Game Development

Beyond Play in one of Yayoi Kasuma's Obliteration Room Installations.

© Karsten D. Wolf 2024

Special Issue

Beyond Play

edited by

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, Christian Schwarzenegger and Karsten D. Wolf

Issue 24 (2026)

introduction

Beyond Play. Towards a Non-Gaming-Centric Gaming Research
by Christian Schwarzenegger, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and Karsten D. Wolf, 1

articles

Genre as Gamevironment: Epistemic Genres Beyond Play
by Alexander Hurezeanu, Mark Nunes, Pamela Maria Schmidt and S. Heeg, 18

Video Games as Neoliberal Therapeutic Techno-Solutions: The Transformative Power of Digital Ludic Wellness Services for Neurodivergence
by Deanna Holroyd and Holly Parker, 48

Belongingness and Resistance in Platformed Play: Feminist Agency among Female Gamers in China
by Weijie Huang, Payal Arora and Mara Yerkes, 96

Asymmetries and Limits in the Transformative Power of Video Games for Women
by Katharine Sarikakis, Ayça Becerir, Oleksandra Gudkova and Lisa Baumgartner, 146

Gaming Streamers as Intermediaries: A Multi-Level Intermediation Framework across Self, Community, and Platformised Industry
by Antonia Wurm, Paula Nitschke and Jeffrey Wimmer, 187

Capturing Play Beyond the Game. A Category System for Game-Related YouTube Videos

by Martin Roth and Vincenzo Idone Cassone, 223

Harnessing the Soft Power of Videogames in Digital Diplomacy

by Amanda Rodriguez Espinola, 264

reviews

Review of Tom van Nuenen's *Traveling Through Video Games* (2024)

by Anika Y. C. C. Falkenberg, 299

Peer-reviewed article

Harnessing the Soft Power of Videogames in Digital Diplomacy

Amanda Rodríguez Espínola

Abstract
The study of public diplomacy has focused on how perceptions of foreign audiences can shape the way people interact with individuals, groups, and ultimately, shape policy-making affecting international collaboration. With rapidly changing information and communication technologies and the mediatization of society, the media greatly inform these perceptions. While the video game industry has become a key media player, economically and socially, little work has been done reflecting on the potential of video games to serve as diplomatic tools for cultural engagement and soft power. This paper examines how games operate as tools for digital diplomacy, enabling nations, organizations, and communities to engage in meaningful cross-cultural exchanges. It explores how video games are uniquely suited for promoting cultural understanding and global collaboration through three key dimensions of video games in digital diplomacy. First, it will discuss games as cultural artifacts that convey values, traditions, and social perspectives. Second, it will examine how procedural rhetoric can strengthen the case for using video games as tools for diplomatic activity. Finally, it will analyze the game *Never Alone* (2014) as a case study of games serving as soft power tools. By redefining how we think about digital diplomacy, this paper invites game developers, policymakers, and public diplomats to harness the transformative power of video games, where purposeful game design is a cornerstone of international engagement, and virtual worlds become catalysts for real-world change.

Keywords: Soft Power, Digital Diplomacy, Video Game Analysis, Mediatization, Public Diplomacy, Political Games, gamevironments

To cite this article: Rodríguez Espínola, A., 2026. Harnessing the Soft Power of Videogames in Digital Diplomacy. *Gamevironments* 24, 264-298. Available at https://journals.suub.uni-bremen.de/index.php/gamevironments.

With the turn of the century, the mechanisms of public diplomacy have significantly changed from a traditional perspective where governments communicate top-down

with foreign publics to a new public diplomacy where public opinion is formed in real-time within digital environments and involving both state and non-state actors. As such, we are now encountering a hyper-mediatized society. Mediatization is a process where the media emerges as an "independent institution with a logic of its own that other social institutions have to accommodate" (Hjarvard 2008, 105).

On the other hand, the continuous development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has resulted in a growing interest in using video games as tools to advance diverse fields, for example, exploring mental health (Granic, Lobel and Engels 2014), ethical education (Schrier 2015), and religion (Campbell et al. 2016). This "favorable climate for the use of digital games for teaching, learning, and training" (Darvasi 2016, 3) extends also to using video games as a mechanism to develop empathy among players in a context of cross-cultural communication. With the gaming industry becoming a leading creative industry, surpassing both film and music industries in global revenue and cultural reach, video games have become the dominant interface for billions of citizens. Yet, under this scenario, there are few academic approaches to the study of games as tools that can be integrated into digital diplomacy strategies (Liu 2013, Hayden 2016, Rodríguez Espínola 2022, Bahurekso, Ningrum and Munajat 2025, Xiang and Yuan 2025, Yuan 2025).

This study works to illustrate how video games, based on their unique potential to facilitate the processes necessary for generating outgroup empathy and actively engage with players through agency, are optimal tools for building relationships through collaboration and engagement that lead to dialogue between communities. Soft power and digital diplomacy scholars such as Pammet (Pammet 2013, Pammet 2014) warn that traditional public diplomacy often fails because it treats foreign publics as targets rather than participants. Video games, by their very design, solve

this engagement deficit. They are participatory environments where players co-create narratives, simulate complex systems, and inhabit the perspectives of other cultures, shaping their opinion of them.

