

Towards a Politics of Video Games: Conceptualizing the Study of Video Games in Political Science

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The study of video games in political science remains fragmented and underdeveloped. Political science has examined other cultural mediums, from television to cinema, yet left video games, which offer deeper immersion and now dwarf both in scale, a niche area of study. This is a grave blind spot: video games transmit political meaning to a global audience, and are political objects shaped by the same regulatory, industrial, and geopolitical forces political science studies elsewhere. This article proposes two subfields: games as sites of political meaning, and games as political objects, examining how games are regulated and operate within global governance. Within each, I put forward foundational concepts: virtual agency and representational politics for the former, gaming spheres of influence, governance, and political economy for the latter. Four case studies, Silent Hill f, Cyberpunk 2077, Fallout 4, and Black Myth: Wukong, demonstrate these concepts, establishing the first research agenda for this field.

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Video games have become central cultural artifacts of contemporary society. Since early titles such as *Pong* (Atari 1972) and *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984) popularized the medium, video games have developed into a global industry characterized by immersive gameplay, complex narrative worlds, and sustained player engagement on a scale comparable to — and often exceeding — film and television. Today, video games shape popular culture, technological development, and global markets, yet their political significance remains underexamined within political science. Given the discipline's long-standing engagement with culture as a site of political meaning, this absence presents a puzzling blind spot. As such, this article establishes the politics of video games as a cohesive field and research agenda. It provides the first systematic vocabulary for studying video games within political science — as sites of political immersion, in which players engage with ideological assumptions through gameplay and story telling, and as political objects shaped by regulation, industry, and geopolitics. Games here are understood broadly, spanning immersive narrative titles, multiplayer console games, and mobile games.

Political science has engaged with other forms of media as serious cultural artifacts deserving of disciplinary attention, with cinema and television being prime examples. Cinema has often been at the forefront of this engagement, with focused analysis of how film depicts race, nations, and political practice (see: Shapiro 1999). More recently, the rise of prestige television, including series such as *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011–2019) and *The West Wing* (NBC 1999–2006), has prompted scholars to critically analyze depictions of international relations (Dyson 2015) and the American presidency (Rollins and O'Connor 2003), while other work has examined how entertainment media more broadly shapes political attitudes and beliefs (see: Jones and Paris 2018; Kim and Patterson 2025). These examples demonstrate that political science has treated fictional cultural media as analytically rich sites of political meaning,

representation and ideological contestation. However, video games have not received the same level of attention and remain subject to a fragmented political science engagement that has yet to develop a systematic framework for analysing them as both cultural texts and as political objects embedded in wider industrial and geopolitical contexts.

Where video games do appear in political science scholarship, they tend to be addressed only sporadically, often through isolated analyses of industry practices or narrative content (e.g. Ernkvist and Ström 2008; Hammar 2020), lacking a cohesive research agenda with shared norms and language. More broadly, political science has largely neglected video games along two analytically distinct but interconnected dimensions. First, games are rarely examined as sites of political immersion, in which players actively engage with ideological assumptions through participation in narrative and rule-based systems rather than passive observation. Szarejko (2026) shows the interpretive payoff of this approach, demonstrating through his analysis of Indigenous relationalism in Indigenous-designed games how video games can illuminate broader political ideas and social relations, but such work remains an isolated intervention rather than part of a cumulative research agenda, underscoring the need for the foundational groundwork this article seeks to establish. Second, video games are seldom treated as political objects beyond the screen, embedded within state regulation, market governance, and international political dynamics. The neglect of both dimensions has limited the discipline's ability to account for how political ideas, institutional logics, and geopolitical narratives circulate through one of the most influential cultural forms of the contemporary period.

This article argues that political science must move toward a politics of video games that takes both dimensions seriously. Such an approach treats games simultaneously as rich political texts — capable of staging ideological conflicts, models of authority, and imaginaries of

resistance through immersive systems — and as political objects shaped by the institutional contexts of their production, regulation, and global circulation. Rather than privileging narrative over industry, or cultural analysis over international politics, a politics of video games insists that political meaning emerges through the interaction of on-screen immersion and off-screen institutional forces. Importantly, this perspective does not depend on claims about direct persuasion or measurable changes in political behavior. Instead, it recognizes video games as structured political environments in which players encounter and negotiate political ideas experientially, while those environments themselves are shaped by large corporations, state interests, regulatory regimes, and geopolitical competition. By foregrounding both immersion and institutional context, political analysis of video games can contribute to political theory, comparative politics, and international relations, offering new ways to understand how political narratives and logics are produced, constrained, and reproduced in global cultural industries.

To demonstrate how such an approach can be operationalized, the article analyzes four contemporary video games as illustrative case studies: *Silent Hill f* (2025), *Fallout 4* (2015), *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), and *Black Myth: Wukong* (2024). These titles were selected for their cultural prominence, commercial success, variation in game design and regional diversity. Together, they reflect distinct political, cultural, and institutional contexts commonly associated with Japan and East Asia, the United States, Europe, and China. Examining how political narratives and systems are articulated within these games — and situating them within their broader production and regulatory environments — allows the article to illustrate how political science can engage video games as serious objects of analysis without reducing them to mere entertainment or speculative media effects.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section establishes the relevance of video games as sites of political meaning and as political objects. It then develops a conceptual framework for a politics of video games, introducing a set of terms for studying games both as sites of political meaning and immersion and as political objects shaped by governance, industry, and geopolitics. For games as sites of political meaning, I introduce the concepts of virtual agency and representational politics; for games as political objects, I put forward gaming spheres of influence, gaming governance, and gaming political economy. Following this, the article outlines its methodological approach and the logic behind its case selection, before turning to four illustrative case studies: *Silent Hill f* (2025), *Fallout 4* (2015), *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), and *Black Myth: Wukong* (2024). The cases examine a small number of in-game political dynamics, including narrative, immersive, and systemic elements, while also identifying broader off-screen political contexts that demonstrate the potential for studying games as political objects. Given the scope of the article, the cases focus primarily on political meaning within games, with the off-screen dimension developed more fully in the conceptual framework. The conclusion closes the article, reflecting on the implications of this approach for political theory, comparative politics, and international relations, and outlining a short research agenda identifying avenues for future study within the subfield.

