

Overview & Gameplay

The game, *The City: Survive or Control*, is a discussion-based serious game designed to understand how forms of capital materialise into opportunities/consequences. In addition, the game aims to make institutional inequality experientially visible. This links directly to multiple modules within Law and Sociology. The game draws primarily on Bourdieu's theory of capital, understood as accumulated material and symbolic resources that shape power and advantage within social fields.¹

Unlike many governance simulations that treat inequality as a result of poor decision-making or competing preferences, *The City* models inequality as an emergent outcome of formally equal procedures interacting with unequal positional resources under systemic pressure.

Each player is assigned a distinct role positioned differently within the system. In each round, players are presented with a policy dilemma requiring a collective decision. Following each decision, consequences are distributed asymmetrically according to the role, and the system's overall stability is updated via a crisis escalation meter. The game concludes either when the system reaches collapse or when the final round is completed, with success defined asymmetrically rather than collectively, reinforcing the insight that institutional stability and individual outcomes do not align evenly across social positions.

Learning Objectives

The learning outcomes are intentionally positioned at the upper levels of Bloom's taxonomy, (analysis, evaluation), as lower-order cognitive tasks such as recall or comprehension are insufficient for understanding structural inequality.²

LO1: Analyse how different forms of capital shape influence and power within collective decision-making.

¹ Bourdieu - Bourdieu, P. (1986)

The Forms of Capital.

In: Richardson, J. (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood Press, pp. 241–258.

² Bloom, B.S., Engelhart, M.D., Furst, E.J., Hill, W.H. and Krathwohl, D.R. (1956) *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals. Handbook I: Cognitive domain*. New York: Longmans, Green.

This learning outcome requires players to analyse how influence and power are structured through differential access to capital. While capital is represented as a unified resource for gameplay clarity, this abstraction reflects Bourdieu's argument that different forms of capital are convertible and cumulative in practice, allowing structural advantage to persist even when its precise form is obscured. This is operationalised through the mechanics of asymmetrically positioned roles, hidden/secret agendas and unequal consequences. Although decision making procedures are formally equal, roles differ in their exposure to risk. This allows advantage to compound over time whilst others are disadvantaged. This is supported by Ogul, who argues that assigning players distinct positional roles enhances engagement by encouraging interaction from differentiated perspectives.³

In line with Young's critique of meritocracy, equal participation, but varying assets within roles, make outcomes appear deserved rather than systemically produced. Players are therefore compelled to recognise that equal voice does not produce equal influence.⁴ As players are required to justify decisions collectively, while experiencing unequal outcomes individually, analysis of power emerges through gameplay rather than post-hoc explanation, ensuring an experiential understanding.

LO2: Analyse how institutional systems and policy decisions produce unequal outcomes for different social groups.

This outcome shifts the focus to the impact, requiring players to analyse inequality as a product of institutional design rather than individual intent. Drawing on Young's account of structural injustice, this outcome assumes that justice cannot be assessed solely by whether decision-making procedures are fair or inclusive; rather, it must account for how institutional processes distribute benefits and burdens across social groups. Similarly, Tilly demonstrates that inequality is often reproduced through routine organisational mechanisms that allocate

³ Ogul, N. (2024) *Designing educational games with role-playing elements to improve student engagement in the classroom*. Master's Thesis, University of Skövde, School of Informatics. Available at: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1879874/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (Accessed: [8th February, 2026]).

⁴ Young, M. (1958) *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. London: Thames & Hudson.

resources and risks unevenly over time, without requiring overt exclusion or discriminatory intent.

The primary mechanic used to support this LO was dilemma cards that present unavoidable trade-offs. This is designed as decisions with no morally optimal solution, or binary Yes/No. The dilemmas ensure that harm emerges through routine institutional operation rather than malicious choices or intent. This reflects real-world policy contexts characterised by what Calabresi and Bobbitt describe as “tragic choices,”⁵ where decision-makers must select between competing goods under conditions in which harm is unavoidable. By removing the possibility of a morally optimal choice, the dilemma mechanic prevents players from attributing harm to bad actors, instead directing analysis toward institutional design and cumulative decision-making processes.

LO3: Critically evaluate how systemic pressure constrains governance decision-making, narrowing the space for reform and incentivising stability-oriented policies even at the expense of justice.

