

EMBODIED DIGITAL PROTEST IN ROBLOX: A MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF POWER AND RESISTANCE IN VIRTUAL ACTIVISM

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the construction of meanings of power and protest through multimodal semiotic resources within the “Free Palestine” protest simulation on the Roblox video game platform. Roblox enables users to perform protest discourse through embodied interaction, spatial navigation, symbolic representation, and multimodal participation as participatory virtual environments increasingly function as sociopolitical communicative spaces. This research applies the MCAD by Jewitt and Machin and Mayr to examine how linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and auditory semiotic resources interact to construct representations of resistance, solidarity, and institutional authority within the virtual environment. Data were collected through repeated close-playing observation, multimodal logging, field-note documentation, and iterative analysis of representative protest scenes. The analytical process involved multimodal categorization, interpretive coding, and critical examination of how semiotic resources operate relationally across interactive gameplay contexts. The findings demonstrate that protest discourse within Roblox is enacted through embodied and participatory performance in which players negotiate ideological positioning through avatar movement, spatial confrontation, and symbolic alignment. This study contributes theoretically to MCDA by extending multimodal discourse analysis beyond static media texts to interactive gaming environments characterized by embodied resistance and participatory protest discourse.

Keywords: *Multimodality, Protest Discourse, Roblox, MCDA, Digital Activism*

Introduction

Power and protest have long been discussed in relation to social and political structures, yet they are also produced through discourse where authority and ideology are expressed, negotiated, and challenged (Dunivin et al., 2022; Foucault, 1980). From a Foucauldian perspective, power does not simply belong to a particular institution or actor. Instead, it moves through social relations networks influences what can be spoken, represented, and interpreted within a given discourse (Becker et al., 2025). Power always leaves room for resistance because of its relational nature (Foucault, 1980). Therefore, protest can be understood as one of the visible forms through which individuals or groups respond to and question dominant authority structures (Blondé et al., 2021). Over time, the places where protests occur have expanded beyond traditional public spaces. While demonstrations and rallies still occur in

physical locations, digital platforms are increasingly used as additional means of expressing disagreement and organizing collective action (Spurava et al., 2025; Tsouparopoulou et al., 2025). The spread of communication technologies and participatory media has enabled individuals across geographic boundaries to share political messages, coordinate movements, and participate in public debates. These online environments also encourage different forms of meaning-making. Messages are rarely communicated through language alone; visuals, sound, and interactive elements often work together to frame how social and political issues are interpreted (Kim & Lim, 2019; Lin & Sun, 2022).

One of the clearest examples of digital protest can be found on social media platforms. Users frequently rely on hashtags, memes, and short videos to communicate political opinions or draw attention to ongoing issues. These forms of expression allow messages to circulate quickly and connect people who may never meet in physical

protest spaces. Several studies show that such multimodal communication can strengthen visibility for marginalized perspectives and encourage broader participation in public discussions (Lobera & Portos, 2020; Moreno-almeida, 2021). Online engagement does not necessarily replace offline activism. Instead, digital participation often supports real-world mobilization by spreading information and helping individuals coordinate collective action (Greijdanus et al., 2025). Protest has also begun to appear in interactive digital environments, including video games, beyond social media. Although games are commonly associated with entertainment, they increasingly engage with social and political themes (Bashandy, 2025). Researchers have noted that game environments can expose players to issues such as historical memory, social injustice, or political conflict through interactive experiences (Gislam et al., 2025). Some well-known examples include *Animal Crossing*'s virtual demonstrations related to the Hong Kong democracy movement, *Minecraft*'s memorial constructions, and *Fortnite* events that raised awareness about racial inequality (de la Cruz et al., 2025). These examples illustrate how gaming spaces can function as environments where social concerns are represented and discussed.