Why video games matter for political science

The scale of the video game industry makes its limited engagement within political science all the more striking. As of 2022, the video game industry generated an estimated \$184.4 billion in revenue, compared with \$26.2 billion for the recorded music industry and \$26 billion in global box office revenue for the film industry (Arora 2023). This economic significance is

accompanied by a vast global audience, with the number of video game players estimated at approximately two billion worldwide (Stoll 2025). These figures demonstrate that video games are no longer a niche entertainment medium but one of the central cultural industries of the contemporary era. The absence of a cohesive subfield in political science represents a significant blind spot, one with consequences for both empirical inquiry and theoretical development. Games are not only major economic objects but also central sites through which narratives, social imaginaries, and representations of the world are produced and circulated — and, distinctively, experienced — among global audiences.

Unlike film, television, and literature, video games combine narrative with interactive systems, allowing players to encounter political ideas not only through observation but through direct participation in the worlds they inhabit. Players do not merely consume these narratives; they engage with them through mechanics, rules, and systems that structure how power, conflict, authority, and social organization are experienced within the game. Take *Final Fantasy VII* (Square Enix 1997) as a clear example, a game of great significance in its own right, critically acclaimed and popular (see: Bukač and Katić 2024). The game's story centers on a group of rebels seeking to overthrow a repressive company that runs the city in which they live and large parts of the world. The story itself evokes an environmentalist critique of environmental exploitation, which has been recognized in segments of the literature (see: Law 2025). What makes this even more compelling, however, is that the exact environmental exploitation the rebels seek to end is itself a material and gameplay mechanic that players interact with directly — players use a refined version of this same material to enhance their characters in combat. While the game does not dwell on this tension during the campaign, it offers a compelling intersection between the story's critique and the mechanics players actually use. This illustrates

two things: players are themselves implicated in the very problems facing the world of the game, and video games move beyond linear media by allowing player decisions to intersect directly with key elements of the story being told. For political scientists, this opens several avenues of inquiry: how players feel about their implication in something that can be framed as "ecoterrorism," how players reconcile using the resource their hero seeks to abolish, and what such implication can tell us about environmental activism and political mobilization in the world itself.

The existing academic literature, though scattered, already offers strong illustrations of what a cohesive field of inquiry could look like, one capable of advancing our understanding of a medium of growing global importance. Games as sites of political meaning and immersion have seen foundational literature dating back to the 2000s (see: Bogost 2006), when the industry and medium was in the process of establishing the framework for what it is today. One of the most popular gaming franchises, *Call of Duty*², a first-person shooter (FPS) with both single-player and multiplayer elements, has received some attention in academic literature. The game allows players to take on the role of soldiers in various fictional and non-fictional wars, from World War II to fictional near-future conflicts. Gagnon (2010) provides a relevant example of the study of such games, analyzing *Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward 2007) and *Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward 2009) and arguing that they have "at least the potential to" encourage players to "embrace militarism" (Gagnon 2010, p. 14). While straying from the hysterics that surrounded the video game industry for decades over fears that games encourage violence (see: US House of Representatives 2006), Gagnon is careful to affirm that these games do not necessarily make players want to join the military or support wars (Gagnon 2010, p. 14). The article nonetheless

² Call of Duty has generated an estimated \$30 billion in lifetime revenue as of 2022 (Statista Research Department 2022).

illustrates the capacity of such games to serve as immersive sites of political meaning, capable of shaping how players encounter and understand militarism and conflict.

While games have long been associated with how violence is portrayed, the medium's growing narrative depth has increasingly enabled it to tackle more complex and analytically rich political issues. However, political analyses of video games largely remain single-theory analysis of single titles, as opposed to comparative cases or multiple theoretical approaches applied simultaneously. Packer (2010) illustrates this well, analyzing *Bioshock* (Irrational Games 2007), a first-person story game set in a dystopian alternative history where society lives away from the surface, through the lens of objectivism, arguing that the underwater city's collapse into chaos is the result of laissez-faire politics. This interestingly points to how these games ought to be debated by political scientists. While Packer's account is without a doubt a compelling explanation, it should not be treated as the definitive account. Political scientists should have been debating the meaning of this game for the past decade, using multiple theoretical approaches, comparative case studies of similar titles, and sustained frameworks applied across subsequent games, rather than a litany of one-off readings. This could have brought further insights into what the game means for players, and how it can echo patterns in society off-screen. Packer also makes a good point about how players become implicated in the very structures the game's narrative critiques: "to succeed at the game the player must engage in those very practices the game criticizes" (Packer 2010, p. 221). This is a compelling but understudied phenomenon in gaming: players are not just told a story that critiques a system, they are forced to participate in that system to advance. This tension between what the game says and what the game makes players do is exactly the kind of dynamic political scientists ought to dissect further. Taken

together, this literature illustrates the fragmented state of political science engagement with video games, showing the need for the cohesive research agenda developed here.

