

# Democratic Characteristics in Government Simulation Video Games

*Características democráticas en videojuegos de simulación de gobierno*

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ARTICLE



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## Abstract

This paper analyses nine videogames centered on managing a political community by studying the democratic characteristics present in the relationship between the player and the virtual citizens. The political communities of the games are sometimes presented as homogeneous and structured around the leader. In other cases, they appear as plural and unsubmitive. The games show diverse mechanisms of informal citizen counterpower, but the conflict may be presented as political and legitimate, or as a productivity or crime problem. Finally, we note important deficits on the dimensions of deliberation and decision-making participation. Based on these, some alternative mechanics are proposed.

## KEYWORDS

Videogames, Democracy, Government simulators.

## Resumen

Este artículo analiza nueve videojuegos de gestión de una comunidad política, estudiando las características democráticas presentes en la relación entre el jugador y los ciudadanos virtuales. Las comunidades políticas de los juegos se presentan en ocasiones como homogéneas y estructuradas en torno al líder, y en otras, como plurales y contestatarias. Los juegos muestran diversos mecanismos de contrapoder ciudadano informal, pero el conflicto puede presentarse como político y legítimo, o enmarcarse en un problema de productividad

o criminalidad. Finalmente, se observan importantes déficits en las dimensiones de deliberación y participación en la toma de decisiones, para lo cual se proponen algunas mecánicas alternativas.

## **PALABRAS CLAVE**

Videojuegos, Democracia, Simuladores de gobierno.

## **Resumo**

Este artigo analisa nove videogames de gestão de uma comunidade política, estudando as características democráticas presentes na relação entre o jogador e os cidadãos virtuais. As

comunidades políticas dos jogos se apresentam ora como homogêneas e estruturadas em torno do líder, ora como plurais e rebeldes. Os jogos mostram diversos mecanismos de contrapoder do cidadão informal, mas o conflito pode ser apresentado como político e legítimo, ou enquadrado em um problema de produtividade ou criminalidade. Por fim, observam-se déficits significativos nas dimensões de deliberação e participação na tomada de decisões, para os quais se propõem algumas mecânicas alternativas.

## **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Videogames, Democracia, Simuladores de governo.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the introduction to his doctoral thesis dedicated to videoludic analysis, Pérez Latorre (2010) resorts to the approach of Brian McHale (1987) in which he defends that science fiction is the fundamental genre of postmodernity. It is, he argues, because science fiction focuses on exploring a new world, with its own entities and rules, rather than following the adventures of characters. Like science fiction, video games contain this double narrative dimension, in which understanding the video game world represents a fundamental part of the gaming experience. These worlds, at the same time, are impressive conglomerates of ideological content, which tell us about our reality and shape it through fictional realities.

Government simulators are video games in which players take control of a political community and manage its development, usually making relevant political decisions. Like science fiction, they present “possible worlds” (Planells, 2015), and simulate complex political systems, which sometimes seek to resemble our contemporary systems, as in *Democracy 3* (Positech Games, 2013). In other cases, they are set in fantasy or science fiction settings, managing non-human political communities, such as societies of peaceful dragons in *Endless Legend* (Amplitude Studios, 2014). In one case or another, they offer representations of politics and the role of citizens in the community and can offer alternative imaginaries regarding how we should organize and live. Playing these games is a democratic practice, in the sense of an essay, a particular political learning that must consider the designed content of the game, the interaction and the emotions and ideas aroused in the players.

In this article, we will carry out a content analysis of nine government simulation video games with the aim of exploring the representations they offer of their virtual political systems and studying what relationship these have with concepts that have traditionally been associated with democracy.

Our idea of democracy comes from a long historical tradition of political concepts, institutions and regimes, a conglomerate of ideas that are often contradictory to each other, but which circulate together in our popular imagination. It is one of those “floating signifiers” (Laclau, 2016), which various actors seek to appropriate. They do so, on the other hand, because the idea of democracy provides legitimacy. In Spain, in 2021, almost 80% of Spaniards considered that democracy was “preferable to any other form of government” (Center for Sociological Research, 2021). In that sense, to affirm that something is, or is not democratic, is a powerful argument.