Participation in these gaming environments differs from social media activism in several ways. Protest is usually expressed through posts, images, or shared content on social media (Lobera & Portos, 2020; Moreno-almeida, 2021; Pranata & Riyanta, 2016; Sultan, 2023). In contrast, video games allow players to interact within a virtual space through avatars and movement. Actions such as gathering, occupying spaces, or displaying symbols become part of the communicative process (Hawreliak & Lemieux, 2020). Because of this interactivity, protest in game environments can be experienced more directly. Meaning emerges not only from what players say but also from how they move, position themselves, and interact with others in the virtual world. For this reason, scholars increasingly treat video games as cultural artifacts rather than purely recreational products (Bogost, 2007; Gee, 2007; Hao, 2021; Jenkins, 2006; Obreja, 2023). The narrative structure of games, together with their mechanics and player choices, creates opportunities for exploring complex social issues (Jackson, 2024). Some studies suggest that interactive storytelling and decision-making processes in games can encourage players to reflect on ethical dilemmas, inequality, and political tensions (Muriel &

Crawford, 2020; Shliakhovchuk, 2024). Through these mechanisms, games become spaces where social ideas are represented and experienced through participation. Among the many platforms that enable such interactions, Roblox presents a distinctive environment. Roblox functions as a user-generated platform where players can design and share their virtual worlds. Instead of following a fixed storyline created by developers, users collaborate to build environments, events, and social scenarios within the platform (Singh, 2025). This participatory structure allows players to move beyond passive consumption and become active contributors to meaning creation. Visual symbols, written messages, spatial arrangements, and avatar movements are often combined to communicate ideas or express viewpoints.

Players have created various protest simulations that reflect real-world issues within this environment. The Free Palestine protest simulation is one example that has attracted attention, where players gather with avatars while displaying flags, slogans, and other symbolic elements associated with the movement. These virtual gatherings involve several semiotic resources, such as written language, visual imagery, spatial positioning, and avatar gestures. The presence of multiple semiotic elements makes such environments suitable for MCDA. MCDA focuses on how different modes of communication interact to produce meaning while also examining how these meanings relate to broader ideological and social structures. When combined with CDA, the approach allows researchers to explore how discourse contributes to the reproduction or contestation of power relations within society (Fairclough, 1995; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Norris, 2004). Multimodal analysis has been performed on various forms of media, including advertising, political communication, memes, cartoons, and corporate discourse. These studies demonstrate how visual and linguistic resources shape ideological narratives, social identities, and audience interpretation (Joy et al., 2024; Kenalemang, 2022; Liu et al., 2024; Ulati et al., 2022). Other studies have examined memes, cartoons, and corporate communication, showing how multimodal discourse can influence political attitudes and social identities (Adebomi, 2025; Asidiky et al., 2022; Lennon & Kilby, 2020). Multimodal discourse is generally understood as the interaction of semiotic resources that construct meaning across communicative contexts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). These studies confirm the usefulness of multimodal analysis for investigating ideological meaning.

However, most existing MCDA research

remains predominantly focused on static and frame-based media texts. Meaning is commonly analyzed through fixed compositions such as posters, advertisements, memes, photographs, or short audiovisual segments where discourse is interpreted through stable visual arrangements. Although these studies successfully demonstrate how multimodal resources communicate ideology, they often overlook how discourse operates within interactive environments where meaning continuously emerges through movement, participation, spatial navigation, and embodied interaction. Discourse is not merely viewed or interpreted passively in participatory virtual environments; it is enacted through user interaction, avatar positioning, spatial occupation, symbolic performance, and collaborative participation. Consequently, meanings of power and protest become dynamic rather than fixed because they are negotiated through ongoing multimodal interaction inside a navigable virtual space.

In game studies, scholars have explored the multimodal characteristics of digital games and the ways in which players interpret narratives, visuals, and sound during gameplay (Wildfeuer & Stamenković, 2022). Multimodal characteristics of videogames have been explored, including narrative construction, player interaction, multimodal literacy, and identity representation during gameplay (de Paula, 2023; Maiorani & Hawreliak, 2024; Setiawati et al., 2024). Nevertheless, these studies primarily examine games as narrative or educational media rather than as discursive environments in which ideological struggle and protest performance are interactively constructed. As a result, limited attention has been paid to how videogame environments function as spaces where political meanings are spatially negotiated through embodied participation and multimodal orchestration. This limitation becomes particularly significant in user-generated platforms, such as Roblox, where players actively participate in constructing symbolic protest environments through avatars, movement, staging, and collaborative interaction.