While the literature on games as sites of political meaning has slowly developed, albeit in a fragmented state, the study of video games as political objects has seen far less development. The most foundational piece of literature in the study of games as political objects is Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter's (2009) work, which situates video games within the global capitalist system, arguing that games condition players to accept the competitive, precarious demands of contemporary work. While very much a product of its time — examining the medium through the lens of what the authors term "Empire" (see also: Hardt and Negri 2000), and written against a backdrop in which the general public remained largely skeptical of games and their influence on players (US House of Representatives 2006) — the book nonetheless illustrates a substantive approach to analyzing the video game industry as a global political-economic system.

Beyond this foundational book, further studies of games as political objects remain fragmented and disconnected from one another. Hammar (2020) exemplifies this fragmentation, arguing that the gaming industry functions as part of "an imperialist economic system." While Hammar's claims about chauvinism and fascism within the industry and player community are provocative and could productively spark debate, the absence of interjection from the broader political science community has left such claims to stand as a reigning account within the discipline. Elsewhere, scattered literature has begun to explore how states use video games as instruments of soft power to project cultural and political influence. Yuan (2024) argues that China has used its gaming industry, particularly through the developer and publisher Tencent³, as

³ Tencent is a Chinese video game vendor, producer, developer, and technology conglomerate with substantial influence over the industry through the games it publishes and its overall market scale (see: Tang 2019).

a vehicle for exactly this kind of influence, noting that "Tencent has not only showcased Chinese culture but also facilitated a form of digital cultural diplomacy" (Yuan 2024, p. 19). Wang and Wang (2025) reach a similar conclusion in their review of *Black Myth: Wukong* specifically, arguing that the game supports appreciation for Chinese culture through the representation of Chinese myth, thereby supporting China's soft power strategy. Such research demonstrates that games are political artifacts, actively instrumentalized by political actors, and that political science has been slow to treat them as such. Therefore, there is clear merit in studying both what these games represent on screen, how they are instrumentalized off of it and the connections between them.

Towards a conceptual framework

In this section, I establish a series of concepts to build the foundation for a common terminology and shared focus for the field. These concepts are organized into two distinct but related subfields of the politics of video games: games as sites of political meaning and immersion, and games as political objects. The former comprises two concepts, virtual agency and representational politics; the latter comprises three, gaming spheres of influence, gaming governance, and gaming political economy. These five concepts are not offered as exhaustive, but as scaffolding: a foundation from which future scholarship can branch, refine, and build. These concepts draw on and are indebted to existing scholarship in game studies, media studies, and political economy. What this article offers is the first systematic and schematic framework organizing these ideas into a coherent, named taxonomy for political science specifically. Each concept is grounded in existing literature, but named and defined here for the first time as part of

a coherent framework for political science, and each will be illustrated directly through the case studies that follow.

Before moving to the concepts, this article first offers a definition for the scope of what it considers video games. Video games are understood as interactive environments involving players and virtual mechanics, through which structured play, systems, player input, and clear objectives shape what occurs on screen. In scope, this includes immersive narrative-driven games, as studied here, alongside life sims and multiplayer games, across consoles, computers, and mobile devices. This importantly does not include gambling apps. While some video games incorporate in-game gambling aspects, such as the loot boxes discussed later, gambling apps themselves are excluded from the scope of video games, as their purpose is gambling rather than structured gameplay. This also excludes platforms such as Second Life (Linden Lab 2003–), which lack the clear objectives apparent in standard video games, despite sharing surface-level similarities such as open-endedness with titles like life sims.

Concepts for games as sites of political meaning and immersion

Virtual agency

One of the defining features of video games as a cultural artifact is that they allow individuals to actively participate in the work itself, rather than merely observe it. Players are not simply witnessing a story; they are picking up the controller and either guiding a character through it or becoming the protagonist themselves. To encapsulate this phenomenon, I put forward the concept of "virtual agency," which holds that players are active participants in narrative structures, and that through gameplay mechanics, inventory systems, and moment-to-moment decisions, players exercise real agency within these virtual worlds. In line

with Bódi (2023, p. 2), this is not meant to narrowly focus on games where players can alter the story's outcome, though this remains an important area demanding political inquiry, with *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios 2023) serving as a compelling example given the extensive player freedom afforded by its cRPG (computer role-playing game⁴) mechanics. Rather, the focus here is on gameplay mechanic participation itself as a form of agency. For the study of politics, this positions players within a far more immersive environment, one in which political themes present in the game, from structural inequality to revolution, are negotiated through the player's own agentic participation. This goes beyond agency alone, however. Players are often rendered implicit in the very stories they inhabit: what does it mean for a player to use a resource that the game's own protagonists claim is actively harming the environment, as in *Final Fantasy VII's* (Square Enix 1997) materia system? This tension between narrative critique and mechanical participation opens a genuinely novel line of inquiry for political scientists: not just how games portray political ideas, but how players come to enact, resist, or internalize them through their own virtual agency.