The mechanic that supports this outcome is the crisis escalation/system pressure mechanic. As the game is played, reform-oriented decisions become progressively riskier as instability increases, while stability-focused policies appear increasingly necessary to avoid a system shock or collapse.

Drawing on Shklar’s liberalism of fear⁶, the game demonstrates how institutions lower their moral ambitions under threat. Through this mechanism combined with the dilemma cards, justice is not consciously rejected but priced out as the system prioritises survival. Players therefore experience how governance under crisis narrows the policy space, incentivising a more stable approach over justice even when outcomes are recognised as unjust. This constraint is further intensified by the private agenda’s mechanic, which encourages players

⁵ Calabresi, G. and Bobbitt, P.C. (1978) *Tragic choices*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

⁶ Shklar, J. N. (1989)

The Liberalism of Fear.

In: Rosenblum, N. (ed.) *Liberalism and the Moral Life*.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

to prioritise role-specific survival or success under pressure. This was particularly relevant to the ‘Elite’ players who began to see justice/stability focused reforms as risky and negative, rather than necessary responses to inequality.

LO4: Reflect on how power and responsibility are distributed and negotiated within systems facing crisis.

This learning outcome foregrounds the reflective dimension of the game, encouraging players to critically examine how responsibility for harm is justified and negotiated within collective decision-making processes. Through the mechanics of collective decision-making, voting and asymmetric consequence resolution, responsibility is diffused across the group while harm remains unevenly distributed. This tension between shared decision-making and unequal impact encourages reflection on how power operates through distance from consequence rather than direct control. Structured post-round reflection prompts function as a deliberate debriefing mechanism, ensuring that responsibility for harm is explicitly examined rather than left implicit. This corresponds to Kolb’s reflective observation⁷ phase, although the game intentionally positions reflection after harm has occurred, intensifying awareness of responsibility rather than enabling hypothetical reasoning.

⁷ Kolb - Kolb, D. A. (1984)
Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development.
Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

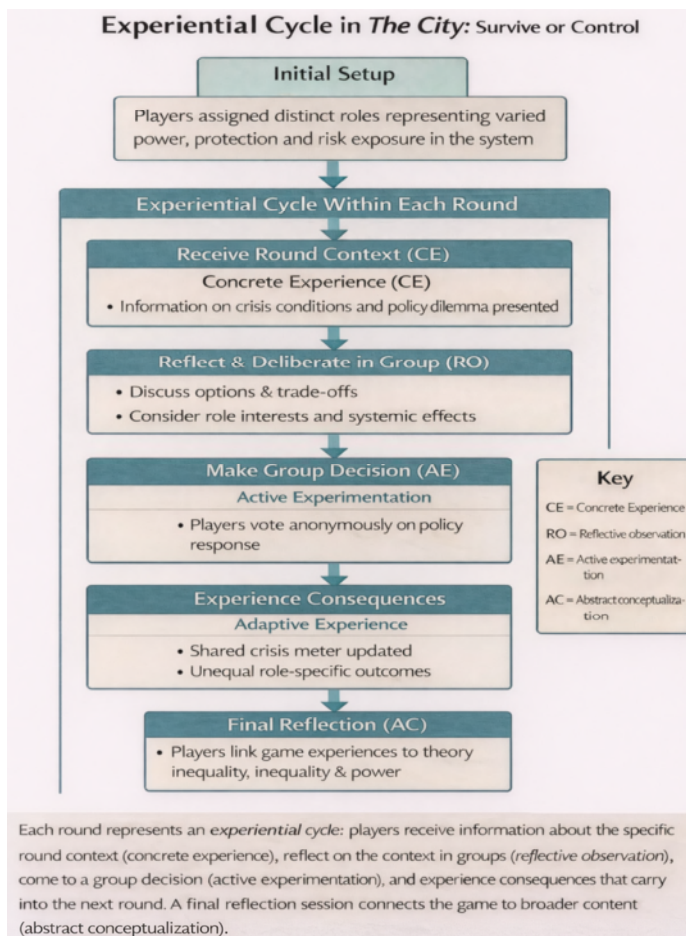


Figure 1: *Experiential Cycle embedded within each round of The City: Survive or Control.* (Diagram generated using ChatGPT, 2026, based on author-designed game mechanics)

Design of the Game

Figure 1 visualises the experiential learning structure embedded within *The City*. Each round is deliberately designed to map onto Kolb's experiential learning cycle⁸, moving from exposure to crisis conditions (concrete experience), through collective deliberation (reflective observation), to anonymous policy decisions (active experimentation), followed by structured reflection linking outcomes to theory (abstract conceptualisation).

