

# Non-Domination Power and Player Agency in Ecogames: Conceptualizing Democratic Agency

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Doubts about democracies' ability to address climate crises have recently led some people to support non-democratic solutions when discussing environmental concerns. Scholars have advocated that ecoauthoritarian or technocratic solutions are better at tackling these concerns than democratic systems' multi-actor decision-making and dependence on citizens' opinions (Enninga 2023). Similarly, nondemocratic trends are also evident in digital games, which are becoming increasingly focused on speculations about climate political futures forming specific player agencies (Bódi 2023) (Sicart 2023). Traditionally, digital games have been dominated by non-democratic representations (Pfister, Winnerling and Zimmermann 2020). In this regard, digital *ecogames* (Beke, Laura op de, Joost Raessens, Stefan Werning, and Gerald Farca, eds 2024) appear to frequently exhibit eco-authoritarian tendencies (Frelik 2024). Despite the scepticism surrounding current democratic systems, there are still reasons to support the idea that principles like justice, fairness, and liberty, which are fundamental to the democratic ideal, are essential for achieving collective environmental action. These principles, for example, offer a mechanism for holding individuals accountable for depleting resources and enable citizens to participate in political transformations. In addition, digital games can have a significant impact on players' account of these principles and their attitudes (Kolek, et al. 2023). However, the notion of democracy has still received rather less attention in digital games research despite exceptions (Pfister, Winnerling and Zimmermann 2020) (Torres-Toukoumidis, et al. 2023).

In our paper, we contribute to this research by analysing democratic procedural mechanisms in relation to player agency in selected ecogames, while merging game studies theory with political theory. In the first part of the paper, we present a new conceptualization of democratic procedural agency, which is mainly grounded in Philip Pettit's principle of freedom as non-domination (Pettit 1999). A key aspect to Pettit's notion is the absence of a dominant power actor who, according to her judgement, can choose to intervene or not to intervene in the actions and decisions of other actors. In other words, in political theory, freedom as non-domination is a form of social and relational independence among community members, marked by a lack of interference and domination (ibid.). We first posit that players usually hold asymmetric power and can intervene with other entities within the game according to their

judgement, therefore ecogames are often making them a dominant, “non-democratic” power actors. Secondly, we argue that distributing degree of player agency (Bódi 2023) afforded by game design as distributed power among the players and other game actors (objects, entities, and non-playable characters) in a non-domination manner, is capable of promoting the representation of the core principles of democratic ideals within these games: equality, freedom, and collective decision-making. By incorporating our conceptualization of democratic agency into the procedural rhetoric of digital games (Bogost 2007), we claim that it is possible to achieve this representation.

Secondly, our conceptualization is followed by close reading of four recent digital strategy games ((*Frostpunk: The Last Autumn* 2020) (*Sid Meier's Civilization® VI: Gathering Storm* 2019) (*Beecarbonize* 2023) (*Green New Deal Simulator* 2023)) that aim to depict the societal consequences and fictional managerial or technology-based solutions associated with climate threats. We compare the procedural mechanisms of these games with the principles outlined in our conceptualization of democratic agency. Specifically, the representation of asymmetrical power and non-domination agency, as well as the importance of collaboration in the games' narratives is discussed. However, we also take note of patterns such as colonization, extraction, and capitalism. Drawing from our findings, we finally illustrate the conceptualization of democratic agency in our own design decisions for creating an upcoming game, which addresses the political concerns of lithium extractivism in local and global contexts.

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