Representational politics

As with other cultural mediums, video games provide a robust arena for depicting political meaning. World design and narrative choices can reflect political themes present in our own world, while also revealing how a game's creators represent — sometimes inadvertently — cultures, peoples, and worldviews. As such, I put forward the concept of "representational politics," which holds that video games encode political meaning through their world building, level design, gameplay systems (including inventory items and their descriptions), and narrative. As will be demonstrated across all of the case studies, each game builds worlds that encode

⁴ Computer RPGs typically provide more immersive in-game mechanics than standard RPGs, offering deeper inventory systems, NPC interaction, and player influence over the game's story.

political meaning, from how a game portrays authoritarianism or democracy to more specific issues such as femininity, as will be discussed in the *Silent Hill f* case. Taking this further, games can also inadvertently reveal how one part of the world constructs its own identity through its depiction of others, as argued by Martin (2018), who shows how *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom 2009) uses its African setting and Black and White character archetypes as reference points through which a Japanese racial and colonial identity is constructed. Beyond representing identity and worldview, video game worlds are living, breathing places, capable of representing systems that cinema, television, and literature cannot. RPGs, for instance, typically operate with functioning economies, currency systems, and non-player characters (NPCs) simulating daily life, participating in markets, and offering goods or services, as seen in both *Fallout 4* and *Cyberpunk 2077*. This has been engaged with in academic literature discussing how economies function within games, albeit as one of several scattered interventions rather than a sustained line of inquiry (see: Giddings 2018). In more advanced systems, entire governing structures can be simulated. What do such in-game economic systems represent, and what can they reveal about real-world economic theory and political order? As such, representational politics captures both how games depict political themes and how they simulate the very systems that structure political and economic life.

Concepts for games as political objects

Gaming spheres of influence

Much like the world of international relations, the video game industry is shaped by developers and countries that group themselves together based on shared interests, themes, and methods. Games can be understood not only as products of the regions in which they are made,

but as reflections of that region's broader approach to storytelling, game design, and political influence. This is a different axis of classification than genre or subgenre. Categories such as the Japanese role-playing game (JRPG) or the "souls-like,"⁵ both subgenres defined primarily by shared mechanics and conventions, can include titles developed across many different countries and regions, grouped by how a game plays rather than by the political and cultural context of its production. Knowing that a game is a JRPG says nothing about the political economy, regulatory environment, or cultural environment that produced it, precisely the gap gaming spheres of influence is designed to fill. As such, I argue that the gaming industry as it stands today can also be understood through this concept, a way of grouping game design, storytelling, and political context into the dominant spheres of the gaming world.

While the industry is in near-constant flux, I put forward four contemporary primary spheres, aligning with the four case studies developed in this article. The first is the United States, which has a long-established track record of developing influential titles like *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) and, importantly, *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios 2015). Thematically, this sphere spans a wide range of genres and mechanics, but its titles are consistently anchored in engagement with American identity, institutions, and history — capitalism, militarism, and the frontier myth recur across otherwise disparate games.

The second sphere of influence is East Asia, encompassing countries with large gaming industries such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. These countries are tied together by geographic and economic proximity, and by a shared commercially-driven, export-oriented approach to the industry. This has not only succeeded in exporting East Asian culture through

⁵ Souls-like" refers to a gaming subgenre based on the Dark Souls titles by FromSoftware. These games are typically known for their third-person perspective, high difficulty, and indirect, near-whispered storytelling.

storytelling, but has also deeply shaped the industry as a whole through the establishment of subgenres such as JRPGs and "souls-likes."

The third sphere of influence is Europe, broadly understood to include EU countries, the UK, and Russia. The EU has repeatedly signaled interest in regulating the video game industry, with consumer protection often central — most notably efforts to restrict loot boxes, a mechanic widely criticized as a form of paid gambling for in-game resources, common in multiplayer games. Within this more heavily regulated environment, narrative-driven games have flourished, with *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red 2020), discussed in this piece, serving as a prime example. Games such as *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios 2018) similarly draw on regional history, while others engage directly with the legacy of post-communism in Eastern Europe and the tensions of capitalism — together illustrating a distinct regional approach to game design and storytelling.

The fourth and final sphere of influence is China — a comparatively recent entrant, but one where state support and interest in developing the domestic industry underscore games' relevance as political objects. *Black Myth: Wukong* illustrates this development directly. As Yuan (2024) notes, China has sought to use gaming narratives and settings rooted in Chinese culture to advance its cultural influence abroad. *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science 2024) exemplifies this objective, building an action-RPG in the souls-like tradition that draws on established genre conventions while constructing an immersive, richly detailed world with strong gaming mechanics. While it remains to be seen how successful Chinese state support for game developers — and this broader approach to soft power — will prove, the game nonetheless demonstrates the direction this sphere of influence may be headed. Together, these four spheres offer only a starting sketch of a much larger phenomenon, one that merits its own sustained

study, and notably exclude regions such as Africa, Latin America, and South and Southeast Asia, where growing game industries are likely to reshape how these spheres of influence are balanced over time. This points to a further avenue for political science: tracking how such spheres shift and evolve rather than treating them as static. Nonetheless, they are sufficient here to demonstrate how games function as political objects within the broader arena of international relations, and to ground the comparative case selection this article develops further below.

Gaming governance

As with other industries, video games have increasingly drawn the attention of the public sphere, both through concerns over game content and the impact of purchasing mechanics such as loot boxes. Governments have responded to this attention in two main ways: by regulating game content directly, and, more recently, by promoting the industry through supportive policy. As such, I put forward the concept of "gaming governance," which captures both of these government efforts to shape the industry, whether through restriction or through promotion. This dual character can be traced back to the 1990s, when United States senators grew concerned with the rising popularity of violent video games such as *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games/NetherRealm Studios 1992–). During a public hearing, senators screened footage of the game's violent imagery, suggesting it was "destroying the moral fabric of society by encouraging unacceptably violent behavior" (Karlsen 2014, p. 8). While this debate now reads as a product of its era, driven by hysteria surrounding a new medium and ultimately unfounded claims about gaming's influence on real-world violence, it nonetheless marks an early instance of gaming governance in its regulatory form. A more modern instance has been the regulation of loot boxes, in-game purchases that provide players with randomized virtual items. This is most notably within the EU, where individual member states have taken varying regulatory approaches

following a 2020 EU Parliament-commissioned recommendation to treat the mechanic as a consumer protection issue, with public debate on the subject ongoing (see: Leahy 2022). Elsewhere, gaming governance has taken a different form, where countries such as China have supported their domestic gaming industry through direct government policy (see: Ernkvist and Ström 2008). Together, these developments illustrate an evolving concept of gaming governance, where states now regulate, restrict, and support the industry in equal measure. This is not a minor administrative matter. If governments can shape what stories get told and what industries get built in one of the most-consumed cultural mediums on earth, then gaming governance is not just an industry question, it is a question of how states shape political belief at scale, largely without scrutiny.