The game's design was structured using the Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics (MDA) framework.⁹ During early design stages, symmetrical roles and evenly distributed consequences were

considered. While such designs preserved surface-level fairness, they failed to represent governance accurately, as they implied that injustice resulted from poor decision-making rather than systemic constraint and lack of capital. Drawing on Salen and Zimmerman's concept of meaningful play¹⁰, early playtesting revealed that extended deliberation without consequence weakened the learning outcome by disconnecting player decisions from systemic cost. In response, a crisis escalation mechanic was introduced and integrated with

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Hunnicke, R., LeBlanc, M. and Zubek, R. (2004) MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research. In: Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI, San Jose, California. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228884866_MDA_A_Formal_Approach_to_Game_Design_and_Game_Research (Accessed: [8th February, 2026]).

¹⁰ Salen, K. and Zimmerman, E. (2004) Rules of play: Game design fundamentals. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Word count – 1591
U2205047

time-limited discussion phases of five minutes, ensuring that systemic pressure was experienced rather than merely discussed (see Figure 2).

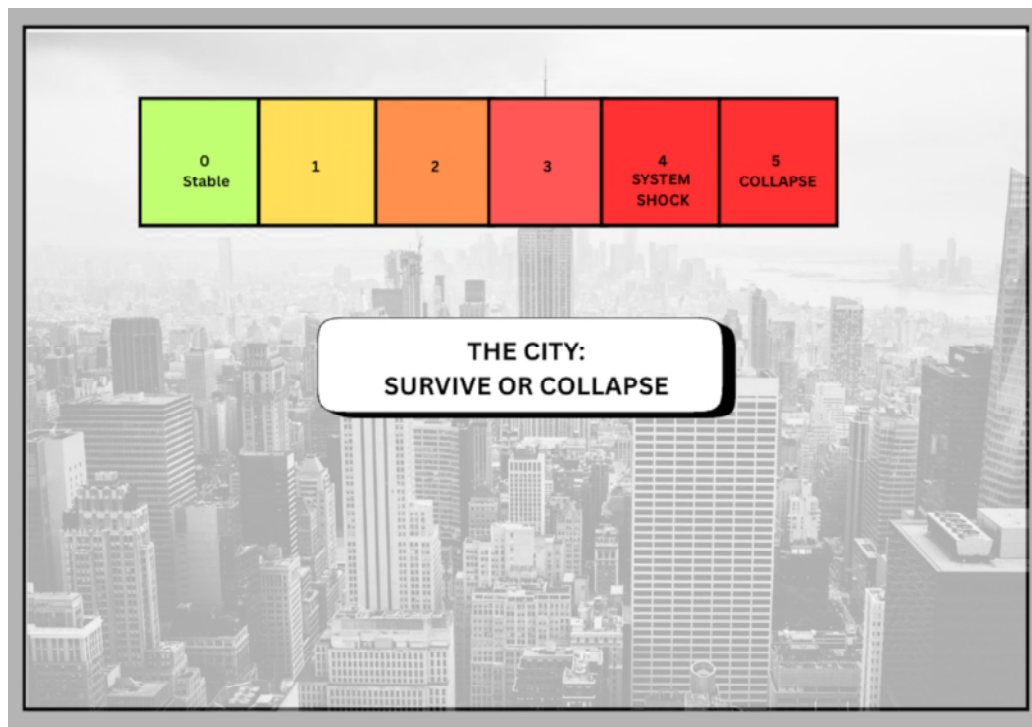


Figure 2: Crisis Escalation mechanic used to track increasing pressure across rounds.

When combined with asymmetrically positioned roles and private agendas (see appendix A), these mechanics generated consistent player dynamics. For instance, as pressure increased reform-oriented players became more risk averse and altered their appeal for changes, not because of prevention, but because reform came to feel like a losing battle and risky. In contrast, elite-positioned players thrived, while more vulnerable roles experienced frustration, an asymmetry that was deliberately retained to mirror how insulation from risk reshapes perceptions of urgency and acceptable harm within real institutional systems.