This paper argues that video games are not merely entertainment products, but are strong instruments of mediatized public diplomacy. Through a cross-disciplinary exploration merging International Relations (IR) and Game Studies, we examine how games generate soft power by communicating values and promoting cultural attraction while simulating real-world dynamics and creating third virtual spaces for cultural exchange. We explore three key dimensions of this phenomenon. First, we analyze games as cultural artifacts that preserve and export cultural narratives and values, functioning as digital ambassadors in a globalized market. Second, we examine the role of procedural rhetoric, a unique quality of games as the process of persuasion through rule systems, arguing that gameplay mechanics can foster empathy and cooperation more effectively than traditional mediatized approaches of soft power. We address some of the ethical challenges inherent in this medium, including the risk of reinforcing colonial and oppressive stereotypes. And third, through textual analysis of the game *Never Alone* (2014), we illustrate how games can be used as tools for digital diplomacy by non-state actors, following the shift to new public diplomacy.

Soft Power in a Digital Playground

Soft power is a concept coined by Nye (2019, 7) used to refer to a "nation's ability to influence other countries through attraction and persuasion" to one's values, and cultural appeal (mainly, but not exclusively, through creative industries), rather than military or economic coercion. Emerging in a global context of a defined ideological

divide headed by the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War, soft power involves diplomacy, foreign aid, educational exchanges, and cultural exchanges to build trust and alliances for foreign policy goals. In this context, soft power was exercised through public diplomacy strategies that sought to promote freedom and democratic values through media channels, albeit through monologic one-way strategies (Pamment 2013).

However, as the evolution of ICTs has shaped the mediatization of society, scholars argue that this perspective needs to be updated in favor of one that acknowledges the role of non-state actors (La Porte 2012a, Lee and Ayhan 2015, Ayhan 2019) and the digital space (Melissen 2005, Pamment 2013, Bjola, Cassidy and Manor 2019). The new scholarship embraces complex communication models and mediatization as a process that explains the importance media has acquired in everyday life. For the exercise of soft power, the mediatization of diplomacy underscores the structural transformation of public diplomacy activities, where the understanding of cultures is largely ruled by their representation in the media, affecting their potential for soft power (Hjarvard 2008, Pamment 2014). Furthermore, state and non-state actors are forced to adapt their behaviors to fit the media logic and face the loss of direct control over their messages, which are no longer filtered solely by the state but are also reinterpreted by the medium and its users.

The adaptation to digital media gave rise to Digital Diplomacy. While early scholarship viewed it largely as a digitalization of existing practices, for example, sharing press releases via Twitter, current perspectives argue that digital diplomacy represents a disruption of public diplomacy, as an effect of the mediatization process, and posit that effective digital diplomacy requires a shift from the monologic one-way strategies mentioned previously to a dialogue and engagement process (Frey

2024). This paper situates video games at the cutting edge of this trajectory. If digital diplomacy is about engagement and dialogue, video games offer the ultimate mediatized environment for these interactions.

Games as Cultural Artifacts

To understand how games can serve as soft power tools we must view them as sophisticated vehicles for cultural transmission. Video games operate through embedded values, allowing players to participate in a culture rather than just observe it. While film and literature function as linear processes of cultural transmission, through the idea of agency, video games allow players to inhabit foreign cultural frameworks, making games uniquely suited for soft power and digital diplomacy.

Video games are a medium with the ability to operationalize abstract values into concrete rules. Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2016) argue that game mechanics are never neutral because they inevitably encode the ethical, social, and political assumptions of their creators. When a player enters the magic circle of gaming, they are effectively agreeing to abide by the cultural logic of the game's design. In this sense, the game environment becomes a social space where different cultures meet and grapple with each other. Unlike a film or a museum exhibit, where the audience is a passive receiver of the narrative, in video games, it is through the player's agency in their actions that the story happens (Juul 2001). In other words, the game requires the player to perform the culture to succeed. In a deeply mediated society, video games have evolved into a sophisticated apparatus of rules that operate as an extension of institutional and ideological mechanisms (Obreja 2024, Lin, Xu and Liu 2025).

An example is *Never Alone*, a puzzle-platformer developed in collaboration with the Iñupiat people of Alaska. The game does not merely display indigenous aesthetics; it embeds values of interdependence and resilience into the core gameplay loop. Players cannot progress by acting individually; they must coordinate the abilities of the protagonist Nuna and the arctic fox companion either in individual or cooperative game mode, reinforcing the cultural narrative that survival is a communal act, guided by the interdependence of humans with the environment (Rodríguez Espínola 2021). Conversely, widely exported Western strategy games like *Civilization VI* (2016) or *Age of Empires* (1997) often simulate a neoliberal, expansionist worldview, where winning requires technological dominance and resource extraction. By exploring these ludic frameworks, developers inadvertently export their internal social norms. For the digital diplomat, this implies that soft power is generated not just by the game's storytelling and strategic narrative, but by its mechanics. We will expand on this aspect in the following section, exploring procedural rhetoric in the light of soft power.

The unique power of video games lies in their interactivity, and as such, their capacity to serve as diplomatic tools is equally rooted in their narrative substance. Beyond their rule systems, games function as sophisticated engines for interactive storytelling that communicate culture to global audiences. The narrative layer comprises the dialogue, world-building, and character arcs and provides the visible cultural context that attracts foreign publics. By embedding specific cultural pointers into compelling storylines, developers can transform local folklore or settings into globally consumed entertainment, effectively positioning a nation's narrative in the global imagination (Juul 2001). Just like the game mechanics, this narrative layer is not neutral. These stories encode values and perspectives that shape how players perceive the originating culture.

The narratology of video games, different from film or literature, encourages players to actively co-create the narrative through their choices. This phenomenon is known as storyliving and refers to the process of experiencing a narrative by constructing a scene that creates an emotional impression and enables embodiment and participation (Maschio 2017). Although storyliving has been mainly associated to virtual reality (Parker 2018), it can also be applied to video games as it situates players in the story, putting them in the shoes of the protagonist and shaping the story through their engagement. The active participation allows players to inhabit the perspectives of others, transforming them from observers to protagonists within a foreign cultural framework. By allowing players to navigate the moral and narrative complexities of a different culture to succeed, games foster a deeper, more personal connection to the cultural values presented, making the cultural exchange not just informative but experiential.