Gaming political economy

While arguably the most obvious of the concepts put forward here, gaming political economy remains strikingly underdeveloped in political science. As previously mentioned, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009) remain the cornerstone of this branch of study, situating video games within the broader structures of global capitalism. In their vein, gaming political economy is concerned with how labor, markets, corporations, and governments shape the industry's landscape, whether through labor conditions (see: Bulut 2020), ownership structures, or capital concentration. The industry's bedrock is built on a handful of multinational giants: Electronic Arts (EA), producer of the *FC* series (formerly *FIFA*) (Electronic Arts 1993–present), and Ubisoft, known for *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007–present), dominate what the industry calls "Triple-A" titles, so named for their scale of investment. This concentration has consequences: “the top 10 titles on each platform capture approximately 50% to 60% of total revenue for active games,” (Plantec and Christofferson 2025). The dominance of these

megacorporations has squeezed out mid-tier "Double-A" studios, even as independent "indie" developers have carved out space largely untouched by this same pressure. Political science has said almost nothing about what this concentration of capital and labor within a handful of firms means, not just for the games industry, but for how we understand capital concentration in cultural industries more broadly. Moreover, the examples provided here are largely Western companies, pointing to a further area for study: focused analysis of gaming industries elsewhere, with potential for comparative work across the gaming spheres of influence.

Elsewhere, as mentioned, government influence in gaming through investment is also on the rise. In parallel, we have seen significant growth in gaming industry lobbying. Proffitt and Susca (2015) demonstrate this type of research well in their analysis of lobbying in the US that contributed to the defeat of a California law aimed at protecting minors from violent video games. While demonstrating the success industry heavyweights can have in influencing legislation, it also shows how they can inhibit public access to information. As such, this demonstrates another facet of gaming political economy, and an area likely to continue developing as the industry increases its fiscal and cultural influence. Therefore, it is paramount for political science to: (1) engage deeply with the themes within the games played, and (2) assess the political economy of games, from labor to lobbying, as the intersection of these two subfields will continue to outgrow the influence of other cultural mediums.

Analytical approach and case selection

This section outlines the methodological approach developed for this article to study games as both sites of political meaning and political objects, offered here as a foundation for other scholars to adopt, test, and refine, before explaining the logic behind the selection of the

four cases that follow. This study draws on narrative analysis (Riessman 2005), treating a game's story, dialogue, and visual presentation as sites where political meaning is constructed and communicated. Moreover, because games are interactive, they simulate agency: players do not merely observe the story but actively participate in and are often implicated by it. This makes games a distinctive site for analysis, allowing scholars to examine not only what a story means, but what it means for players to act it out — sometimes in ways that run counter to the story's own critique. As such, in the qualitative study of games' narratives, as was conducted for this piece, scholars must play the games themselves, taking detailed notes, capturing screenshots of key narrative moments, and recording key inventory items or mechanics. In contrast, games as political objects can take up an approach similar to that of many other industries studied by political scientists. Through this approach, we can examine the capitalist structuring of the industry (see: Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009), assess public statements by government officials pertaining to the industry, and evaluate the impact of government regulation or investment — all of which fit firmly within standard approaches in political science. Together, these approaches provide a replicable foundation for studying games both as texts and as objects, one that the following case selection puts into practice.

For this study, four games have been selected to conduct an illustrative comparative analysis. Each was selected for multiple reasons that together fill the breadth of this study: the richness of its narrative, its distinct genre (e.g., action RPG, action horror), its release date — allowing the cases to span a ten-year period — and its origin within one of the spheres of influence outlined above. Importantly, these four cases are immersive games. While they do not reflect the full range of the medium, such as multiplayer or mobile games, their shared status as immersive titles makes them broadly comparable across both games as sites of political meaning

and games as political objects. This immersion allows for analysis of virtual agency and representational politics. Games as political objects, by contrast, apply regardless of genre, as regulatory scrutiny of monetization in non-immersive titles such as *Candy Crush* (King 2012–) demonstrates. The cases here are *Silent Hill f* (Konami 2025), *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios 2015), *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red 2020), and *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science 2024). *Silent Hill f* is an action horror game developed by Taiwanese studio NeoBards Entertainment, set in 1960s Japan and centered on questions of feminine identity during the period. *Fallout 4* is an open world RPG set in a post nuclear war America, engaging themes of corporate critique and anti nuclear messaging. *Cyberpunk 2077* is an open world RPG developed by a Polish studio and based on a tabletop RPG, offering a critique of corporate technological power and structural inequality. *Black Myth: Wukong* is an action RPG developed by a Chinese game studio, which acts as a follow up to the story of *Journey to the West* and offers contemporary audiences an in-depth engagement with classical Chinese literature. Together, these four cases span a wide range of narrative territory, from feminism to capitalism, nuclearization, and history, while also showing, through the spheres of influence, how game development philosophy varies by region and interacts with global politics.