At the aesthetic level, the game was intentionally designed to produce tension and moral frustration. Through the MDA lens, crisis escalation (mechanic) generated constrained deliberation (dynamic), producing an experience in which justice felt progressively unaffordable (aesthetic). This affective response was not incidental but central to the game's educational purpose, foregrounding the emotional dimensions of governance under pressure and supporting higher-order reflection on responsibility and legitimacy.

Success is defined asymmetrically across roles to prevent players from interpreting outcomes through a universal metric of winning. This was deliberately avoided to ensure that inequality is not reframed as a matter of player skill and to draw attention to reflection, rather than winning in a tradition sense. This design choice reinforces the learning objective that institutional stability and individual success do not align evenly across social positions, and that some actors benefit from crisis conditions while others bear disproportionate cost. This asymmetrical definition of success aligns with Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric, whereby games make arguments through the structure of their rules.¹¹

Finally, accessibility considerations informed the game's visual design. Drawing on cognitive load theory¹² and universal design principles, a minimalist board layout and clearly labelled crisis meter were adopted to reduce extraneous cognitive burden and ensure accessibility for non-gamers.

Prototyping and Playtesting

All playtesting was conducted under approved ethical clearance, with participant feedback anonymised. Prototypes and supporting materials are provided in Appendices A–G.

<u>Playtesting Observation</u>	<u>What does this reveal about mechanics/learning</u>	<u>Design Response</u>
Players engaged in prolonged discussion during early rounds.	Unrestricted discussion prevented systemic pressure from being experienced. The dilemma mechanic successfully prompted debate, but without temporal or structural constraint, players could resolve tensions through deliberation alone. This meant that Learning Outcome 3 (constraint under pressure) remained conceptual rather than experiential.	Time-limited discussion phases of up to five minutes were introduced, ensuring that deliberation remained constrained while still allowing meaningful engagement with the dilemma.

¹¹ Bogost, I. (2007) *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹² Bruner, J. S. (1960) *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Elite did not engage with learning outcomes in the same way as other roles.	Asymmetric role allocation to consequences produced uneven learning experiences across roles. Drawing on Kolb's experiential learning cycle, the Elite endured a prolonged period within abstract conceptualisation due to insulation from consequence, while exposed roles engaged in more reflective observation.	Targeted reflective prompts were introduced for the Elite to encourage post-round engagement with responsibility and insulation, without equalising experiential exposure (see appendix G).
The 'Rebel' was blamed for instability rather than structural constraint.	During reflection, one player asked, " <i>Why do you keep trying to ruin everything?</i> ", attributing instability to the Rebel's reform advocacy.	This interpretation was treated as analytically productive. Retaining this dynamic reinforces Learning Outcome 3 by exposing how justice becomes politically suspect under crisis and 4 by highlighting the negotiation of responsibility.
Players developed a shared understanding of resource scarcity as a structuring constraint rather than a temporary problem.	Players internalised scarcity as persistent rather than temporary (" <i>we're running out of room to do anything ambitious</i> "), indicating successful experiential learning. Decision-making shifted from desirability to affordability.	No design change required. The crisis meter and resource mechanics were validated as effectively communicating constraint through play.

Figure 3: Table showing Iterative Playtesting Observations and Outcomes.

These observations demonstrate that the game largely produces the intended dynamics.

While playtesting cannot capture the full complexity of real-world institutional systems, it provided insight into whether the game's mechanics generated the intended learning objectives. Playtesting was therefore used as a design validation process to assess whether the game functioned as intended concerning alignment between mechanics and learning objectives, rather than to evaluate learning outcomes. This approach is consistent with Duke's characterisation of serious games as exploratory models for examining system dynamics rather than predictive instruments.¹³

Results/What Next

One viable adaptation would be a digital or hybrid version of the game. Automation can enhance learning where it reduces administrative burden without reducing conceptual friction.¹⁴ Automating crisis escalation and role-specific consequences would ensure that systemic pressure is applied consistently, preventing facilitator intervention from softening constraint. Crucially, this would not alter player agency but would instead intensify the experience of governance under externally imposed limits, directly supporting for instance, Learning Outcome 3.

¹³ Duke, R. (2021) Gaming the future's language: Games and serious play in futures education. ISAGA. Available at: https://isaga.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/74duke-gaming_the_futures_language.pdf (Accessed: [8th February, 2026]).