However, the capacity for storyliving relies heavily on the perceived authenticity of the narrative. If players are to genuinely inhabit a foreign cultural framework, the experience must feel like a legitimate artistic or entertainment expression rather than a calculated political message. This raises a dilemma for public diplomats who are best positioned to craft the messages in these immersive worlds. While the theoretical potential for soft power exists in any game, the practical impact differs radically depending on its origins.

Historically, state agencies have approached gaming through a didactic lens, creating edutainment or serious games designed to deliver a specific message with the public seal of ownership of the government. A prominent example is the U.S. Army's *America's Army* (2002). While successful as a domestic military recruitment tool, its

transparency as a state-sponsored instrument limits its capacity for diplomatic persuasion abroad (Bogost 2010). Other examples are games commissioned by international organizations, like the World Bank Institute's *Urgent: EVOKE* (2010), distributed as a serious game meant to help youth understand global challenges of the 21st century. Such institutionalized games often struggle to penetrate global markets because they prioritize messaging and the distribution is restricted, failing to engage the voluntary attention of the player.

In contrast, some of the most successful digital diplomacy strategies have been the result of creative industry products that organically export a nation's image. This is reflected in the Cool Japan phenomenon, where the consumption of Japanese gaming culture, mainly tied to Nintendo, helped rebrand the nation from a post-war Axis power to a cultural and technological powerhouse. While the soft power generated here was a byproduct of consumer attraction rather than government decree, the Cool Japan strategy was a government public diplomacy strategy relying on the established global success of Japanese cultural and creative industries (Norris 2010).

Another example of organic soft power is found in Poland's relationship with *The Witcher* transmedia environment. Developed by CD Projekt Red, the game is deeply embedded in Polish geography, Slavic mythology, and local literary history. Its global critical acclaim transformed Poland's digital brand, positioning the nation as a hub of modern technology and deep cultural heritage (Jaworowicz-Zimny 2020). The Polish state recognized this organic success, validating its cultural relevance when Prime Minister Tusk gifted a copy of *The Witcher 2* (2011) to U.S. President Obama (Bahurekso, Ningrum and Munajat, 2025). This gesture signaled a shift in diplomatic strategy: rather than manufacturing state narratives, successful digital diplomacy

involved identifying, supporting, and leveraging the organic cultural artifacts that already resonate with global audiences. In this instance, the game acts as a narrative vessel, where the attraction that builds soft power is generated by the richness of the story world, inviting players to appreciate the cultural contributions of the source nation.

Ultimately, the role of video games in digital diplomacy is to facilitate a shift from story*telling* to story*living*. By allowing global audiences to inhabit the digital skin of another culture, games foster a form of engagement that traditional diplomatic cables cannot replicate. Games are increasingly being recognized as vehicles for governance, where these characteristics that facilitate story-living experiences, also encourage players to "regulate themselves in pursuit of achievement, mastery, and personal growth" (Lin, Xu and Liu 2025, 7). Drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality, Lin, Xu and Liu suggest that games function as technologies of power that engage players in structured systems of feedback that govern their conduct.

This apparatus extends institutional reach in two spheres. In the domestic sphere, games are used by the state to reinforce ideological governance. In other words, through the governmentalization of games, the state transforms playful spaces into sites for social monitoring and the internalization of national values. In the international sphere, games serve as instruments of soft power and digital diplomacy by providing cultural bridges to showcase national identity and technological prowess, effectively enlisting players worldwide into a specific national narrative. In return, nations can amplify their soft power and promote international goodwill (Bahurekso, Ningrum and Munajat 2025).

Procedural Rhetoric

Understanding the full diplomatic potential of video games requires analyzing how they function differently from linear media. As briefly explored in the previous section, in film, literature, and to some degree music and museums, the audience is passive. In video games, the audience is an active agent. This distinction is critical for soft power because it shifts the mode of engagement from witnessing a narrative to enacting a system. This section uses Bogost's (Bogost 2008, Bogost 2010) concept of procedural rhetoric defined as the process of persuasion through rule-based representation, to argue that game mechanics themselves are an element that can foster empathy and transmit value systems more effectively than traditional storytelling.

Procedural rhetoric captures the notion that video games construct meaning by "making claims about the world, which players can understand, evaluate, and deliberate" (Bogost 2008, 119). For soft power, this element becomes transformative in the way the diplomatic activity is conceived. Through traditional media, like television, film, or music, and even in cases of digital diplomacy where culture is communicated passively, the audience receives the message at a narrative level, through storytelling. With video games, the player engages with the narrative aspects and with the rules of a virtual world, thus *experiencing* the message, whether it is values or cultural representation. This creates a systemic understanding that linear media cannot replicate, one where players accept the rules to proceed with the gameplay, and in doing so, they temporarily adopt the worldview embedded in the game. They are storyliving. Along with this structural acceptance, the process of imagined contact (Crisp and Turner 2009) where interactions between outgroups are facilitated by digital third spaces, can lead to building empathy, which is a

cornerstone of trust-building and mutual understanding in soft power and digital diplomacy (Cowan and Arsenault 2008, Pamment 2013).