At the same time, our contemporary societies are experiencing a certain crisis or degradation of their democratic institutions. The idea of “political disaffection”, a loss of trust towards institutions and in particular towards parties, has been around for decades (Mair, 2015) but it can

be increased with new worrying dynamics, such as the emergence of authoritarian movements and parties or the growing spread of fake news (the latter contribute to building radically different worldviews, in which there are no common truths to debate, which leads to insoluble conflicts).

This situation invites a collective reflection on our institutions, of which video games can be a part, and this article seeks to be a modest contribution. As we will see, many of the analyzed video games do not seek to represent democratic political systems, but they can incorporate present and characteristic elements of a democracy. We start then from a notion of democracy not as a pure political regime, but as a conglomeration of characteristics that may be present in various regimes. In the following pages we will present some characteristics of what has been considered democracy throughout history and that we will look for in the political systems present in the analyzed video games. However, we will present the theoretical inspirations of this work from the perspective of *game studies*.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 GAME STUDIES AND GOVERNMENT SIMULATORS

Research on the political content of video games makes sense by assuming that they influence the ideas and worldviews of their players. Sociology has long worked on the idea that cultural products contribute to shaping our representation of the world and game studies have pointed out some peculiarities of video games (such as interaction or the ability to build worlds with their own rules) that potentially reinforce their social and political impact (Bogost, 2007). Some studies (Imhoff et al., 2021; Barthel, 2013) have wanted to evaluate with specific measurements the political learning of players after playing certain video games through experimental studies or surveys with modest but positive results. Certain learnings were recorded with sufficient levels of statistical validity, but it is likely that many of these learnings are not clearly conscious or are developed more through continuous play than in a temporally limited experimental study. Sociocultural analysis, of which videogames are a part, moves in a swampy terrain, with clear indicators of its importance and of the political effects of culture, but with an evident difficulty in clearly measuring them in a society where cultural consumption is extremely varied and plural.

Although video game content studies have generally focused on political criticism (Pobłocki, 2002; Zamaróczy, 2017, among others), more recent game studies have begun to pay attention to video games as instruments for promoting civic and ethical values. The literature on

ethics and video games has disproved some myths about sadistic players, showing that they habitually put moral behaviors into play (Schrier, 2016) and pointing out components that the design of a game can take into account to generate ethical reflections (Schrier, 2015, Zagal, 2011, Simkins, 2008). Others have pointed out how some video games can help promote civic values (Dishon & Kafai, 2019) or reflect on public administration (Exmeyer & Boden, 2020). In a more critical line, the *Gamevironments* magazine published an issue in 2020 focused on the relationship between democracy and video games. This leads us to think that the way in which government simulators involve players in the management of a state and in interaction with virtual citizens could both reinforce authoritarian ideas about social reality and encourage civic and pro-democratic behavior, inside and outside the video game.

On the other hand, although government simulators are rarely treated as a genre, there are multiple comparative or individual game analyzes that highlight and criticize their political characteristics (McNeil, 2016, Pobłocki, 2002; Shields, 2009). The specific issues that the authors highlight are varied: imperialism and colonialism (Douglas, 2002, Ford, 2016, Oliva et al., 2009), ecocidal developmentalism (Evans-Thirlwell, 2021) or international relations (Zamaróczy, 2017), among others. A few, however, focus on characteristics directly related to the organization of the political system and the interactions between citizens and state power. Planells (2015), for example, suggests that *Tropico* is an interesting representation of political pluralism, where citizens organize themselves into ideological groups (environmentalists, ca-

pitalists...) with different interests and “ideal worlds”. In this way, both the homogeneity or pluralism of the political community represented and the ability of citizens to bet on certain public policies are highlighted. Regarding the same game, Shields (2009) talks about the organization of a certain “social contract” between player and citizens that arises from the ability of the latter to boycott their government. For his part, Dolkemeyer (2020) presents a more aesthetic analysis for *Frostpunk*, in which he suggests that there are mechanisms, not present in other games, by which the player feels within the political community, thus potentially maximizing the empathic component.

## 2.2 HISTORICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF DEMOCRACY

Our conception of democracy is the product of millennia of political experimentation, institutions, and concepts. More than talking about “democracy”, it makes sense to talk about the “characteristics of democracy”, aspects that at one time or another have been part of its political history. These characteristics will be the elements that we will look for in the games, with which we will briefly explain how they have operated throughout history.

