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# Engaging International Relations with Videogames

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## Abstract

The paper examines how video games are related to international relations. Firstly, we explore the general relationship between video games and international relations. We find that video games reflecting popular culture represent the theory, praxis and norms of world politics. We also shed light on the way in which IR scholars use games as a pedagogical tool in the process of university education. We find that simulation and role-playing games are an alternative way for teaching international relations. Nevertheless, the military is the main area in which video games are extensively used. Indeed, most of the games deal with war and, therefore, we review the IR literature to map out how war and enemies are depicted in games. We conclude that video games affect and are shaped by international relations through different ways and processes. For this reason, they are a field of study in the discipline of international relations.

**Keywords:** education, gaming, military, terrorism, war

## 1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to review the international literature on the relationship of video games with international relations. This bibliographic research leads us to the conclusion that this relationship is two-way.

In particular, video games are multimedia and cultural products (Hobbs 2016, 470; Dralega & Corneliussen, 2018, 154). Financially, they are a rapidly growing industry of the global economy, worthy of billions of dollars (Proffitt & Susca, 2015, 595; Ciută, 2016, 202; Dralega & Corneliussen, 2018, 154; Metzger & Paxton, 2016, 532; Baeza-González, 2021, 39), and producing revenue higher than those of music and film industry (Weststar, 2015, 1239).

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Most games are played through the Internet. They form a social capital by connecting people as products of cultural media; thereby enhancing their idiosyncratic properties such as their identity of gender, age, religion, nationality and culture (Skoric & Kwan, 2011, 472; Gelles, 2012, 199; Perez Latorre, 2015, 416; Dralega & Corneliussen, 2018, 154).

There are several categories of games. For example a category of games that is gaining ground in industry is social games (Cuenca & Martín, 2010, 1341; Stanitsas et al., 2018, 396). They use modern technological means to represent real life in realistic way. Based on everyday life, they stimulate players to identify themselves with their avatar. The main themes of these games are culture, customs, identity, conflict resolution and social empathy. Players experience the consequences of their actions and decisions. Because of their realism, these games are transformed into social workshops. Thus, social science researchers can gather information on current social issues (Cuenca & Martín, 2010, 1340-1341). Another category is geographic games, which focus on the spatial meaning and diversity of areas based on different physical, political and human characteristics. An example is *SimCity*. in which the player takes on the role of the mayor/ governor of the city. On this capacity, the player is responsible for the progress or decline of the city and the protection or destruction of the environment (Cuenca & Martín, 2010, 1341).

As a whole, video games appeal to large audience having global reach (Clarke et al., 2012, 713; Molyneux et al., 2015, 381; Ciută, 2016, 202; Harvey, 2019, 906; Gibbons, 2021, 359). Due to the wide range of audiences they address, game designers most often adapt games to social norms of several international target groups (Gibbons, 2021, 359) and the political economy of their time (Lawuyi, 1997, 488).

## 2 Videogames and international relations

International relations concerns sorts of issues, that are usually considered popular culture of the time. This way, they contribute to an increase of political participation (Inthorn et al., 2013, 336-337; Metzger & Paxton, 2016, 535; Hayden, 2017, 175). It is from this angle that, video games represent the theory, praxis and norms of world politics.

Videogames are closely related to international relations. They simulate international politics and place the player in the position of a decision maker at a particular time and in a certain space (Corliss, 2011, 7; de Zamaróczy, 2017, 158). Games give an entertaining tone to kinds of facts and events. Socio-historical phenomena, which are otherwise considered difficult to understand, because of their complexity, are made attractive through gameplay

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(Cuenca & Martín, 2010, 1336). As a result, games are images that depict micro situations mainly through the perspective of the West (Väliäho, 2014, 118).

Historical games, for example, which are the most profitable in industry, usually portray and simulate facts and events in the virtual world at a given historical moment either in a realistic or exaggerated way (Cuenca & Martín, 2010, 1341; Metzger & Paxton, 2016, 533; Denning, 2021, 197). They enable the player to engage in reflections of the past (Dean 2018, 405) even though they do not focus so much on accuracy as on specific historical contexts (Hong, 2015, 36).

Broadly speaking, numerous successful games in the market are related to subjects and themes of international politics. Yet, most games downplay their importance and refer only to war and interstate relations (Starkey & Blake, 2001, 538; Ciută, 2016, 200). Many of the games, whose subject matter has to do with international relations, concern World War II and national socialism, offering the player the opportunity to play scripts for which he has read about (Hayton, 2015, 249, Denning, 2021, 185). That several parastatal organizations and terrorist groups promote via games their ideologies; is in itself a matter of international politics. Games either simulate real events or present alternative, yet familiar worlds; thereby pushing players to play by the rules of world politics (Ciută, 2016, 201-202). They present in a simplified way the international reality without mediation (Ciută, 2016, 210). Thus, gaming may emerge as a useful tool for policy making. For example, if we take into consideration that the war is politics by other means, war games might contribute to public policy making and planning (Mayer, 2009, 825-826).