In this sense, games can use two forms of empathy in their mechanics: cognitive and emotional. With low or high levels of empathic involvement, video games allow players to inhabit the experiences of others in a uniquely immersive way and gain insight by solving problems from another's perspective (Belman and Flanagan 2010). Consider the anti-war game *This War of Mine* (2014). Unlike traditional military shooters or war games, which empower the player as a soldier, *This War of Mine* mechanically disempowers the player, as it is centered around scarcity, survival, and vulnerability from a civilian perspective. To survive, the player is consistently forced to make conflicting ethical choices, like stealing medicine from the elderly to save a child. Through the necessity of these choices, the game simulates the desperation of civilians in a war zone.

The game's mechanics are linked to this moral experience. For example:

> "altruism costs the player time and resources, but returning without resources can mean death to nonplayer characters and the loss of the game." (de Smale, Kors and Sandovar 2017, 388)

In this case, the player's decision-making is the primary driver of the game's main narrative. An interesting design element is that the game does not represent a real conflict; rather, it can easily be contextualized in a generalized war setting. According to the developers, this decision was twofold. First, they avoid misrepresenting history, and second, they prevent players from taking sides if a particular conflict were identified (de Smale, Kors and Sandovar 2017). This choice is strategic, as it ensures that the underlying message of war as a devastating event is not obscured by the

political polarization that arises from identifying a particular side. For foreign audiences, this fosters a deeper cognitive empathy and a more direct emotional response to humanitarian crises. Consequently, in the context of digital diplomacy, games like this can build the trust and understanding necessary for generating support for policies aimed at transnational cooperation and humanitarian aid.

Game mechanics can also serve as vehicles for exporting national value systems. This is increasingly evident in the rise of the Chinese gaming industry. While Western games have traditionally prioritized direct confrontation, individual gain, and freedom, Chinese games often encode distinct cultural values into their gameplay that reflect the country's ideological priorities. Recent scholarship on Chinese digital strategy (Custer 2012, Xiang and Yuan 2025, Yuan 2025) suggests that video games are becoming part of the Digital Silk Road project, extending the country's digital infrastructure aspiration to enhance connectivity and international cooperation.

An example of this is *Honor of Kings* (2015), a game developed by Tencent's TiMi Studio and recently released to Western markets. It features several characters inspired by Chinese historical figures and deities that honor China's traditions. The characters also showcase China's tradition of innovation and craftsmanship while educating international players on its cultural attractiveness to foster a deeper appreciation of its contribution to global civilization. Most notably, it has demonstrated the resonance of culturally rooted narratives that draw from Chinese mythology (Yuan 2025). As of 2024, *Honor of Kings* remained the most downloaded and played mobile game globally (Tach 2025). In this case, Tencent Games, a branch of the Chinese multinational conglomerate Tencent Holdings, dedicated to developing and publishing video games, presents a clear strategy to advance Chinese

soft power through intentional cultural dissemination that ultimately fosters cultural affinity towards China.

In the same line, the game *Black Myth: Wukong* (2024), an adaptation of the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West,* portrays the Monkey King, a main character of Chinese mythology. The 2024 game, developed and published by Game Science, sets players to master the discipline and rhythm of local martial arts, requiring players to engage with the procedural rhetoric of the discipline inherent in the source material. Through its narrative and procedural discourse, the game story presents players with Chinese values of perseverance, self-improvement, morality, and a sense of national pride for a Chinese audience and a cultural bridge for international players (Xiang and Yuan 2025).

Through procedural rhetoric, these games not only display Chinese culture, but they socialize global players into Chinese modes of thinking and values. They learn that success comes from perseverance and self-improvement while engaging with the narrative language that highlights Chinese aesthetics and mythology. This represents the ultimate goal of mediatized digital diplomacy by state actors: the subtle alignment of the foreign public's cultural understanding with the message of the state achieved through play.

Recalling that soft power is the ability to obtain the desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion (Nye 1990), videogames offer another domain for persuasion through procedural rhetoric. Videogames can be "tools for institutional goals [or] change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world" (Bogost 2010, 9). For digital diplomacy this means that persuasion is practiced through both, processes and strategic narratives in videogames, a quality that other forms of digital

diplomacy do not have. Furthermore, the accessibility of videogames to a wider public reinforces the idea of *public* in public diplomacy, where the differentiator is the targeting of foreign publics.

In this sense, digital diplomacy, when executed through videogames, is building a rule-based system, a process, within which the player (foreign audience) internalizes and operates. As it often happens with public diplomacy evaluation, this is a long-term game. The diplomatic gains are not always seen immediately through signing of treaties, commercial alliances or foreign investment. Through digital diplomacy, non-state actors, such as marginalized communities or civil society, are able to bypass traditional gatekeepers and engage with foreign publics, shaping public opinion and mobilizing grassroots support. That is the diplomatic gain. Such gain can later on translate in the strengthening of transnational networks of advocacy, civil action and pressure to specific government action.

Ultimately, it is crucial to acknowledge that procedural rhetoric is not a hypodermic needle that injects values directly into players. Game Studies scholars note that players are active interpreters who engage in negotiated or oppositional readings of a game (Stang 2019). A player may enjoy the mechanics or narrative of *America's Army* while rejecting its ideological recruitment message, or play *Civilization* subversively to challenge its colonialist assumptions (Mukherjee 2016). Therefore, digital diplomacy through games should account for the capacity of a game to generate multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings, depending on the player's cultural background and context.

A Double-Edged Sword: Challenges for Digital Diplomacy

While the potential of video games for digital diplomacy and soft power is vast, the transition from theory to practice has its complications. The mediatization of diplomacy does not merely offer new tools, it introduces new vulnerabilities. As nations race to harness the soft power of the gaming industry, they encounter two critical challenges: the persistence of stereotypes in the digital space and the geopolitical tension between state-controlled narratives and the free market.