### • Participation in decision-making

Traditionally, classical Athens is considered the first democracy (although there are previous experiences). For Josiah Ober (2018, pp. 57-76), the fundamental element of Athenian democracy was found in the access of ordinary citizens to positions of power and decision-making, either through the assembly (open to every citizen) or the institutions chosen by lottery (such as the popular courts or the *boulé*). Deci-

sion-making by the people was the constitutive element of Greek democracy, but it has mostly disappeared in other regimes considered democratic, where the popular selection of leaders has been imposed so that they are the ones who make the decisions.

### • Public deliberation and collective interests

Another significant aspect of classical Athens was the importance given to deliberation, a mechanism that brought into play and trained civic virtue, which was present in all citizens (Plato, 2013). Deliberation has found its space in all democratic political regimes, but with different approaches. Although in Athens, or in what has come to be called the republican tradition, deliberation had to do with civic virtue and collective interests, for the liberals it has to do with negotiating between different interests in search of a solution that satisfy the majority. Deliberation has lost political weight since the first democratic experiences, but in recent decades the school of thought of deliberative democracy, particularly defended by Habermas (1998), has advocated recovering it together with greater popular participation in decision-making. Some experiences of deliberative democracy have been launched through the selection of a small number of citizens by lottery for the elaboration of complex proposals (such as a new electoral legislation in Canada), with encouraging results (Lang, 2007).

### • Representation and selection of leaders

Although representation was already present in Athens (through a few elective posts, but above all through lottery and the idea of the assembly as a “the polis gathered”), it has been the cornerstone of liberal democracies, which rejected lottery in favor of the election

for two fundamental reasons: to select leaders considered “better” than their representatives (instead of “equal”), and to understand political legitimacy not as a product of participation in decision-making, but as a product of consent (Manin, 1998, pp. 103-118). Thus, our representative democracies are based on the selection of political representatives and leaders, in what Schumpeter (1971) described as a selection process of competitive elites.

- **Counterpower and separation of powers**

On the other hand, both in liberalism and in the republican tradition, counterpower mechanisms have been privileged to avoid tyranny. For the most part, these mechanisms have been institutional, such as the division of powers or legal limitations. But, throughout history, non-institutionalized citizen counterpowers (protests, boycotts, strikes) have also developed in all kinds of regimes.

Finally, some other features will be part of our analysis. Several authors have defended a certain level of economic equality as an attribute of democracy, insofar as it ensures citizen rights and a better distribution of power in society (Tusell Collado, 2015, pp. 183-184). On the other hand, political theory has discussed a lot regarding the characteristics that a political community should have in terms of social homogeneity or pluralism. Liberals have always defended their idea of community as an association of individuals, while authors like Schmitt have opted for less instrumental articulations (Schmitt, 1998).

### 3. METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE SELECTION

The sample is made up of nine government simulators: *Pharaoh* (1999), *Imperivm Civitas III* (2009), *Civilization V* (2010), *Tropico 4* (2011), *Democracy 3* (2013), *Endless Legend* (2014), *Frostpunk* (2018), *Surviving Mars* (2018), and *Surviving The Aftermath* (2020)<sup>1</sup>. These are relatively popular simulators, with significant sales numbers compared to other games of the same genre and with a temporary distribution that, prioritizing the most modern games, includes some old works. At the same time, most of these are city-building games, but two of them (*Civilization* and *Endless Legend*) are considered 4X (an acronym for *Explore, Expand, Exploit, Exterminate*; empire-building and quest for supremacy games). Finally, *Democracy* simulates public policy decision-making in a modern nation state.

From a methodological perspective, multiple analysis models have been proposed when studying video games, considering their particularities with respect to other cultural objects (Pérez Latorre, 2010; Navarro, 2016), and we rely on them. Our understanding of the player who occupies the position of the State is nourished by a semiotic perspective, similar to the one proposed by Pérez Latorre (2010), but the analysis is framed in what we could define as a systemic or ludic analysis. This is because we want to focus on the internal workings of the political system, understood as a designed set of institutions, actors, and rules of the game (institutional and non-institutional). We want to know who makes the decisions, how and throu-

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<sup>1</sup> Below, these games will be cited without detailing the year or the particular installment (*Imperivm Civitas* instead of *Imperivm Civitas III*), to facilitate reading and because the conclusions are normally applicable to the saga as a whole.

gh what processes. The narrative aspects are essential to understand how these rules are presented and to intuit the vision that the players could have of them, but that analysis will be reserved for another occasion.