### 3 Educational games

The disciplines of international relations develop concepts, which are usually understood only through the actual engagement of individuals in a real environment (Maser & Orbell, 1984, 1; Chasek, 2005, 2). From this perspective, games are social simulators that guide students into the learning process through the collective intelligence that emerges from networking, brainstorming, and social capital (Jung, 2020, 2). Simulation games, in particular, are a fun way to understand the subject matter of international relations (Kowalewski, 1981, 5; Maser & Orbell, 1984, 1; Starkey & Blake, 2001, 537; Asal, 2005, 360; Shin, 2021, 326), in essence as a method of "political exercise" for the study of international politics (Bloomfield & Padelford, 1959, 1105). Also, after a learner starts and ends a game with a theme relating to international politics, he is likely to look for additional information about it (Turkay & Adinolf, 2012, 3348).

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Simulation and role-playing games are an alternative, easy and enjoyable way for teaching the theory and praxis of international relations by pushing learners to live within their own virtual reality (Bloomfield & Padelford, 1959, 538; Bock & Dunham, 1992, 1115; Asal, et al., 2018, 838; Dishon & Kafai, 2019, 5) and understand how decision-making works within a particular institutional framework (Shin, 2021 326). *Classical Realism* is good example of a role-playing and simulation game often used as a learning tool in international relations courses (Asal, 2005, 366-368).

Briefly, this game tries to explain the causes of conflict through the lens of Thomas Hobbe's realism. The instructor distributes a card and a dice to every student. The main purpose is for students to survive. Students can challenge each other into a dice duel. If a student wins the duel, he takes the cards of the other students and the loser dies. The instructor gives the "dead" student another card until there are no other cards left. When all of the cards finish, if someone dies he stays dead. At the begging, students are not willing to begin a duel, but after some encouragement they start and after a few rounds of play, they challenge each other on their own. When only two students are left, the instructor asks remaining students why they fight, and all of the students what the purpose of the game was. After they respond, the instructor stops the game by asking the question: is fighting increases your chance of survival? Students understand that the best way to survive is to avoid the duel. At this point, the instructor gives the students copies of Hobbes's *Leviathan* to study the causes of conflict: competition, diffidence and glory. Students can identify on their own their motives based on the Hobbesian theory of realism and the effects of anarchy (Asal 2005, 366-368).

In addition, such key social issues as democracy, relations and values in crisis situations can perfectly be instrumentalized through games requiring players to delve deeper into problem solving by using resource and variable management strategies. This way, learners can analyze and understand aspects of international politics such as armed conflict, territorial management, democracy and social or economic issues (Cuenca & Martín, 2010, 1338).

#### 4 War games

War is a predominant theme in games, especially those dealing with terrorism (Lee, 2011, 297). There are games that simulate recent events such as the war in Syria (Dralega & Corneliussen, 2018, 154). Overall, it is widely recognized in the literature and in industry that most of the games belong to the category of war games.

There is no doubt that this category of game is made and consumed mainly in the West and, therefore, depict war from this perspective. Nowadays, war games have also been made in the

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Middle East, depicting another perspective of the war (Robinson, 2012, B, 505). War-themed video games are highly realistic and use real-life visuals from real battles (Power, 2007, 272; Clarke et al., 2012, 712). They promote war by legitimizing its practices and presenting military forces as friendly (Power, 2007, 273; Mantello, 2017, 486). However, armed conflicts in these games are not governed by laws. They therefore create misleading impressions for the respect of human rights (Clarke et al., 2012, 712).

More generally, the widespread use of wargames has led to the legitimation, justification and consensus of citizens regarding military interventions, weaponization and militarism (Ciută, 2016, 207). Wargames present an open and free-shooting environment without civilians, promoting the notion that whatever is alive and outside the player's team is an enemy and must be executed without limitations in the use of violence (Clarke et al., 2012, 721). A standard example is that of health professionals who, while being portrayed in video games as aggressive and thus targets, in real war conditions must be protected in order to treat war wounded.

Also, in some games the player collects military IDs of enemies to win rewards. In real war situations, however, both warring sides should ensure that all soldiers can be identified and returned to their families (Clarke et al., 2012, 730-731). In addition, soldiers are governed by a legal framework based on the international and the national law. Some wargames have adopted rules of international law regarding civilians since in real armed conflict conditions certain persons and objects are protected by international law and the violation of its rules has consequences. Likewise, in other games the use of firearms is allowed only where life is threatened and there is no alternative (Clarke et. al., 2012, 723-724, 736).

Another problem is that wargames most often create particular forms of identity in depicting warring parties in terms of friend and enemy. In particular, the cultural and social implications of identity perpetuate stereotypes by creating "others". Those who challenge the standards of the game culture are punished as "others" outside the team. Thus, in the game environment, stereotypical categories are created about those who belong to the team and those who do not (Dralega & Corneliussen, 2018, 154). Opponents in the game are often characterized as extremely different in relation to the player, thereby laying the ground for their conflict (de Zamaróczy, 2017, 164- 165). Those who belong to the dominant ideological culture reproduce it with the help of groups that already exist (Dralega & Corneliussen, 2018, 163).