In considering stereotypes and digital orientalism, scholars and game developers alike need to acknowledge that, if games are effective at transmitting values, they are equally effective at reinforcing prejudices. Historically, the video game industry has been dominated by Western developers who have often relied on reductive tropes to depict foreign cultures (Leonard 2003, Höglund 2008, Šisler 2008, Mukherjee 2016). For example, this form of digital Orientalism can be found frequently in military shooter games, where vaguely-coded Middle Eastern insurgents or Soviet/Russian ultranationalists are the enemy. As mentioned previously, these representations are not neutral; they function as a reassertion of a binary worldview of us vs. them. For the digital diplomat, this *othering* presents a significant hurdle. Even if a nation attempts to project a positive image through its own cultural exports, it may be confronting a wave of negative representation in global blockbuster titles. The challenge then is not just creating positive new narratives, but deconstructing existing ones that have become ingrained in gaming lexicon.

For the challenge regarding the state-controlled narratives vs. non-government-sponsored games, the digital diplomat needs to take into account the crisis of credibility in the new world order. As mentioned previously, many traditional public diplomacy strategies considered the direct involvement and funding of governments,

mainly through their foreign affairs ministries. However, in new public diplomacy, including digital diplomacy, non-state actors such as private corporations and civil society are considered vital to the development and success of such strategies. Moreover, some of the most powerful cultural actors in the creative industries are private multinational corporations.

This crisis of credibility creates a complex dynamic for diplomacy. Games that are developed or published directly by state-controlled institutions are often viewed with suspicion by global audiences, rendering them ineffective for soft power. Games developed or published by independent private corporations, such as Activision, are more effective at generating attraction, but the state cannot control their message. This tension is particularly pressing in the divergence between liberal and authoritarian approaches to digital diplomacy. In liberal democracies, the state has little control over its game industry. A game like *Call of Duty* projects American soft power through its display of values like freedom that reinforce a post-9/11 vision of geopolitics and the othering of the enemy (Gagnon 2010). Simultaneously, the lack of censorship provides an image of an open society.

Conversely, in more centralized systems, the state exerts tighter control over cultural production to ensure alignment with national interests. While this ensures that games align with specific foreign policy goals, it risks creating a culture that global audiences may perceive as inauthentic. However, this is proving to be more complex, if the example of China and its government's input in the development of the gaming industry and the messaging embedded in the games is something to affirm. Even if companies like Tencent are not directly government-owned, they hold deep ties with the Chinese Communist Party and align with the promotion of the Digital Silk Road strategy (Minter 2016).

The world has shifted from a unipolar world dominated by the United States to a multipolar system where power is distributed across non-state actors, multinational corporations, and, more significantly, rising state powers like China, which hold greater economic, military, and technological power (Muggah 2024). This global distribution of influence makes the projection of soft power through digital diplomacy a critical ecosystem for national image and global narratives. In a multipolar world, the credibility and legitimacy, or lack thereof, of the cultural source may prove to be a decisive factor in winning hearts and minds through video games.

Never Alone as a Case Study of Non-State Digital Diplomacy

As this research has explored, in the context of a deeply mediatized society, non-state actors have emerged as influential players in the international arena using digital platforms to project their identities and values to global publics. This shift allows civil society organizations and indigenous groups to bypass traditional state-led channels, gaining legitimacy and credibility by addressing foreign audiences directly through digital spaces (La Porte 2012a). For these actors, digital diplomacy is not merely a one-way instrument of information dissemination but a way to conceive of diplomacy as a process of relationship-building and mutual understanding. By leveraging the media logic, non-state entities can compete effectively in the realm of soft power, influencing political discourse and agenda-setting on a global scale.

Never Alone serves as an example of a digital third space, an imagined location, for digital diplomacy. *Never Alone* was published in 2014 by E-Line Media in partnership with the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), a non-profit that provides services to the Iñupiat community in northern Alaska. The Iñupiat are part of the Inuit indigenous

peoples who have traditionally inhabited regions of the Arctic that extends through the U.S., Canada, Denmark, and Greenland. The game features Nuna, an Iñupiaq girl, and her Arctic fox companion in a search to find the source of an eternal blizzard that is menacing her community. Through textual analysis of the game (Balela and Mundy 2011, Fernández-Vara 2019), we can observe how it engages the player through narratology and ludic elements with the Iñupiaq value system as a way to promote foreign policy goals of climate change advocacy and support of their indigenous diplomatic agenda (Abele and Rodon 2009).

Central to the game's diplomatic mission is the promotion of a value system rooted in Iñupiat culture, specifically the values of interdependence and resilience, which the game's procedural rhetoric forces players to engage with. For example, as was mentioned previously, the characters Nuna and Fox must work together, as success is mechanically impossible if they act in isolation. The players, whether playing cooperatively or individually, must use the particular abilities each character has by switching between them throughout the game. This approach ensures that interdependence is not just a narrated theme but a lived experience where the player must perform this value in order to succeed. By rewarding cooperation, the game serves as a persuasive tool that communicates a worldview where reciprocity and connectedness between humans and the environment are essential for survival.

The helping spirits in the game also function as a primary example of procedural rhetoric, where the game's rule system makes specific claims about the Iñupiat worldview regarding interdependence. The negotiation of Nuna's interaction with the spirits evolved from the first iteration, where the developers intended for players to *call* a spirit animal for help by pressing a button. During the NZCER Games for Learning Conference in 2017, Amy Fredeen, then CFO of CITC stated that this

mechanic was rejected by the game's cultural ambassadors because, in Iñupiat culture, one does not command spirits. Instead, the mechanic was redesigned to require Nuna or Fox to move toward the spirit, prompting the spirit to move toward them in return. This form of "coming together in the middle rather than calling upon" *(*@nzcer 2017*)*, forces the player to mechanically enact reciprocity, internalizing the cultural logic that humans must work in harmony with nature to survive.