¹⁴ Crookall, David. (2011). Serious games, debriefing, and simulation/gaming as a discipline. *Simulation & Gaming*. 41. 898-920.

Bibliography

Bloom, B. S. (1956) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals*. Handbook I: Cognitive Domain. New York: Longmans, Green.fcal

Bogost, I. (2007) *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1986) 'The Forms of Capital'. In: Richardson, J. (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood Press, pp. 241–258.

Bruner, J. S. (1960) *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Calabresi, G. and Bobbitt, P.C. (1978) *Tragic choices*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

ChatGPT (2026). AI-generated diagram created using ChatGPT (OpenAI), February 2026. Used to visualise the author's original game design concepts.

Crookall, D. (2011) 'Serious games, debriefing, and simulation/gaming as a discipline', *Simulation & Gaming*, 41(6), pp. 898–920.

Duke, R. D. (1974) *Gaming: The Future's Language*. Available at: https://isaga.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/74duke-gaming_the_futures_language.pdf (Accessed: 8 February 2026).

Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M. and Zubek, R. (2004) 'MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research'. In: *Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI*, San Jose, California. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228884866_MDA_A_Formal_Approach_to_Game_Design_and_Game_Research (Accessed: 8 February 2026).

Word count – 1591
U2205047

Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Ogul, M. (2024) [Title of thesis/report]. Available at: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1879874/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
(Accessed: 8 February 2026).

Salen, K. and Zimmerman, E. (2004) *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Shklar, J. N. (1989) 'The Liberalism of Fear'. In: Rosenblum, N. (ed.) *Liberalism and the Moral Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

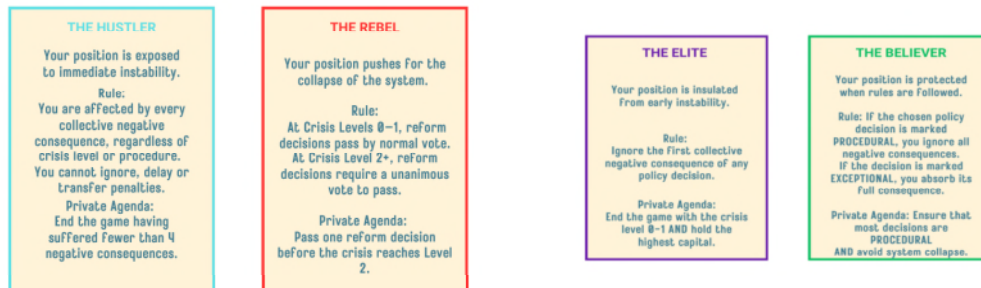
Young, I. M. (2011) *Responsibility for Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Young, M. (1958) *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Word count – 1591
U2205047