As a whole, the enemy is usually demonized in videogames (Clarke et al., 2012, 721; Valeriano & Habel, 2016, 465). It is presented collectively as a team that does not respects the law and breaks the rules first. Players are justified using any method of war against the enemy

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to achieve their goal. Any act of violence and human rights violation is considered justified. This way, the enemy is portrayed as a terrorist who deserves punishment including execution and torture (Clarke et al., 2012, 721, 728-729). It is no coincidence that, for example, Western video games create stereotypes about Arabs and the Middle East by presenting them as extremely violent (Schulzke, 2014, 638). The Nazis, on the other hand, appear to be overly evil while the historical facts of genocide and the holocaust are usually omitted altogether or presented as a crime that is about to happen or has already happened (Hayton, 2015, 249, 260).

In this context, government officials use war games to simulate military situations; conversely, board games are used to replicate armed conflict (Spotlight, 2005, 321; Hayton, 2015, 250). There are games that require players to negotiate to resolve their disputes, end armed conflict and make peace (Schulzke, 2013, 591). In this respect, collaboration between the military and videogame designers is a two-way interaction. On the one hand, game designers create fun games to make enlistment attractive and increase military recruitment (Ang & Mansell, 2015, 1; Valeriano & Habel, 2016, 465; Clarke et al., 2012, 718). On the other, military services provide game designers with experiences, tips and photos to create realistic games (Clarke et al., 2012, 718; Ang & Mansell, 2015, 1; Mantello, 2017, 485). Therefore, shots from real armed life, including militarized conflicts, are used by both sides to train new recruits and produce commercial game (Clarke et al., 2012, 718).

In parallel, games are used by terrorist groups for strategic purposes. Some games depict war in the same way as parastatals and terrorists perceive of it. The main goal is to spread the ideology of these groups and demonstrate their power through the game environment. Bombings, kidnappings and the like are usually understated or overlooked. The war is portrayed primarily as being ideological and as an attempt by parastatals and terrorists to legitimize their violent acts. That is why media try to alienate groups of this kind so that they cannot attract more supporters (Schulzke, 2014, 627-629). Nonetheless, games have an advantage in this respect. Terrorist groups present facts and events in a way favorable to them, the state as particularly violent towards them and their attacks as fully successful no matter how much this corresponds to reality. In addition, players develop emotional connection and visibility through their in-game avatar. Therefore, those who are characterized as neutral and potential supporters are prevented from becoming friendly to the enemy; those who are considered enemies are intimidated into losing the war; and those who are advocates reinforce the need for sacrifice in order to achieve victory and improve devotion to war (Schulzke, 2014, 631- 635).

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## 5 Conclusion

Videogames have emerged, both internationally and domestically, as a political, international, social and cultural phenomenon (Robinson, 2012, A, 414). They mirror part of the social reality in their virtual world (de Zamaróczy, 2017, 166). They are essentially popular culture. As such they reveal the dynamics of modern politics (Young, 2015, 147). In fact, they interact with politics in two basic respects. First, the state promotes its values through this culture. Popular culture is thus politicized. Secondly, groups in society use popular culture to achieve mass promotion (Demirbag-Kaplan & Kaplan-Oz, 2018, 630).

Basically, videogames are used for various purposes in the discipline of international relations. A most commonplace is to educate the public in international political issues (Barthel, 2013, 30). In academia they are useful for conveying information, ideas and messages of all sorts (Wild, 2014, 435; Sou, 2018, 511). In playing a game, players tend to imprint them on their mind and externalize them through their way of thinking and action in real life (Wild 2014, 436). From this angle, the analysis of videogames may help scholars and practitioners understand the geopolitical, social and cultural processes of militarization (Salter, 2011, 359). Given the realism and simulation offered by modern games, they could be characterized as indicators of geopolitical behaviour in terms of boundaries and ideas, or even of targeting peoples and countries (Salter, 2011, 362). This might be one reason why several governments have banned the circulation of several wargames. Classical examples are *Battlefield 4* banned by China because it portrays a naval campaign against the Chinese; and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* banned by Russia because it depicts Russian politicians as terrorists (Valeriano & Habel, 2016, 463). Games with religious content, for instance, can capture, reject or give feedback on religious traditions and practices (Šisler, 2017, 127). By extension, they might have negative effects on peace and compassion (Campbell et al., 2016, 644).

Therefore, videogames must be evaluated in terms of how they present people, places and things (Hergenrader, 2016, 31). They affect and are influenced through and by different ways and processes (Rebello, 2014, 292). This is the case in international politics. The discipline of international relations could hardly be an exception, for videogames are on their way to consolidate as a distinct field of study.

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