Furthermore, the game's mechanics establish Fox as the intermediary who makes the helping spirits visible and accessible, reinforcing the value of interdependence between the human and nature realms. The progress is impossible without spiritual aid and this procedural rhetoric ensures that the player does not just witness the Iñupiat cosmology, but actively performs the culture, accepting that survival is a collaborative effort between humans and nature, and between the physical and spiritual worlds.

This understanding of interdependence then rejects Westphalian top-down state action and instead demands a collaborative partnership. The gameplay persuades players, through its procedural rhetoric, into a collaborative, indigenous oriented diplomatic framework, directly challenging the extractionist logic of current Arctic politics. As mentioned previously, measuring tangible results is not a straightforward process. The persuasive elements of the game work in conjunction with other public diplomacy elements, such as advocacy and cultural diplomacy.

However, in the case of *Never Alone* and Arctic politics, diplomatic gains can be seen in the media presence of the game during the year following its release and in the inclusion of the game in cultural institutions such as museums. The game has been exhibited in museums around the world, from the Denver Art Museum in 2017 to the

James Museum in 2026. For a non-state actor, especially an indigenous community, achieving visibility in global forums is a tangible diplomatic gain. As the purpose of digital diplomacy is to promote narratives and persuade foreign publics to support your policy efforts, by having the game validated by global cultural nodes like museums, their political efforts are legitimized. This institutional prestige grants the community global visibility and moral authority in broader geopolitical discourses surrounding Arctic environmental stewardship and indigenous sovereignty across transnational networks.

From the perspective of the CITC, digital diplomacy is a path toward economic self-determination and sovereignty (Lagace 2016, Fredeen 2017, Longboat 2017). By creating their own digital product, they sought to reduce their heavy reliance on federal and state funding, which often imposed restrictive, top-down service models that did not reflect the community's needs. Fredeen (2017) has stated that *Never Alone* thus represents a form of entrepreneurship where the generated revenue allows the community to fund culturally relevant programs of their own design, such as Fab Labs for youth. This shift illustrates how non-state actors use the digital economy to bypass paternalistic and colonial structures, asserting their right to determine their own social and cultural development.

While these aspects can be understood as part of a national issue concerning an indigenous community within the United States, the reality is that it reflects the *intermestic* (La Porte 2012b) nature of the Iñupiat community. In other words, the community operates at the intersection of domestic and international affairs, becoming a non-state actor with national and foreign policy interests, diplomatic activity, and soft power.

The geopolitical landscape of the Arctic is currently being redefined by the recession of the ice cap, which has transformed the region into a site of intense environmental, economic, and social contention (Marshall 2015, Bodenhorn and Ulturgasheva 2018, Brimmer 2023). As the ice melts, new trans-Arctic shipping routes like the Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route, have opened. This significantly reduces transit times between Europe and Asia, offering faster deep-water navigation for larger cargo ships. Furthermore, the receding ice has exposed vast natural resources including an estimated 30% of the world's untapped oil and gas reserves, alongside deposits of gold, zinc, and nickel. These developments have triggered heightened sovereignty disputes among the Arctic Five (the U.S., Russia, Canada, Norway, and Denmark), who utilize the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to claim exclusive economic rights over these newly accessible territories (Nuttall 2008, Simon 2008, Gerhardt 2011).

In response to these state-centered claims, Inuit diplomacy, spearheaded by the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), strives to establish the Inuit as active, legitimate partners in the Arctic governance. Their diplomacy strategy is anchored in the 2009 Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Arctic Sovereignty, which asserts that any national or international deliberation regarding the region must include the Inuit people as right-holders (About ICC | Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada 2021). Rather than seeking Westphalian secession, many Inuit groups, particularly in Alaska, such as the Iñupiat, pursue self-determination through increased autonomy over land management, resource ownership, and the protection of their cultural integrity. This context situates them as an intermestic actor where they navigate the international stage as a transnational identity group that advocates for environmental preservation and the survival of their culture and lifestyle while also navigating different legal systems and national identities.

Never Alone then becomes a sophisticated tool for Inuit diplomacy by providing a digital third space for imagined contact, where global audiences can engage with a pan-Arctic Inuit identity that challenges Western-centric narratives (Echchaibi 2014). Through its procedural rhetoric, the game embeds the values of interdependence and resilience into its mechanics, inviting players to perform the cultural logic of cooperation required to survive the harsh Arctic environment, but also to reflect the role of humans within the larger ecosystem. By centering indigenous storytellers and the Iñupiat language, the game functions as a decolonial site that portrays the Inuit not as "museum pieces" (Pérez 1999) of the past, but as a living, innovative culture. This representation builds soft power and legitimacy for the CITC and the broader Inuit nation, effectively mobilizing international opinion to support their political and economic interests.

Ultimately, the game serves as a force amplifier for the ICC's Strategic Plan, particularly in its priority to build a leadership pipeline for Inuit youth (ICC-Alaska 2018). By integrating *Never Alone* into educational curricula and digital hubs like Fab Labs, the community utilizes technology to reconnect youth with their traditional knowledge while preparing them for a future involving digital global engagement. This mediatized approach ensures that the Inuit voice is not only represented in the international fora but also internalized by a new generation of citizen diplomats. Consequently, the game transforms the virtual space into a site for transnational solidarity, where the global public's empathic connection to Nuna and fox can translate into support for Inuit resource sovereignty and climate justice (Figueira 2020).