Case studies

In this section, I present an analysis of the case studies outlined above. Each case focuses primarily on the games as sites of political meaning concepts, virtual agency and representational politics, drawing on games as political objects concepts where the opportunity presents itself. Given the depth those latter concepts demand, however, their treatment here remains necessarily limited. As such, these cases serve as a demonstration of how political scientists might study

video games, ideally alongside relevant theories or theoretical frameworks drawn from the discipline to construct further arguments and approaches. They are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative: each game discussed here could easily sustain its own dedicated article, applying theory and engaging critically with the themes only introduced in this piece.

Silent Hill f

Silent Hill f offers a rich site for examining feminine identity in 1960s Japan, illustrating the concept of representational politics through its treatment of gender roles and the societal expectations placed on women. Players take on the role of Hinako, a teenage schoolgirl living in a rural Japanese village⁶. The game's events unfold after an unexplained occurrence empties the village of its residents, leaving Hinako and a handful of classmates behind as monsters begin to roam the streets. Roughly half the game takes place within the town itself, while other sequences guide Hinako through a spirit realm governed by a fox deity bound to a childhood friend, who seeks to force her into marriage to preserve his clan. The game's multiple, often contradictory endings resist easy resolution, but converge on a common theme: Hinako's struggle against an imposed, quasi-arranged marriage, with outcomes ranging from her violent breakdown and submission to outright rejection of the role forced upon her.

The game focuses on a protagonist grappling with gender roles, particularly through cutscene sequences and in-game items, a fertile area for further scholarly exploration. Hinako is often treated like one of the boys by her male friend Shu, who affectionately calls her "partner" ("aibō" in Japanese)⁷, a term originating from a make-believe game they played as children called Space Wars. Another schoolgirl, Rinko, questions this nickname, noting that the term

⁶ The game has been widely read as an homage to *Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly* (Tecmo 2003), a title influential in shaping the survival horror genre and games based on rural Japanese folk-horror.

⁷ *Silent Hill f* offers both English and Japanese voice dubs; this analysis draws on direct engagement with both versions.

carries a masculine, brotherly affection sitting outside conventional gender norms, and reinforces the point several times, even remarking that Hinako talks in a way that is "manly," (Konami 2025). A more visceral depiction of expected femininity, and Hinako's own relationship to it, appears in one of the game's recurring enemies: walking female mannequins, some dressed in schoolgirl outfits, others entirely nude, moving in a stilted, jagged gait, their hips, legs, head, and torso darting out of sync with one another in combat. That these figures serve as common enemies Hinako must fight is telling: expected femininity here is rendered as something disjointed, artificial, and threatening, an external expectation Hinako is positioned against rather than one she comfortably inhabits.

Gameplay mechanics take these critiques further. The game is designed to reward multiple playthroughs: in the first, the protagonist is understood to have been drugged by a friend, while in the second, players can choose to forgo the so-called "red capsules" entirely, unlocking a markedly different version of events. The pills are framed within the narrative as a mental health medication, and notably also function as a healing item in combat, meaning forgoing them is never accidental but a deliberate choice with real mechanical consequences. Refusing them radically alters the player's perspective, reshaping key cutscenes and revealing events no longer filtered through the protagonist's presumed intoxication. This mechanic invites several readings: the over-medication of contemporary society, the sedation of housewives common to mid-century psychiatric practice, or even a pointed inversion of the contemporary "red-pilled" internet vernacular, where here it is refusing the medication, not taking it, that constitutes waking up to the world. How players interpret this is left open, shaped by their own positionality, an example of how virtual agency allows video games to offer not just representation, but direct, embodied engagement with contested political and social questions.

In-game items scattered throughout the world provide further depth to the story's central message. Early in the game, following the red monster chase sequence, players can find a magazine inside a house titled "Household Tips for the Good Wife and Wise Mother: A Collection of Loving Ways for Mothers to Create the Perfect Home," (Konami 2025). This detail immediately reinforces the game's broader preoccupation with gender roles and the expectations placed on women in 1960s Japan, expectations that, in altered form, persist in contemporary society as well. It illustrates how representational politics operates not only through cutscenes and character dialogue, but through the environment itself: the objects a game places in the world, however peripheral, are themselves political texts worth unpacking.

This case demonstrates that critical and pressing real-world issues are deeply embedded within video games. Beyond the economic uncertainty or violence more commonly recognized as political terrain in games, *Silent Hill f* shows that something as intimate as feminine identity, coercion, and bodily autonomy can be staged with equal political weight, and rendered more viscerally than film or literature could manage, precisely because the player is made to fight through it, not simply witness it.

Fallout 4

Fallout 4 deals directly with concepts such as American exceptionalism and post-WWII nuclearization. While mechanically an RPG, and thus rich in virtual agency, this illustrative analysis focuses on the game's core themes and its place within the spheres of influence, reserving deeper discussion of virtual agency for *Cyberpunk 2077* below. *Fallout 4* is set in a post-apocalyptic America, over 200 years after a nuclear holocaust left the continent a wasteland. Thematically, the game's setting evokes a "nuclear-punk" aesthetic, blending 1950s Americana with nuclear-powered technology and Cold War-era optimism, all filtered through the lens of

American post-war exceptionalism. Players take on the role of an unnamed protagonist, the Sole Survivor, who emerges from a Vault, an underground bunker built prior to the nuclear holocaust, in search of their kidnapped son. This setting frames the game less as straightforward post-apocalyptic fiction and more as a satire of American Cold War confidence, a tone that runs throughout.