The analysis of the political system focuses on four axes:

- Citizen action competencies and their activation rules (Pérez Latorre, 2010, p. 120). What they can do, how and why they do it (representing the power of citizens and their repertoires of collective action).
- The acting powers of the player (which in this case represents the power of the ruler and the State).
- The characteristics of the political community, such as the social composition of the citizens or the distribution of resources.
- The objectives of the game.

The analysis of these elements will be organized in three sections from the point of view of political theory: the characteristics of the political community, the citizen counterpower systems, and the dimensions of deliberation and direct participation in decision-making.

## 4. GAME ANALYSIS

### 4.1 FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POLITICAL COMMUNITY

The virtual political communities of the analyzed games present a set of characteristics related to their basic political configuration, what we could call their character. These seem to move in a line with two ideal types at the ends. On the

one hand, we find organic communities with strong social homogeneity, a natural leader and a kind of manifest destiny expressed in the objectives of the game (like *Endless Legend*). On the other, heterogeneous communities in which citizens have diverse interests and leadership is more often questioned. In general terms, the games that present totally fictitious communities are more similar to the first model, while those that propose supposedly reliable historical representations (*Imperivm Civitas*), or relatively modern ones are closer to the second.

Although the popular selection of leaders has been considered a fundamental element of modern democracies, in government simulators the game begins with the player already in the position of leader-state. However, the type of leadership that is presented is variable. In *Civilization*, for example, the leader is presented as a personification of the character of the community, so that both are confused. He is also an immortal, eternal leader, present during the approximately 6,000 years of game, a videoludic fiction that presents us with a model of political community with Schmittian overtones (Schmitt, 1998). In less radical cases, the leader is the founder of the community (as in *Surviving The Aftermath*) which gives him a certain “manifest destiny” sometimes related to survival in a dangerous world. In others, the leader directs the community, but uses it with a certain patrimonial logic, as in *Imperivm Civitas*, where the foundation of cities has as its objective the growth of the family's influence. Finally, *Tropico* and *Democracy* stand out because their leaderships are the most disputed: they must stand for competitive elections, and they will lose the game if they do not win them.



That line between organization and plurality seems to be represented in the objectives as well. In *Endless Legend*, for example, there are “faction” missions, related to the cultural character of each of the playable fantasy races. In *Civilization*, a certain natural will in humanity is assumed to lead its people “to the glory” (which normally comes to mean supremacy). At the other extreme are *Tropico* and *Democracy*, where the goals of the players are largely undetermined (although there are formal goals, very different public policies with an impact on the community can be chosen) and where citizens have their own different goals. Both games are based on faction systems, where citizens belong to certain ideological groups and want different policies and forms of society (Planells, 2015).

That element makes *Tropico* and *Democracy* the games with the highest level of social heterogeneity. Perhaps it is also worth mentioning *Imperivm Civitas*, where the community is necessarily divided into social classes, which have different interests regarding the type of goods and services they want. These three games are also the ones with the highest levels of economic differences, although the first two can reduce them through a redistribution policy. In the others, the interests, and ideological approaches of the members of the community are very similar or, at least, society always expresses itself as a unified and organic whole. The latter is interesting, for example, in *Frostpunk*. Here, the game features discussions among citizens regarding the player’s policies, but the public opinion is reflected and unified in the community’s indicators of discontent and hope, and when the player is expelled, there is never a civil conflict, but an act of the community. Even if we think that it

is a decision of the majority, the community is presented as a unified whole through that decision.

On the other hand, there are some functionalist social divisions (such as the specialists in *Civilization*, or the biologists or geologists in *Surviving Mars*), but these rarely include ideological differences or differences in the redistribution of resources. For example, in *Endless Legend* or *Civilization*, we never find any kind of hoarding of resources. In *Pharaoh*, access to these does not depend on whether the citizens can pay for them, but on whether their home is in a provision zone. The citizens, in fact, use their money only to pay taxes but they leave the city if these are too high.