Conclusion

This article has argued that the mediatization of society requires a fundamental rethinking of how state and non-state actors generate soft power. By analyzing games through the lenses of cultural artifacts, procedural rhetoric, and geopolitical challenges, we have demonstrated that the digital space is not an extension of traditional broadcasting platforms. Instead, they function as imagined contact spaces where international relations are actively simulated, negotiated, and performed. This suggests a more ontological shift that recognizes video games as spaces of diplomatic encounter and exercise. In a deeply mediatized society, the virtual space is often the primary site of cross-cultural interaction. When players from outgroups work together toward the same goal, they are engaging in a form of people-to-people diplomacy that is unscripted and organic (Rodríguez Espínola 2022). These shared virtual spaces allow for the formation of transnational communities based on shared ludic experiences, even if separated geographically (Huizinga 1949). Thus, the challenge for digital diplomacy is no longer just how to communicate in the virtual realm, but *how* to inhabit it constructively to build on its social fabric.

Furthermore, the video game industry must be recognized as a vital pillar of the creative economy and a foreign policy imperative. The gaming industry serves a dual diplomatic function: it positions a nation as a hub of technological innovation and artistic merit, and it aids in positioning its narrative in the global imagination.

To harness the transformative power video games offer, the digital diplomat can take certain steps that engage key stakeholders. First, policymakers should focus on investing indirectly in the industry through grants, cultural incubators, and tax incentives for studios to tell authentic local stories, treating developers as cultural workers. Second, developers should embrace this role, ethical design and recognize

that game mechanics and narratives are not neutral, they encode values. Design systems that reward cooperation, empathy, and non-violent conflict resolution could lead to stronger cultural understanding. Third, public diplomacy scholars should engage with video games and expand on the reach of digital diplomacy, as they hold much insight into intercultural interaction and virtual communities.

Ultimately, video games must be understood as central conduits of soft power. Further research is needed to empirically assess the long-term impact of these ludic encounters on player attitudes and to explore how non-state actors in the creative economy shape national narratives independently from government strategy. Additionally, the growth of E-sports represents a new frontier for public diplomacy. Major international tournaments for games function similarly to the Olympics, serving as arenas for national pride and hefty infrastructure investment. These events create high-visibility moments where national identity is performed on a global stage.

By treating video games as serious diplomatic spaces, we can unlock their potential to transform virtual empathy into real-world understanding, engage in storyliving, and consider the political economy of the industry. Recognizing the video game as a legitimate site of international relations allows for a more nuanced understanding of how influence is negotiated in a deeply mediatized society, moving the discipline beyond traditional state-centric paradigms toward a more inclusive view of global engagement.

References

Abele, F. and Rodon, T., 2009. Inuit diplomacy and global citizenship. In: Beier, J. M., ed. *Indigenous diplomacies*. New Mexico: Palgrave Macmillan US, 115-132.

Age of Empires, 1997. [video game] (PC) Microsoft, Microsoft.

America's Army, 2002. [video game] (PC) US Army, US Army.

Ayhan, K. J., 2019. The boundaries of public diplomacy and nonstate actors: A taxonomy of perspectives. *International Studies Perspectives*, 20(1), 63-83. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky010.

Bahurekso, P. R., Ningrum, S. and Munajat, D. E., 2025. Video games as foreign policy tools: A comparative between Japan and Poland. *Journal of Law, Politics and Humanities*, 5(4), 2489-2501. DOI: https://doi.org/10.38035/jlph.v5i4.1540.

Balela, M. S. and Mundy, D., 2011. Analysing cultural heritage and its representation in video games. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2011 Conference*, 1-16. DOI: https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2015i1.721.

Belman, J. and Flanagan, M., 2010. Designing games to foster empathy. *International Journal of Cognitive Technology*, 15(1), 5-15.

Bjola, C., Cassidy, J. and Manor, I., 2019. Public diplomacy in the digital age. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 14(1-2), 83-101. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-14011032.

Black Myth: Wukong, 2024. [video game] (multiplatform) Game Science, Game Science/Tencent.

Bodenhorn, B. and Ulturgasheva, O., 2018. Envisioning arctic futures: Digital and otherwise. *Museum Anthropology Review*, 12(2), 100-119. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14434/mar.v12i2.23184.

Bogost, I., 2008. The rhetoric of video games. In: Salen, K., ed. *The ecology of games: Connecting youth, games, and learning*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 117-140.

Bogost, I., 2010. *Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Brimmer, E. D., 2023. *Changing geopolitics in the Arctic*. Available at https://www.cfr.org/testimonies/changing-geopolitics-arctic-0, accessed 2 February 2025.

Campbell, H. A., Wagner, R., Luft, S., Gregory, R., Grieve, G. P. and Zeiler, X., 2016. Gaming religionworlds: Why religious studies should pay attention to religion in gaming. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 84(3), 641-664. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfv091.

Civilization VI, 2016. [video game] (multiplatform) Firaxis Games, 2K.

Cowan, G. and Arsenault, A., 2008. Moving from monologue to dialogue to collaboration: the three layers of public diplomacy. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 10-30. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311863.

Crisp, R. J. and Turner, R. N., 2009. Can imagined interactions produce positive perceptions?: Reducing prejudice through simulated social contact. *American Psychologist*, 64(4), 231-240. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014718.

Custer, C., 2012. If China really wants soft power, it should be making games. *Tech in Asia,* [blog] 13 August. Available at https://www.techinasia.com/china-soft-power-making-games, accessed 1 December 2025.