In response to these limitations, the present study examines Roblox protest simulations as interactive multimodal environments where meanings of power and protest are dynamically negotiated through linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and auditory resources. This study extends MCDA beyond static media analysis to interactive virtual environments characterized by embodied resistance, spatial semiotics,

participatory protest discourse, and interactive ideological performance by integrating MCDA with Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework and Foucauldian perspectives on relational power. Therefore, this study contributes theoretically by demonstrating how discourse within virtual gaming environments is collaboratively enacted through multimodal participation rather than represented solely through fixed textual or visual forms. Based on these considerations, this study aims to investigate the construction of meanings of power and protest in Roblox protest simulations by identifying the semiotic modes involved and examining how these modes interact to convey ideological messages within the virtual environment.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a critical perspective to examine how multimodal semiotic resources in Roblox protest simulations construct and represent meanings of power and protest. The analysis applies MCDA by combining CDA (Fairclough, 1995) and MDA (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). CDA provides a critical framework for examining how discourse reflects ideological positions and power relations, whereas MDA enables the analysis of how different semiotic modes interact to produce meaning. The integration of these approaches is particularly appropriate for interactive digital environments because discourse is communicated through embodied participation, spatial navigation, symbolic interaction, and multimodal performance (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The study focuses on the representation of power and protest within the Roblox platform's "Free Palestine" protest simulation. The research setting was a user-generated Roblox protest environment designed around the "Free Palestine" movement. Close-playing observation was used to collect data (Chang, 2010), which involved repeated engagement with the virtual protest simulation across multiple gameplay sessions conducted over several observation periods. Rather than relying solely on isolated screenshots, a broader observational data set consisting of gameplay observations, repeated scene documentation, field notes, multimodal observation logs, and screenshot captures of significant protest interactions. During the observation process, the researcher repeatedly entered the simulation to observe avatar interaction, symbolic objects, environmental structures, spatial positioning, and protest performance within the virtual environment. Particular attention was paid to how players used multimodal resources to communicate solidarity, resistance, institutional authority, and humanitarian

positioning through participatory interaction.

The primary multimodal resources analyzed in this study consisted of linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and auditory modes. Linguistic resources included slogans, protest signs, donation boards, usernames, and written messages. The visual resources included flags, uniforms, color symbolism, environmental objects, and symbolic imagery associated with the protest setting. Gestural resources refer to avatar posture, orientation, movement, and embodied actions performed during gameplay interaction. Spatial resources focused on avatar arrangement, spatial proximity, centrality, staging, navigational positioning, and environmental composition within the protest environment. Auditory resources included background instrumental music and ambient sounds that contributed to the simulation's emotional atmosphere. The sampling process employed purposive multimodal sampling. Protest scenes were selected based on four criteria: (1) the presence of multiple interacting semiotic modes, (2) clear representation of protest-related symbolism, (3) visible interaction between protest participants and institutional symbols, and (4) relevance to representations of power, resistance, solidarity, or humanitarian advocacy. Five representative scenes were selected as the primary analytical units from the broader observational data set because they most clearly demonstrated multimodal orchestration and ideological negotiation within the protest simulation. To ensure analytical consistency and contextual interpretation, the selected scenes were systematically organized within a multimodal data log supported by descriptive field notes.