In line with the gaming spheres of influence, the game is deeply concerned with American identity and holds up a mirror to American society. This runs from in-game healing items like Nuka-Cola, a beverage that heals the player's character and evokes standard American cola brands, to patriotic-sounding songs on the in-game radio and NPCs dressed in clothing evocative of the colonial era. In-game advertisements plastered across walls carry a cheery 1950s aesthetic, promoting food reminiscent of the era's ready-made meals and breakfast cereals. This same sensibility is embodied by the franchise's mascot, Vault Boy, a blond cartoon figure in a blue vault suit, winking and giving a thumbs up directly to the player. The game pushes this dynamic further in its depiction of "vault dwellers." The in-game vaults were built by a corporation called Vault-Tec, ostensibly to shelter citizens in the event of nuclear war, but revealed within the game to have functioned as sites of human experimentation. Players can explore various vaults, witnessing the atrocities left in the experiments' wake, and yet the vault dwellers they encounter often retain a comedic, almost willful optimism reminiscent of Cold War-era confidence, here rendered as a kind of ignorance. What all of these examples illustrate is how a game can deconstruct a national mythology, in this case what it means to be American, exposing both its flaws and its more sympathetic qualities, in a way that players around the world can engage with. In doing so, the game constructs a global impression of American identity, however filtered through a post-apocalyptic wasteland and satirical undertones.

As such, this game demonstrates the American branch of the gaming spheres of influence: a US developer, Bethesda, using the conventions of the Western RPG, a genre defined by its first-person perspective and high degree of player agency, to stage a satirical reckoning with American exceptionalism itself. What makes this case distinct is not merely that the critique exists, but that it is delivered by an American studio, for a global audience, using the very genre conventions long associated with American cultural dominance in gaming. Importantly, this game, and others like it, can help construct national identity for the culture they come from, while simultaneously shaping the imagery of that culture for audiences around the world. It is therefore both a site of internal identity construction and an instrument of outward cultural soft power. To evoke the field of nationalism, when nationalism scholars describe how self-perceptions of identity are constructed, how the so-called "us versus them" distinction is built (see: Smith 2009), cultural artifacts of this kind are, in the modern era, precisely what they are talking about.

Cyberpunk 2077

While *Cyberpunk 2077* offers a deep capitalist critique with futurism at its focal point, for the purposes of this article, it lends itself best as an illustration of complex in-game economies. The game is set in Night City, a futuristic metropolis on the West Coast of a fictionalized United States, evoking something of a Los Angeles-meets-Tokyo aesthetic, where the rule of law is limited and illegal trade is central to daily life. Players take on the role of V, a mercenary who acquires a biochip implanted with the consciousness of a character named Johnny Silverhand, triggering a countdown until V either successfully removes the chip or loses their own consciousness entirely. The game's premise centers on the player navigating V through Night City's criminal underground in an effort to remove the biochip before time runs out. As an RPG,

the main story provides a throughline, but players remain free to engage with it at their own pace, pursuing extensive side missions and open-world activities as much or as little as they choose.

This brings in the in-game economy, similar to that of *Fallout 4*, but in a setting that feels more reminiscent of the world today. Within Night City, players operate within a capitalist economic system. Players earn Eurodollars, or Eddies as they are commonly called in the game, through completing story and side missions, taking on bounties, selling obtained items, and numerous other activities. With money in hand, players can purchase a range of goods, from cyberware that enhances in-game mechanics such as jumping or shooting stability, to cars, weapons, and other commodities. This demonstrates the virtual agency players have within the game's economic system. The game does not force players to determine how they earn or spend their money; players can undertake missions that support small businesses, take on work for larger corporate interests, or engage in criminal activity, while ultimately deciding how to use the resources they accumulate. Their agency, however, operates within the economic rules established by the game, requiring players to engage with systems of earning, exchange, accumulation, and consumption in order to develop V and progress through Night City. For political scientists, examining this virtual agency provides a way to understand how economic systems are not only represented within games but experienced through the choices, constraints, and forms of participation available to players.

Interestingly, while the game offers a critique of capitalism by depicting large corporations as oppressive and corrupt, the player must navigate a world run by capitalism. This, similar to other games mentioned, makes the player implicated in the very system that the game seeks to critique. Of course, taking this a step further, *Cyberpunk 2077* itself is produced and sold

by large multinational corporations, creating a further tension between the capitalist critique presented within the game and the capitalist structures through which the game exists as a cultural object. While the scope of this article cannot fully unpack this relationship, it represents another avenue for political science to explore, illustrating the interaction between a game's narrative and systems, and the broader political and economic systems in which these objects are produced and circulated.

Black Myth: Wukong

Black Myth: Wukong serves as a site of deep immersion into Chinese myth and culture. At the same time, it stands as a key example of what this article has termed gaming spheres of influence, illustrating how states may use such cultural objects as a form of soft power while also evoking the concept of gaming governance. Interestingly, *Black Myth: Wukong* is not a simple retelling of *Journey to the West*, a common narrative design choice when games engage with historical or mythological texts, but rather acts as a sequel to the classical novel, answering the question of what happens next. The story follows the Destined One, who journeys to recover a set of six relics in an effort to revive Sun Wukong. Along the way, the protagonist encounters numerous characters from the source material, among them the Bull Demon King, a fierce antagonist in *Journey to the West*, who appears here in a much more diminished state. This illustrates the game's design as a genuine follow-up to the events of the historical text, rather than a retreading of them. As such, the game exists as a site of deep immersion into an enduring cultural text, allowing players, whether familiar with the source material or not, to engage with its central story beats while inhabiting a richly realized Chinese mythological world.

