

Ethical and political debates in Riot: Civil Unrest and Democracy

Previous compulsory steps / Prior students' knowledge	The educator must decide on an ethical or political topic for a debate that appears in a video game. In Riot: Civil Unrest , the topic could be related to the historical protests that appear in the game. If you use a Democracy series game, the topic could be related to some of the many political decisions that the players face within the game.
Learning objectives	To prepare and participate in an ethical or political debate about a contemporary issue (for example: civil rights, socioeconomic inequality, cultural diversity, climate change, etc.). To practice the use of persuasive reasoning to overcome prejudices. To analyze the social environment critically, from an ethical perspective.
Subjects	Philosophy (Ethics), Political science, Social sciences
Recommended Age	15 – 18
Material needed	Computers (one per pair or group)
Sequence duration	1-2 hours
Individual or group activity	In pairs (playing in co-op mode or PvP – player versus player). If playing with Democracy, it can be done in small groups (3 – 4 students).



Skills developed	Critical thinking, Communication, Presentation skills, Empathy
Price range of the game	15 – 30 €
Similar games to use with the approach of the sequence	Papers Please , or any other version of the Democracy series

Step by step: how to implement the sequence

- **Step 1: Introduction to the debate topic (20 – 30 minutes)**

This sequence should start with the educator introducing the basic structure of a debate (i.e., sides for and against the topic, taking turns giving speeches, rebuttals, researching and justifying your position, etc.), as well as giving background information on a topic that is included in either the historical protests in **Riot: Civil Unrest** or a political topic from the **Democracy** series. Before playing the game, you (the educator) should present the context of this event to the students and also present them with some examples of pros and cons to help them understand both sides of the issue and the structure of debating. Later on, there will be another step that will help them understand the topic in greater detail, so we recommend keeping things simple and not going too in-depth with debate arguments right now. This step should simply introduce the debating structure and make it clear that students will discuss and debate a contemporary social issue.

- **Step 2: Gameplay in pairs or small groups (20 – 30 minutes)**

Next, students should play the chosen game in pairs or small groups, depending on which video game is used.

Riot: Civil Unrest presents the player with examples of real protests taken from recent history, so if the students play this game, you may consider motivating them not only to participate in the debate, but also to think critically and to analyse the social implications that the issue had in the historical moment of the protest in question. It is recommended to play this game in pairs, since one of the players will control the protesters and the other will control the police.

It is worth mentioning here that this game includes a “political result” score. For example, if the police are too violent or if protestors seem keen only to loot (rather than to protest), this score will be low. This score can be used to encourage further reflection and critical thinking for students, i.e. having them consider the success and failure of both non-violent and violent protests and perhaps complicating their previous beliefs on the issue. For more on this topic, see the article [Speaking of Violence: The Complicated Reality of Violence vs. Non-violence.](#)

If you use the games **Democracy** or **Papers, Please**, you must take into account the fact that these were created as single player video games. However, since these games require players to make ethical decisions, they lend themselves well to having students play in small groups, where they can discuss and analyse different positions together, reaching a consensus to move forward in the game. Thus, this approach can help students develop some key skills (such as critical thinking, analysis, and persuasive reasoning), which are necessary both for life and for progressing in the game.

Regardless of the game students play in this stage, you may help them identify different elements of the specified debate topic during gameplay. The point of this stage is to make the experience of playing motivating to the student, helpful in preparing their debate stances, and ideally both.

- **Step 3: Debate preparation (20 – 30 minutes)**

After playing the game, students should prepare a debate on the topic you identified. They should be split into two or more groups and prepare the debate with their groupmates. To facilitate this preparation, it is better not to have more than ten students per group. As a group, they have to choose a position within the debate and prepare their arguments.

This preparation can be done by brainstorming and then asking the educator for help, as well as doing some research on the Internet. They should be sure to take into account which arguments the other groups' participants may use and should prepare rebuttals to these arguments. A guided worksheet with a few questions may be helpful for them to generate and then write down those arguments (see suggestions below).

