

**JIACHEN:** Hi everyone and welcome to another episode of The Longest Rainy Sunday. Before I begin, I want to ask the audience, what would you do if you are the President of the United States? Free candy for all?

**HAYDEN:** Well I think a lot of people would enjoy that.

**JIACHEN:** Today we are going to talk about Democratic Socialism Simulator, a newly produced game by Unity earlier this year.

**ANUSHA:** You may not have heard of Democratic Socialism Simulator, but you might have seen many simulators like this on the internet. Living in a democratic republic, it is a right to be able to comment on and participate in the political realm. And it is definitely evident that people enjoy being critical of the political process through a game as Democratic Socialism Simulator is so popular it has been rated eight out of ten on Steam, one of the biggest game communities in the world.

**JIACHEN:** To begin with, we need to understand how this game works. In this game, you play as the president of the US and the coalition behind them. From the start, you are required to make decisions that would impact your supporters and every American citizen as a whole. After you make some choices, the media such as Fox News and the New York Times will send you a message to reflect the impact of your decision. You are required to probe along with your decisions to maintain a balance you desire, whether that is winning the next election, maintaining supporters, or keeping the government away from deficits. There are three columns to reflect the impact: money, people's power, and greenhouse emissions. The goal of the game is to get the greenhouse gas emission down to zero. What was your experience like Anusha?

**ANUSHA:** Yeah, these mechanics sound easy, but it took me several trials to get the result I wanted. The probing experience, which is critical when first playing a game, is definitely different in this game. In Democratic Socialism Simulator, the probing seems to be very easy and user friendly since we have a tutorial to begin with and label datas, yet the final model of this game required me to maintain a balance between socialistic ideals, like implementing healthcare that covers for more people, and conservative ones like supporting militarization. The probing comes down to understanding this balance: you literally cannot win if you stay consistent with your choices. You eventually learn that despite the choices you want to make, you have to have a moderate ideology.

**HAYDEN:** Moreover, there are multiple graphic details in the game that make the presidency closer to life. For example, it uses animals instead of people to represent characters, and I think it shows the stereotypes really clearly, but at the same time, it makes it seem less offensive to the people it is representing. For instance, the peacocks are elegant and attractive, and is actually the Press secretary in this game. It's insinuated that the press secretary has to be well put and communicative because they are in front of a lot of press. And of course, the classic representation of a Democrat as a donkey and the Fox News is just

a fox. The environmentalists are white polar bears and economists are lions. Those are really just classic representation of those positions.

**JIACHEN:** Do you think that is realistic that in real life, you have to be a moderate president to be successful? And is this simulator mirroring our current circumstances?

**HAYDEN:** Well, my experience of playing this game told me that the game does mirror the current political climate. However, I believe that it depends on the timeframe as well. Evaluating the circumstances today, I do believe that having a moderate president can lead to his success.

**ANUSHA** Definitely-especially since the description of this game includes “The Democratic Socialism Simulator is an attempt to prefigure the opportunities and challenges of a Sanders (or Sanders-like) presidency. It is meant to entertain, enrage, provoke socialist-curious players as well as comrades on the front lines of the political revolution.”

**JIACHEN** I think this game chooses to mock what a socialist ideal would be like. The ideals that this game designs correspond to Sander’s running ideals. For instance, is universal healthcare and free college education for all realistic? This game will slam on your face if you made those choices. Similar question appears in this simulator, and the result it tells you is that you will get into a severe deficit. The most simple supply and demand will make Sander’s ideal into vanity.

**HAYDEN:** Yes, especially because the demand of a college education is apparently very desirable in today’s society. There are 21 million young Americans and about only 5300 colleges. And we are not even counting the international students. Who will pay for those tuitions then? Apparently the government in this case. Yet with this situation of economic depression, it makes the proposal even more unrealistic. Those are some obvious problems with being a radical president.

**ANUSHA:** This idea of polarization being bad for the country definitely seems like the argument that the game makes. It already targets people who are likely not voting for Trump and urges people not to vote for Sanders by mocking socialist ideals. It is also interesting because this game came out this February right before the pandemic.

**JIACHEN:** I think that an important point relating to the pandemic is how in the beginning of the game, when you are elected, you are asked “will you push for Medicare for all?” If you choose to, your budget declines significantly. Medicare is a policy that a lot of Americans need during this pandemic, but a thriving economy is also incredibly important. While it didn’t intend to comment on COVID-19, I think the game tells us that we need a moderate president now in this unsettling time with all of the issues going on in 2020.

**HAYDEN:** And I think the way this game drives us to believe moderation is the solution is by enforcing a really strong feedback system. It goes back to Flanagan’s idea about the basis of

games in Critical Play. The feedback loop is one of four main components of a game and it creates purpose and excitement that engages us to keep playing. Quite literally, every decision we make in this game is given an immediate response that affects our subsequent decision, either by putting us in major debt or increasing greenhouse gas emissions infinitely.

**ANUSHA:** I think this game has a big impact on the younger generations given the simulator's simple mechanics and user-friendly design. Interestingly, if we look at the presidential election that just happened, we saw that young voters turned out in record numbers—they had a huge impact on the results. In this election specifically, we saw a highly contested race between Biden & Sanders during the primary elections (when this game was released). A lot of people in America believed that if Sanders won, then he wouldn't be able to beat Trump during the general election. I think the creators of this game took that stance and attempted to encourage socialist-like voters to turn on socialism and support a moderate presidency.

**JIACHEN:** Personally, I do not think being a moderate during the entire presidency is the key success for every cabinet. For instance, we wouldn't praise President Lincoln or President FDR to be moderate. Both presidents are ranked the most popular presidents in US history. President Lincoln stood up when no one wanted to abolish slavery, and FDR implemented one of the most radical and liberal policies in US history like the New Deal. Therefore, when we comment on a president's success, moderation will not be a critical point. And that is the part of what I think the game is misleading people.

**ANUSHA:** That is a really good point, this game certainly has its limitations.

**Hayden:** Overall, this is a really great game to try out and really experience the decisions made by our president. Unlike other simulators that tend to have a policy party to lean on, this game shows how a moderate model after the player probes through the underlying rules can be really helpful. More importantly, this game is deeply relevant to our current situation as a country and has expressed, obscurely, its political lean toward the presidential election that just happened. So, do you want to be a president? Then, let's play this game!

**JIACHEN:** Thank you for listening! I am Jiachen, the producer for this episode.

**Anusha:** And I'm Anusha the assistant producer

**HAYDEN:** Thank you, I'm Hayden, the line producer.