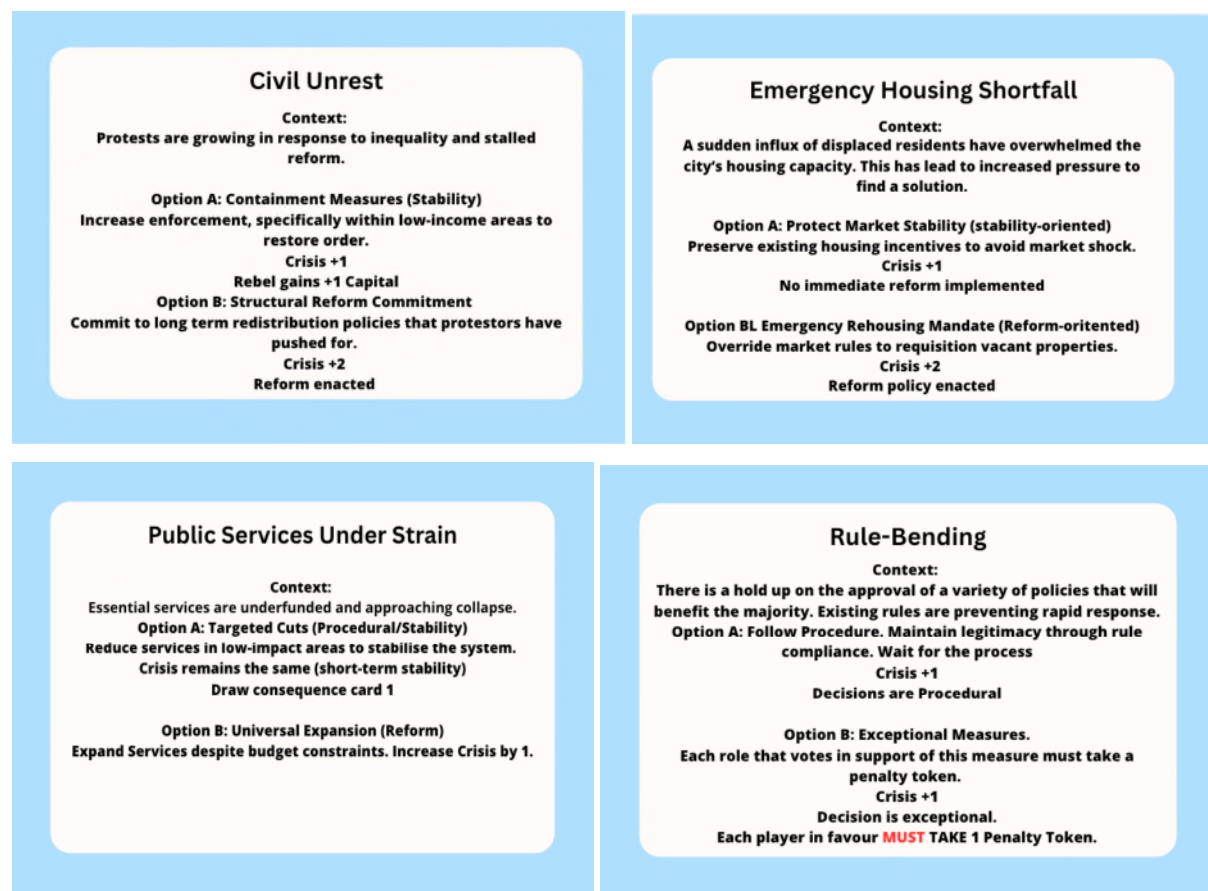
The following assets (Items A–G) are the digital designs for the physical prototype of City:
Survive or Control.

Appendix A: Components – Role Cards

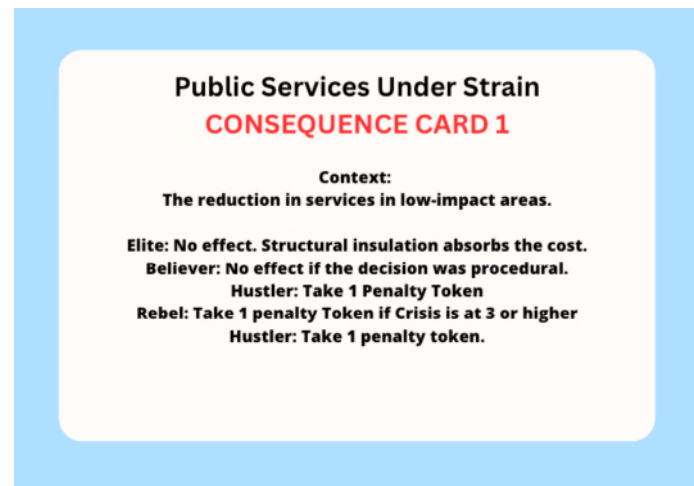
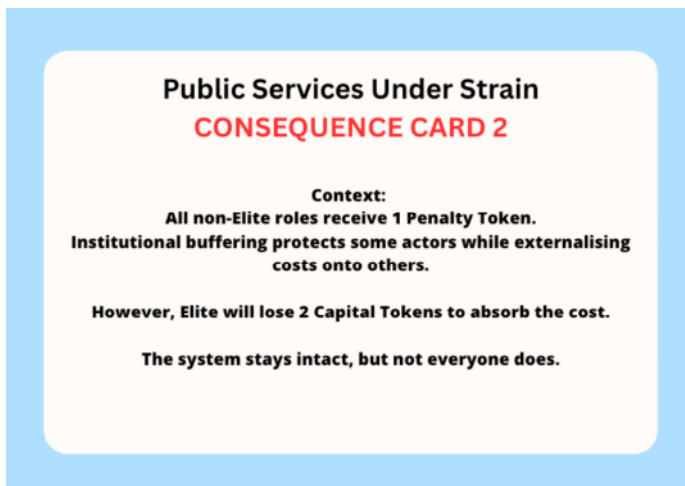


Appendix B: Components – Dilemma Cards.