Thus, a first approach to the type of political communities offers us various models. We find ourselves with strongly structured communities, with natural leaders and a collective character reflected in their objectives. Also, we find instrumental communities, founded by the leaders but used according to their own objectives, and in which citizens usually arrive or leave the city depending on its attractiveness and the living conditions it offers, as if it were a monetary exchange. Finally, there are also some plural, heterogeneous communities, more similar to our modern vision of society. Although each game tends to be closer to one or the other, these are ideal types, and it is possible that each game contains characteristics of others.

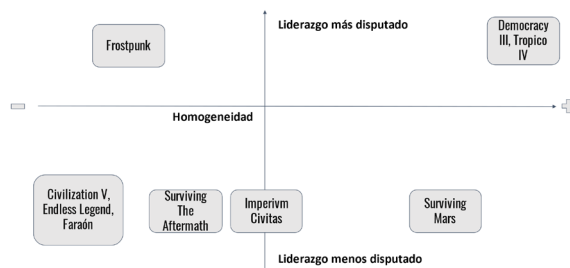
The following diagram seeks to visually show the characteristics of the games analyzed based on two of the proposed dimensions. The level at which the player’s leadership is disputed and social homogeneity, referring to the si-



milarity of citizens among themselves in terms of interests and actions, accompanied by a similar distribution of resources. Given that each game has unique characteristics that are difficult to compare with each other, the positions of the games should not be taken strictly, but rather indicative of general trends.

**Figure 1**

*Distribution diagram of the games by social homogeneity and disputed leadership*



## 4.2 CONTROL AND COUNTER-POWER

All historical political systems that have been considered democracies have incorporated a legal and institutional dimension, a set of rules of the game that defined what could be done and how. Legal procedures, in fact, have often been considered counterweights against the claims of powerful actors, with the factual capacity to do things that the laws do not allow them.

Government simulators, however, hardly incorporate legal mechanisms that regulate the functioning of political life. It is true that games have their own “laws” that regulate their world, but these, even when they are social, are more like physical ones: they define what can or cannot be done in an absolute way and not just formally. Institutional actors external to the player are extremely rare: there are no judges or parliaments, but only figures like the “advisors” in *Civilization* (without any real power) or the ministers in *Democracy*, who never make decisions on their own, but put their political capital at the service of the players. Only in cases like *Tropico* can illegalities be committed (such as assassinating a political rival), but even there you will not find opposition from institutional actors, but from the citizens themselves.

In a context of general absence of institutions, rules of the game and leadership selection processes, citizen opposition becomes the fundamental element of counterpower in the games analyzed, and this is in turn the most developed democratic component among those studied.

As for the liberals, who understood popular control more as a system of incentives than obligations (Manin, 1998, pp. 201-206), government simulators abound with mechanisms by which popular discontent has negative implications for the player. In very few occasions, it forces the player to make certain decisions.

Games vary in terms of the power of citizen control: in some cases, they can remove the player from power and make him lose the game (*Democracy*, *Frostpunk*...), while in others the effect of discontent is less, such as the fact that some citizens leave the city (*Pharaoh*). The intensity of the control usually comes from the hand of another relevant difference, related to the conception of the conflict that arises. In this sense, five ways of conceiving the effects of discontent are presented.:

- **Discontent as a productivity problem.**

In these cases, citizen discontent does not generate any political response per se, but it has pernicious effects on the political community and represents an obstacle to the player's victory by generating a problem of inefficiency. In the *Pharaoh* city builder, part of the population will leave the city if they lose access to goods or services, which hinders growth and the development of economies of scale. In *Civilization*, the unhappiness of the population decreases its growth and makes the soldiers fight worse, and in *Endless Legend* productivity is affected.

- **Discontent as a crime problem.** In some games, like *Surviving The Aftermath* or *Imperium Civitas*, discontent causes some citizens to turn criminal and steal food or burn down buildings, respectively.

- **Discontent as a business management problem.** This framework doesn't have the presence and consistency of the other four,

but finds some expression in *Surviving Mars*, a Mars colony-building game. Before well-being, the inhabitants of the neighborhood are provided with "comfort" through the provision of services. At the same time, tourists regularly visit the colony and rate their satisfaction with the experience of returning to Earth. In this way, a business management of discontent is adopted, where political incentives acquire the characteristics and logic of the private management of services, and citizens become clients.

- **Discontent as political anger.** In this case, the discontent generates a properly political malaise against the government and its policies and is expressed in the will to expel it from power, but it is not built on concrete alternative political proposals. This is the case of *Frostpunk*.