In terms of virtual agency and representational politics, *Black Myth: Wukong's* rich narrative and gameplay mechanics offer another example of how video games construct worlds

that players actively engage with. As is often the case with action-RPGs, the game allows players to discover hidden areas as they progress through the story, such as Purple Cloud Mountain in Chapter 4. While this area is naturally tied to the source material, mechanics of this kind give players agency over how they choose to experience the game and how deeply they immerse themselves in its world. Such "hidden areas" can be missed entirely, knowingly or unknowingly, demonstrating that player choice can directly affect one's degree of immersion. Areas like this also expand player engagement with figures from Chinese mythology, such as the Scorpionlord, an optional boss encounter drawing on scorpion-demon imagery familiar from *Journey to the West*.

As a form of representational politics, *Black Myth: Wukong's* treatment of Chinese myth demonstrates how games set in historical or mythological worlds can convey positivity toward their source material and the culture it belongs to. The game doesn't evoke *Journey to the West* and its mythological figures in passing, but emphasizes their significance through a larger-than-life story and towering figures the player directly interacts with. In terms of narrative design, the choice to position the game as a sequel to the historical text feels like a deliberate decision rather than an accident of creative shorthand. Players booting up the game are essentially expected to arrive with some familiarity with the novel it builds on. This could be read as indifference to Western audiences unfamiliar with the source material, but the game's marketing and global commercial success suggest otherwise. By beginning in the aftermath of the novel's events, the game pushes players who become invested, in the story, in Chinese mythology, or in the source material itself, to seek out further context on their own. I do not claim the designers had soft power explicitly in mind, but such design decisions carry implicit consequences regardless of intent. This illustrates an interaction between two of the concepts

developed above: representational politics, a site of political meaning, and spheres of influence, a political object. A game's narrative and mechanical design choices, as shaped by its creators, can carry a cross-cutting effect, drawing players toward genuine interest in a culture or region they may otherwise never have engaged with.

This case also illustrates a genuinely novel dimension of gaming spheres of influence: *Black Myth: Wukong's* choice of subject matter was, whether by design or fortunate accident, primed for global reach. Sun Wukong is not an obscure figure to international audiences; decades before this game's release, Akira Toriyama's *Dragon Ball* (Toei Animation 1986–1989), and its most famous protagonist, Son Goku, drew directly on *Journey to the West* as source material, embedding a distorted but recognizable version of this myth into global popular culture well before most Western players ever encountered *Journey to the West* itself. *Black Myth: Wukong's* success may owe something to this latent familiarity: audiences primed by decades of *Dragon Ball* media arrived with an existing, if imprecise, cultural reference point, making China's own foundational mythology feel accessible rather than wholly foreign. In this sense, the game can be read as something close to a reclamation: a Chinese studio taking back a figure whose most globally recognizable form had, for decades, been mediated through Japanese pop culture rather than its own point of origin.

As such, this case demonstrates the connection between games as political objects and sites of political meaning. *Black Myth: Wukong* shows how video games can help facilitate genuine cultural appreciation, and stands as an early example of how states may come to view games as spaces for cultivating exactly this kind of soft power, one likely to expand as more states recognize its potential.

Case studies conclusion

Taken together, these four cases demonstrate the range of the concepts proposed above, applied across genre, region, and political theme: feminist critique in *Silent Hill f*, national mythology in *Fallout 4*, economic systems in *Cyberpunk 2077*, and soft power and cultural reclamation in *Black Myth: Wukong*. No single case exhausts what these concepts can do, nor were they meant to. Each was illustrative, not definitive, and some concepts, gaming political economy and gaming governance, remain underexplored here and are better suited to focused treatment elsewhere. What these cases show, together, is that video games are not a marginal cultural form waiting for political science's attention as an afterthought. They are already a site of political meaning and political instrumentalization.

Conclusion

This article has set out to argue that video games are serious cultural artifacts, encoding political meaning and functioning as political objects globally, even as the study of them has remained largely incohesive and tangential to political science. To remedy this, I have proposed two distinct subfields, games as sites of political meaning and games as political objects, along with a series of concepts to help establish a cohesive shared language for the field. A single game can encode a nation's unspoken reckoning with its own colonial past (Martin, 2018) and yet this insight sits stranded in a media studies journal, unconnected to the political science literature built to make sense of exactly this kind of phenomenon.

This work opens onto several distinct lines of inquiry across the discipline. For critical theorists, virtual agency and representational politics do more than offer a new object of analysis; they offer a new site from which theory itself might be reinterpreted or revised. A feminist theorist working through *Silent Hill f*'s staging of coerced marriage and imposed gender roles

may find existing frameworks stretched, or even upended, by a medium that forces the theorist to enact the very dynamics under study, not simply read or observe them. Games, in this sense, are not just texts awaiting critical theory's tools; they may be capable of reshaping those tools themselves. For comparativists, gaming spheres of influence offers a genuinely new lens for studying how political-economic context shapes cultural production across regions. For scholars of international relations, gaming governance and gaming political economy point toward an emerging arena of state regulation, industrial power, and soft power competition that remains gravely unstudied.

This article invites scholars across political science's subfields, ideology, governance, regulation, nationalism and international politics, to bring their existing expertise to bear on a medium many have engaged with personally but few have yet studied professionally. Indeed, I envision a world where young political scientists take up this field as their area of expertise, building a cohesive academic debate for generations to come. As the world's largest cultural medium continues to shape political imagination and institutional life alike, the discipline can no longer afford to treat video games as peripheral to its concerns.

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