This appendix presents a sample selection of the dilemma cards used in the game. The full deck contains additional dilemmas following the same design logic.



Appendix C: Components – Consequence Cards



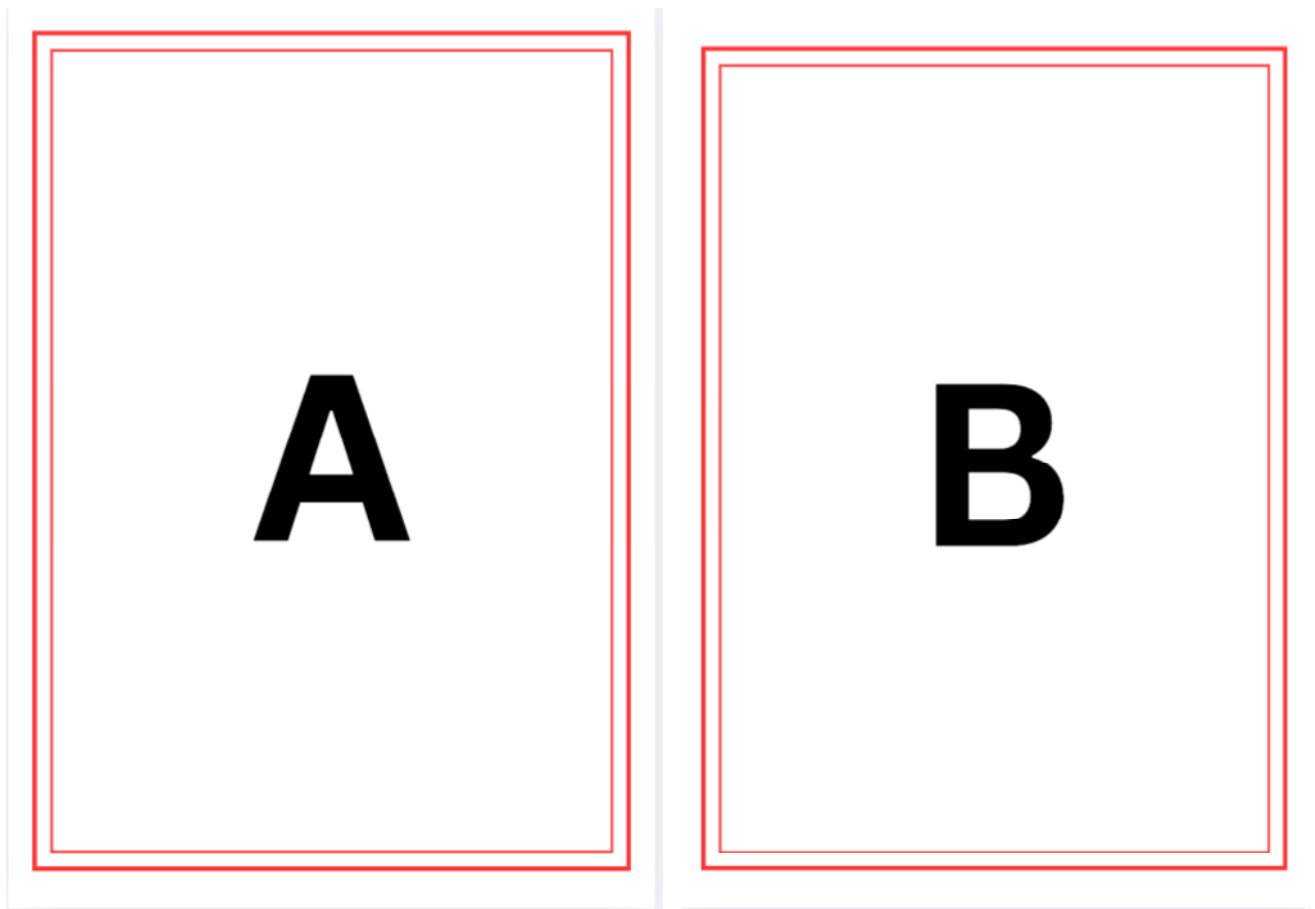
Appendix D: Penalty Token



Appendix E: Capital Token



Appendix F: Voting Cards



Appendix G: Reflective Prompt Questions for Elite (found in Rulebook)