- **Discontent as a political alternative.** In both *Tropico* and *Democracy 3*, the citizens who express their discontent have clear political preferences alternative to those of the player (such as less or more defense of the environment or investment in social policies). Contrary to the previous cases, discontent does not arise only from poor living conditions, but also from political disagreement.

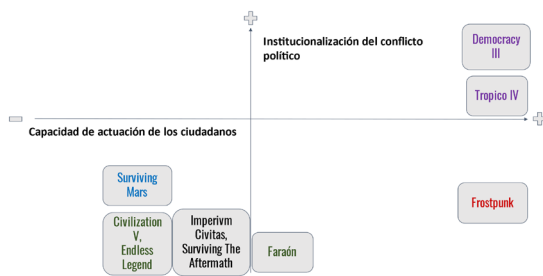
These are ideal types, so each game can combine various perspectives, although they usually don't. In the last two types, discontent is presented as a political problem, and not merely a technical one, but it is the fifth that clearly

provides greater agency to the citizenry, whose preferences are close to the same cognitive level as those of the player. The first three, on the other hand, are closer to the idea of politics as technocracy, where efficiency in pursuing the goals of the game replaces politics itself.

The following diagram summarizes the approximate position of the games based on three dimensions: the power of citizens to set the player's political agenda (on the horizontal line), the institutionalization of political conflict, through, for example, regulated elections (on the vertical line) and the framing of the conflict, which can be seen in the colors of each game (productivity in green, crime in black, business management in blue, discontent as political anger in red and discontent as political alternative in purple). As we mentioned, we can observe correlations between the framing of the conflict and the power of citizens, as well as between institutionalization and citizen power.

**Figure 2**

*Distribution diagram of the games by the ability of citizens to act, institutionalization of the political conflict and framing of the political conflict*



## 4.1 DELIBERATION AND PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING

Deliberation has been a fundamental aspect of the decision-making process among various democratic traditions, whether understood as a process of training and putting into practice civic virtue to achieve collective wisdom, or as a process of negotiation between factions that allows reaching a solution satisfactory to the majority (the latter is the case for liberals (Manin, 1998)). Although deliberation today seems rather formal at the parliamentary level, it occupies a relevant role in decision-making in the formation of the so-called "public opinion". In our complex democracies, deliberation and the formation of public opinion take place through the mediation of a multitude of actors with different functions and powers, from individuals and public figures to social movements, organizations, parties, and media. As a result, we find a society with a dynamic public opinion, in which various issues enter and leave the public agenda and the perceptions of citizens and other actors change over time. It also offers what is, a priori, the main incentive for political activity, which is the ability to present ideas and projects for society and convince the necessary actors to implement them. Deliberation also functions as a counterpower mechanism, which is why authoritarian regimes often want to limit it.

Deliberation is, however, a fundamental absence of government simulators. In games, citizens react to the situations in which they or the community find themselves (for example, their happiness in *Civilization* or the economy in *Democracy*), or to the decisions made by the player (unanimous or heterogeneous), but these reactions are predetermined and programmed, they are never debated or changed by being convinced of something.

Sometimes the deliberation is presented briefly in a narrative way, as in *Frostpunk*, when, after enacting a law, various opinions of the citizens regarding it show up, but without any mechanical effect. Similarly, in the speech in *Tropico*, the player wins votes for the elections through promises but does not convince anyone to change their ideological position. At the same time, in *Democracy*, citizens can change their minds on a particular issue if their social situation changes (for example, if a driver stops driving, he or she will no longer have a problem with fuel tax increases), but never as an effect of a deliberative process; on the contrary, as a consequence of a change of objective interests. In this way, the absence of deliberation supposes an absence of social dynamism and an approximation to democracy and to citizens as rational voters/consumers, whose decisions are made in accordance with the evaluation of their interests and preferences. Democracy is represented in a similar way as imagined by theorists of economic democracy, based on rational choice theory (Downs, 1957).

One of the potential effects of this representation of democracy has to do with the promotion of authoritarian reactions in the game. Faced with the impossibility of convincing citizens of a certain policy, the only way to carry it out is to unilaterally exercise power to implement it and,

as in *Frostpunk*, deprive citizens of their tools of counterpower. This dynamic can be reinforced if the player is sure that what he intends to do is objectively better than what the citizens propose, which leads us to consider the question of the idea of collective wisdom and the infantilization of citizenry in government simulators.