The data analysis procedures were adapted from Jewitt's [2017] multimodal analytical framework and Machin and Mayr's [2012] approach to multimodal critical discourse analysis. The first stage involved repeated familiarization with the collected data through iterative observation of screenshots and field notes to identify recurring multimodal patterns within the protest environment. The second stage focused on multimodal logging and documentation, where each scene was systematically described according to the semiotic resources present, including linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and auditory elements. Following Jewitt's framework, the analysis then identified how different modes contributed to meaning-making within the virtual protest environment's interactional context. The next stage involved semiotic categorization and

coding based on the MCDA procedures of Machin and Mayr [2012]. Linguistic elements were analyzed using lexical choices, slogans, and textual framing. Visual elements were examined through color symbolism, salience, symbolism, and representational meaning. Gestural elements focused on avatar posture, orientation, and embodied action. The spatial elements examined positioning, proximity, opposition, centrality, and environmental arrangement within the virtual protest setting. Auditory elements were interpreted according to their emotional and atmospheric contribution to protest representation. The analysis examined how these multimodal resources interacted relationally to construct unified meanings of power, protest, solidarity, resistance, and institutional authority within the simulation after categorization

In the final stage, the findings were critically interpreted using Fairclough's discourse framework and Foucault's concept of relational power to explain how multimodal resources negotiate ideological meaning in participatory digital environments through embodied and spatially organized interaction. This stage emphasized how discourse within Roblox is not only visually represented but also dynamically enacted through avatar interaction, spatial occupation, symbolic performance, and participatory engagement within the virtual protest space. To strengthen analytical trustworthiness, the researcher employed iterative recoding and repeated comparison across observation sessions to ensure consistency in multimodal interpretation. Field notes, multimodal logs, and screenshot documentation were reviewed repeatedly to stabilize the analytical interpretation and reduce the number of isolated scene analyses. An audit trail consisting of coding notes, observation records, analytical memos, and multimodal documentation was maintained throughout the research process. Ethically, the study analyzed publicly accessible virtual protest environments without collecting private participant information or personal user identities. Usernames appearing within screenshots functioned solely as contextual gameplay elements and were not treated as identifiable personal data. Considering the political sensitivity of the protest topic, the research focused on discourse representation and multimodal meaning-making rather than evaluating political legitimacy or ideological correctness. In addition, the researcher acknowledged positionality as an interpretive observer within the digital environment and therefore approached the analysis critically while maintaining analytical neutrality toward the represented political conflict.

Findings and Discussion

Multimodal Semiotic Modes in Roblox Protest Simulation, The multimodal analysis identified five dominant semiotic modes within the Roblox “Free Palestine” protest simulation: linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and auditory. However, these semiotic resources do not operate independently. The coordinated interaction of slogans, symbolic imagery, avatar embodiment, spatial organization, and environmental atmosphere within the participatory virtual environment is used to construct meaning. Through repeated multimodal configurations, ideological meanings related to solidarity, resistance, institutional authority, and humanitarian advocacy are normalized across the protest simulation.



Figure 1. Symbolic Solidarity Through Multimodal Orchestration

Annotated screenshot: repeated Palestinian flags, “SAVE GAZA” slogan, roadside positioning, and avatar holding sign. Fig 1 demonstrates the normalization of protest ideology through the interaction of visual repetition, linguistic framing, spatial occupation, and avatar embodiment. The repeated circulation of Palestinian flags constructs symbolic solidarity by aligning the protest environment with a collective humanitarian identity. Simultaneously, the slogan “SAVE GAZA” linguistically frames the protest as a moral and humanitarian discourse rather than merely a political confrontation. The roadside arrangement spatially simulates the structure of real-world demonstrations, allowing the virtual environment to function as a recognizable protest space. Although the avatar gesture appears static, embodiment remains ideologically significant because the avatar operates as a performative extension of player participation. Through this multimodal configuration, protest identity is normalized through repeated symbolic visibility and collective spatial occupation.



Figure 2. Institutional Authority and Spatial Conclusion

Annotated screenshot: soldier avatar, Israeli flag, weapon symbolism, and oppositional positioning, Fig 2 Institutional authority is constructed through the orchestration of militarized symbolism, spatial confrontation, and embodied positioning. Through visual salience, the Israeli flag, soldier avatar, and weapon collectively signify state authority and ideological control. Simultaneously, the oppositional positioning between avatars negotiates power relationally by placing institutional authority and protest resistance within direct visual confrontation. Therefore, spatial opposition functions ideologically because meaning emerges through interactional tension rather than isolated representation. Embodiment further reinforces ideological positioning as the upright posture and orientation of the soldier avatar visually perform authority, whereas the facing protest avatar constructs resistance through confrontational presence. The interaction among symbolic nationalism, militarized imagery, and spatial opposition consequently normalizes institutional power while simultaneously enabling visible resistance within the virtual protest environment.



