accused of supporting the mobs and/or the Mainland government. Molotov cocktails became common during the confrontations as the police also firing thousands of rubber-bullets, tear-gases and other “less-lethal” bullets on the streets and college campus.

However, this paper would focus on the less graphic but the equally intense online environment. As this movement has often being described as “leaderless” (Ag 2019), online platform such as Facebook, Telegram, and the LIHKG forum (a Hong Kong equivalent of reddit) are being the major platforms of co-organizing and spreading the news of the protest.

Most often, the issues of this movement are being discussed in these platforms with normal language, but wordplays and semantic changes of terms are also observed. One of the most significance phenomenon is the use of computer game vocabulary, jargon and slang during the discussion. The superficial cause of this is to avoid the legal liability when talking about and/or suggesting radical tactics. A court injunction has been released on 31 October 2019 barring online comments that incite violence on LIHKG forum and Telegram. Because of that, for examples, some users in LIHKG would use the term “Hong City Online” instead of “Hong Kong” to show that they are just talking about game strategies rather than something real. Terms like fire-magic and its performer – fire magician are often seen when users are discussing some Molotov-related tactics.

However, this paper would argue that the use of gaming phrases for protesters is more than a steganography. On the other hand, there is nothing new for a group of people re-

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appropriating a set of language into their own context for daily use (Gagné 2008). Most of the subcultures are developed along with their own lexicon and they are quite often borrowed from other origins. The subculture theory may be able to explain the use of language in online forum during initial stage of this movement, as demographic background of frequent forum users and gamers are often overlapping, and they also share a similar lexicon during online discussion.

However, as the protest accelerates, people from different walks of life are joining the online forum to discuss and express their opinions and proposing new tactics. This phenomenon also spread from the reddit-like LIHKG to Facebook and local WhatsApp/Telegram groups which have a wider user demographic.

Thus, the idea of gamification would be needed to explain this online phenomenon and its outcomes in the physical world (Sailer et al. 2017). The ultimate goals of the Hong Kong protest are the five demands mentioned above but so far, only the first one (withdrawal of the bill) has been met after more than six months of protest. A single night of hostile confrontation won't achieve immediate success but only aims to build up accumulating pressure against the government. Thus, the online forums/applications seem to serve as a platform for discussing the goals and ethnics for an expected night or day of confrontation (or a "side mission" as they call it, while the five demands are the "main mission"). For examples, the terms "beheaded" is often used to describe the arrested protesters, although serious injuries happen and mysterious death are frequently reported, there are no solid evidences of protesters being killed on the streets and many of them are bailed out after arrest. Still, the phrases "no beheaded" is used when discussing tactics to avoid arresting, this also become a goal and points for evaluating the successfulness after a night of confrontation/mission.

Moreover, a set of color code (Black, Red, Blue and Yellow) has been established to identify which properties should be targeted or protected and if targeted, what level of damage should be done on them. If a supposed to be protected or neutral property being damaged, the mission on that night may be considered as partial-failure by the online forum users.

Beside the online forum, most of the radical protesters are communicating with each other through small group in Telegram about their actual actions (rather than abstract strategy) because the online forum is open to everyone. Game phrases like LFG (Looking for Group) are used and not only as analogies since the ecology of multi-small teams during the whole protest and individual confrontations/missions do share many similarities with online game environment.

By looking at the game vocabulary being used in the Hong Kong Protest, this paper suggested that the use of these terms is not only a steganography to avoid liability, it is also not sufficient to claim such phenomenon as just a development of subculture. Ideas from gamification would be needed to explain the on-going development between the use of gaming language, the online environment and the physical protest.

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