As we have previously verified, only in two of the games do the citizens propose alternative policies to those of the players, while in the others the players react to the circumstances but lack a program. At the same time, games may feature critical circumstances for survival (as in the post-apocalyptic settings of *Frostpunk* and *Surviving The Aftermath*) or game objectives that are known to the player but are unclear if the citizens share them (such as supremacy in *Civilization*). In both cases, the citizens can appear uncooperative, unsympathetic towards the player, and even capricious in their demands. In the same way, the player has a set of technical information that citizens cannot access, such as statistical data on productivity and living conditions, future technology developments and their current requirements, or potential natural disasters or serious weather changes. This information allows players to develop a long-term strategy (compared to the short-term needs of citizens), which, together with the lack of political initiative of the latter, contributes to this process of infantilization in which the players appear as the ideal actors for making “good” decisions.

Something similar happens with the idea of collective wisdom. Advocates of deliberation have argued that it is a suitable process for making good decisions, since it involves more perspectives on the issue to be discussed than that of the autocrat. The problem, once again, is that

there is no assembly where citizens share these perspectives, but the only actor with the possibility of learning about them (to the extent that the game allows it) and incorporating them into the final decision is the player (for example, by reading the claims of each faction in *Tropico*).

Thus, the absence of deliberative mechanisms, accompanied by a representation of citizens as rational consumers and childish subjects at the same time, and the concentration of information in the hands of the player promote the acceptance of an authoritarian relationship as the most effective and suitable formula for making decisions in the game. The games themselves then give an ideological justification to the fact that there is not a single mechanism for direct participation of citizens in decision-making. The buildings that are built, the laws that are signed, international relations, the technology that is researched and any other public decision using the common resources of the community is made exclusively by the player or State.

Although there are clear mechanical and technical difficulties for the simulation of deliberation and participation in games, these could give rise not only to very innovative games, but also to games with the capacity to teach pro-democratic values. In the *Frostpunk* expansion “*The Last Autumn*”, a theoretically very interesting mechanic appears. When confronted with the labor claims of the workers, the player can create a union. This reduces the risk of a strike and creates a space where the workers meet and make some decisions for the commu-

nity, autonomously and independently. Other games could incorporate significant mechanics in which the players give up part of their decision-making power and obtain, in return, greater citizen collaboration, promoting negotiation and cession over the application of authority.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In general terms, the analyzed government simulators do not present democratic systems. With a total absence of direct participation of the population in decision-making, virtual political communities are built on the consent of the authority of their leaders, be they chosen or natural. This consent is attenuated by a relatively developed dimension of counterpower, but which is often framed as a technical problem and gives citizens little agency (or directly infantilizes them). Even in games that seek a more accurate representation (such as *Democracy*), the actions of citizens are built based on rational choice theory, which excludes any kind of deliberative aspect. It is difficult to associate the models of government simulators with real democratic experiences. Although the importance of consent versus participation or the logic of counterpower would bring us closer to liberal approaches than to, for example, the model of classical Athens (Manin, 1998), we are very far from the former, given the almost total absence of institutions or the tendency to present homogeneous communities. Although the proposals of the simulators emerge from diffe-

rent sources, their political systems are unique and respond to the particularities of the video game and the genre.

This scenario is problematic in terms of transmitted values, since there are ideological mechanisms to justify the autocracy, but there is room for alternative mechanisms that reinforce pro-democratic values.

This work can be extended in different ways. On the one hand, it requires a more in-depth analysis, incorporating a narrative dimension and considering the perceptions of the players. Another line of research could be found at the design level to try to understand how and why the decisions that have led to this type of representation have been made (and that are probably not consciously ideological, but rather explained by subconscious worldviews, principles of the video game genre and approaches in terms of gameplay, mechanics, and challenges). But the most interesting, knowing that there

are problematic representations of democracy in video games, is probably to propose alternative designs, which lead us to think about government simulators in another way. Mechanics related to ceding power, dialogue, convincing or being convinced, and listening and understanding could complement the rationalization of resources according to an objective and oppose the understanding of citizens as resources and opponents, as well as the fantasy of power that video games typically exhibit. If games can function as citizenship schools, perhaps they can contribute to rethinking what democracy means and to rethinking our own societies.

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