- **Step 4: Debate and debriefing (40 – 60 minutes)**

Now that the students have prepared the debate, it is time to carry it out. The educator is responsible for moderating the debate and keeping time and order in the different previously prepared parts of the debate: introducing the topic, presenting the main arguments from each side, refuting arguments made by the other group, etc. The educator should also ensure that students present and argue their positions using well-structured, logical arguments. The class can decide democratically which group has “won” the debate, based on these same criteria. The educator may also decide to

follow up the debate with a debriefing session of 10-20 minutes to discuss what the experience was like for students, whether they would engage in the same actions or whether they would react differently next time, and what they have learned about the specific issue after carrying out their own debate. This last question is particularly important, as they have carried out the debate not only to learn skills related to critical thinking, communication, and interpretation, but also to develop empathy for other peoples' experiences, challenge prejudices and internal biases, and to broaden their understandings of contemporary social issues.

Example of a debate topic:

The use of violence or non-violence in protests, and how these may impact public debate on contemporary issues such as civil rights and racial justice.

This topic ties in nicely with **Riot: Civil Unrest** but may be used with either game. In this case, one group argues in favour of non-violent protests, while the other argues in favour of the effectiveness of violent protests. Both groups should consider how their stances affect public opinion on the chosen topic.

In **Step 1** of this sequence, the educator should **introduce the topic** and ask students to **define violent protest**. One potential answer might be protests in which some participants threaten or use physical force to damage property or other people.

The educator may also ask some of the following **general questions** to get students to start thinking critically:

- Can you think of other examples of politically motivated violence, or other words to describe it?

- Educators may find it helpful to present the definitions and examples found in the following article: [An Illustrated Glossary of Political Violence](#).
- Do you think violent protest is a good or bad thing?
 - One recent study found that both riots and nonviolent actions have disruptive effects, such as blocking traffic, though riots come with a particular trade-off: they can draw attention and put effective pressure on institutions to fix issues, though they also tend to reduce popular support for issues. How these effects weigh on the long-term or short-term goals of a movement varies on a case-by-case basis (Feinberg, Willer & Kovacheff, 2020).
- Can political violence ever be justified?
 - For example, is using violence to overthrow a dictator justified and/or well-received by citizens?
 - How much does this justification depend on the context of the protest (and the political beliefs of the public)?
 - You may consider presenting the following information: Nine out of ten Americans opposed the Capitol riot on 6 January 2021 (Langer, 2021), though just 54% of Americans believed that the burning of the Minneapolis police station was a justified response to the police murder of George Floyd (Impelli, 2020).

The educator may also include specific **historical examples** in Step 1 of this sequence. For instance, they might discuss the ambivalence and differing opinions surrounding protest in the Civil Rights era in the United States, offering the examples of the differing strategies used by Malcom X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. while fighting for Black civil rights. They may also choose to highlight this dichotomy in contemporary history by showing news coverage of recent Black Lives Matter protests and the differing opinions displayed in the media surrounding the use of violence. Ask

students to consider the implicit biases involved in media coverage, such as the political stances behind different news networks or newspapers. Also, ask students to consider how the interpretations of violent or non-violent protests change depending on the subject of the protest: for example, does the interpretation applied to Black Lives Matter protestors differ from that of the protests staged after major sports games? Do they differ from right-wing protests (such as the attack on the US Capitol Building on 6 January 2021)?

After playing the video game in **Step 2**, both groups should gather evidence of the pros and cons of each stance in **Step 3**, and thus expand upon their knowledge of historical events and protests, as well as develop their critical thinking skills. Though they will defend only one position, they will be well-prepared to understand all sides of the debate and defend their stance by the time they reach **Step 4**. Any of the reflection questions issued above in Step 1 may also be moved to the end of the activity and used for reflection and debriefing the specific debate topic, if the educator prefers. These questions are also helpful for helping students draw conclusions about the issue.

References

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