Figure 3. Embodied Resistance Through Avatar Interaction

Annotated screenshot: regurgitating gesture, close proximity, and symbolic confrontation. Fig 3 demonstrates how embodied participation and interactive gameplay mechanics enact protest. The regurgitating gesture transforms resistance from a symbolic representation into a performative action through avatar movement. Rather than functioning as passive visual imagery, embodiment operates ideologically by allowing the physical enactment of protest discourse within virtual space. Spatial proximity intensifies this power negotiation

because the reduced distance between avatars creates an interactional confrontation between the protester and the institutional figure. Simultaneously, the opposing Palestinian and Israeli flags reinforce ideological polarization through symbolic contrast. The intensified background music heightens the sense of conflict between the protest avatar and the soldier figure, while also contributing affectively to the normalization of resistance discourse. Meaning in this scene therefore emerges through the multimodal interaction of gesture, spatial confrontation, symbolic opposition, and auditory intensity, constructing protest as an embodied ideological performance.



Figure 4. Discursive Visibility and Public Protest Voice

Annotated screenshot: podium centrality, elevated stage, microphone, and central positioning. Fig 4 Protest discourse constructed through spatial hierarchy, symbolic staging, and centralized visibility. The podium, microphone, and elevated stage reproduce the structure of formal public speech, visually positioning the speaking avatar as the environment’s focal communicative authority. Spatial centrality functions ideologically because the arrangement hierarchically organizes visibility and legitimizes the avatar as the dominant public voice within the protest setting. Although spoken language is not explicitly audible, embodiment remains significant because the avatar posture simulates political speech performance through visual presentation and environmental staging. Therefore, the interaction among stage design, centralized positioning, symbolic imagery, and embodied posture normalizes discursive authority through multimodal orchestration. Protest is consequently represented not only as resistance but also as a collective public articulation within a virtual participatory space.



Figure 5. Humanitarian Advocacy and Moral Legitimacy

Annotated screenshot: donation board, informational framing, and avatar orientation toward the board. Fig 5 demonstrates how humanitarian framing and informational discourse legitimize protest ideology. The donation board linguistically associates protest participation with humanitarian assistance and ethical responsibility, thereby normalizing moral alignment within the protest environment. Visually, the continued presence of Palestinian flags maintains symbolic continuity with earlier scenes and reinforces collective ideological identification. The avatar’s orientation toward the donation board directs interpretive attention toward the informational content and prioritizes humanitarian discourse within the scene. In contrast to confrontational configurations, power in this scene is negotiated through moral legitimacy rather than visible opposition. The interaction among linguistic explanation, symbolic imagery, spatial orientation, and environmental framing consequently constructs humanitarian advocacy as a form of moral power within the Roblox protest simulation.

Representation of Power and ProtestThe multimodal analysis identified five types of meanings constructed across the scenes.

Table 1. Power and Protest in the Roblox Protest Simulation

Data	Configuration	Representation of the Protest	Representation of the Power
Data 1	Symbolic environment	Collective solidarity through repeated use of flags and slogans	Power through symbolic visibility
Data 2	Soldier confrontation	Protest presence facing the authority	Institutional power represented by soldier and national symbol
Data 3	Throwing gesture	Embodied resistance through avatar action	Negotiation of relational power between protesters and soldiers
Data 4	Stage speech	Protest as a Public Voice and Discourse	Discursive power through platform and visibility
Data 5	Donation board	Humanitarian advocacy	Moral power through informational framing

Table 1 demonstrates that the meanings of protest within the Roblox simulation develop through shifting multimodal configurations. Protest initially appears through symbolic solidarity constructed by repeated visual imagery and collective spatial occupation. Subsequently, the representation shifted toward institutional confrontation where militarized symbolism, embodied positioning, and spatial opposition negotiated ideological tension between authority and resistance. In later scenes, protest is enacted through embodied avatar interaction before evolving into discursive articulation and humanitarian advocacy. The findings further reveal that the power within the simulation operates relationally rather than as a fixed structure. Institutional authority is normalized through militarized imagery, symbolic nationalism, spatial hierarchy, and discursive visibility, while protest is constructed through symbolic repetition, collective occupation, embodied resistance, and moral framing. Importantly, these ideological meanings emerge not from isolated semiotic resources but from multimodal orchestration among avatars, environmental structures, gestures, slogans, spatial positioning, and symbolic objects within the virtual participatory environment.

Multimodal Construction of Power, The findings demonstrate that multimodal meaning within the Roblox protest simulation is constructed through the coordinated interaction of symbolic imagery, avatar embodiment, spatial organization, linguistic framing, auditory atmosphere, and participatory gameplay mechanics. Therefore, meaning emerges relationally through multimodal orchestration rather than through isolated semiotic elements. Through repeated multimodal configurations, the ideological meanings of solidarity, resistance, humanitarian legitimacy, and institutional authority are normalized within the virtual protest environment. From a critical discourse perspective, power relations within the simulation are dynamically negotiated through spatial confrontation, symbolic visibility, embodied interaction, and discursive staging. Institutional authority is represented through militarized symbols, hierarchical positioning, and public visibility, while protest emerges through collective spatial occupation, participatory resistance, and humanitarian discourse. Consequently, the Roblox protest simulation functions not merely as entertainment media but as an interactive

ideological environment in which discourse is collaboratively enacted through participatory multimodal performance.

Conclusion

This study examined the construction of meanings of power and protest within the Roblox “Free Palestine” protest simulation through multimodal critical discourse analysis. The findings demonstrate that protest discourse within the virtual environment is constructed through the coordinated interaction of linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and auditory semiotic resources. These multimodal resources work relationally to normalize the ideological meanings of solidarity, resistance, institutional authority, and humanitarian advocacy throughout the simulation. Protest initially emerges through symbolic repetition and collective visibility, develops into embodied resistance through avatar interaction and spatial confrontation, and shifts toward discursive articulation and moral legitimacy through staging and informational framing. The findings further reveal that power within the simulation operates dynamically rather than as a fixed structure because authority and resistance are continuously negotiated through multimodal orchestration, avatar embodiment, symbolic visibility, and participatory spatial interaction.

This study contributes theoretically to MCDA by extending MCDA beyond static and frame-based media analysis toward interactive virtual environments characterized by gameplay participation, spatial immersion, and embodied ideological performance. The findings also contribute to multimodal literacy studies by demonstrating that meaning-making within digital environments increasingly depends on the simultaneous interpretation of multimodal interaction, symbolic navigation, spatial organization, and participatory communication practices. In this context, virtual discourse environments reshape communicative practices because users no longer function solely as message recipients but also as active participants who collaboratively construct discourse through movement, interaction, and symbolic performance. This study also highlights the educational implications of digital activism within virtual platforms. Protest simulations, such as those found in Roblox may contribute to the development of critical literacy by encouraging users to interpret ideology, power relations, symbolic representation, and sociopolitical discourse within participatory digital environments. Interactive virtual platforms may provide alternative spaces for developing multimodal critical awareness and digital literacy practices in contemporary communication

contexts.

Despite these contributions, the study is limited to a small data set within a single Roblox protest simulation. Therefore, future research could investigate multiple protest simulations across different virtual platforms, compare ideological representations across gaming environments, or examine how player interaction, community participation, and live communication features influence the construction of political discourse within digital spaces. The pedagogical potential of virtual protest environments in multimodal literacy education, digital citizenship learning, and critical discourse awareness among learners in increasingly interactive online environments may be explored in future studies.

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