Darvasi, P., 2016. Empathy, perspective, and complicity: How digital games can support peace education and conflict resolution. *MGIEP Working Paper*, 3(6). Available at https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000259928?posInSet=2&queryId=9c0332d7-37cc-4ff5-a22d-d22d53a94ad6, accessed 14 September 2020

Echchaibi, N., 2014. So what is this third space of religion in the digital age? *Third Spaces*, [blog] 27 May. Available at https://thirdspacesblog.wordpress.com/2014/05/27/so-what-is-this-third-space-of-religion-in-the-digital-age/, accessed 13 December 2025.

Fernández-Vara, C., 2019. *Introduction to game analysis*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Figueira, C., 2020. Indigenous peoples as non-state diplomatic actors in the public/cultural diplomacy of Taiwan: A case study of dispossessions: Performative encounter(s) of Taiwanese indigenous contemporary art. *International Journal of Taiwan Studies*, 3(1), 62-92. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/24688800-00301006.

Flanagan, M. and Nissenbaum, H., 2016. *Values at play in digital games*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Fredeen, A., 2017. Never Alone: Storytelling for the next generation [online] *International Funders for Indigenous Peoples*. Available at https://internationalfunders.org/never-alone-storytelling-for-the-next-generation/, accessed 28 September 2019.

Frey, C., 2024. Digital diplomacy: The impact of technology on modern diplomacy and foreign policy. Current realities and future prospects. *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, 24(1), 107-126. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4864962.

Gagnon, F., 2010. "Invading your hearts and minds": Call of Duty® and the (re)writing of militarism in U.S. digital games and popular culture. *European Journal of American Studies*, 5(3). DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.8831.

Gerhardt, H., 2011. The Inuit and sovereignty: The case of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference and Greenland. *Politik*, 14(1), 6-14. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7146/politik.v14i1.27469.

Granic, I., Lobel, A. and Engels, R. C. M. E., 2014. The benefits of playing video games. *American Psychologist*, 69(1), 66-78. DOI: http://doi.apa.org/getdoi.cfm?doi=10.1037/a0034857.

Hayden, C., 2016. The procedural rhetorics of Mass Effect: Video games as argumentation in international relations. *International Studies Perspectives*, 18(2), 175-193. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekw002.

Hjarvard, S., 2008. The mediatization of society: A theory of the media as agents of social and cultural change. *Nordicom Review*, 29(2), 105-134. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/nor-2017-0181.

Höglund, J., 2008. Electronic empire: Orientalism revisited in the military shooter. *Game Studies*, 8(1). Available at https://gamestudies.org/0801/articles/hoeglund, accessed 15 November 2025.

Honor of Kings, 2015. [video game] (mobile) Tencent/TiMi Studio Group, Tencent Games.

Huizinga, J., 1949. *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Inuit Circumpolar Council Alaska, 2018. *Strategic Plan 2018-2022*. Available at https://iccalaska.org/wp-icc/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/StrategicPlan-18-22_06-2019-update.pdf, accessed 4 May 2021.

Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada, 2021. *Inuit Circumpolar Council*. Available at https://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/about-icc/, accessed 3 March 2021.

Jaworowicz-Zimny, A., 2020. The Witcher novels and games-inspired tourism in Poland. In: Yamamura, T. and Seaton, P., eds. *Contents tourism and pop culture fandom: Transnational tourist experiences*. Bristol: Channel View Publications, 46-61. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21832/9781845417239-007.

Juul, J., 2001. Games telling stories? A brief note on games and narratives. *Game Studies*, 1(1). Available at http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/, accessed 15 November 2025.

La Porte, T., 2012a. The legitimacy and effectiveness of non-state actors and the public diplomacy concept. In: *International Studies Association Annual Convention. San Diego, US, 1-4 April 2012*. Available at https://dadun.unav.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/217c4a4b-c126-4a95-a43f-3f124861f862/content, accessed 19 June 2026.

La Porte, T., 2012b. The impact of 'intermestic' non-state actors on the conceptual framework of public diplomacy. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 7(4), 441-458. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-12341241.

Lagace, N., 2016. Never Alone and the impact of digital indigenous storytelling. *Never Alone: Resources and reflections,* [blog] 26 May. Available at https://ilsaneveralone.wordpress.com/2016/05/26/never-alone-and-the-impact-of-digital-indigenous-storytelling/, accessed 22 February 2022.

Lee, G. and Ayhan, K., 2015. Why do we need non-state actors in public diplomacy?: Theoretical discussion of relational, networked and collaborative public diplomacy. *Journal of International and Area Studies*, 22(1), 57-77. DOI: https://doi.org/10.23071/jias.2015.22.1.57.

Leonard, D., 2003. "Live in your world, play in ours": Race, video games, and consuming the other. *SIMILE: Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education*, 3(4), 1-9.

Lin, Z., Xu, Y. and Liu, T., 2025. Governmentalization of games and emerging playful apparatus in contemporary China. *Critical Arts. South-North Cultural and Media Studies*, 1-21. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2025.2553520.

Liu, C., 2013. Raising the golden goose: A retrospective analysis of the state's role in China's online game industry. *Media International Australia*, 149(1), 41-54. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X13149001.

Longboat, M., 2017. Reset and redefine: Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna) and the rise of indigenous games. *Transmotion*, 3(1), 179-188.

Marshall, T., 2015. *Prisoners of geography: Ten maps that explain everything about the world*. New York: Scribner.

Maschio, T., 2017. Storyliving: An ethnographic study of how audiences experience VR and what that means for journalists. *Google News Lab*. Available at https://newslab.withgoogle.com/assets/docs/storyliving-a-study-of-vr-in-journalism.pdf, accessed 13 December 2025.

Melissen, J., 2005. The new public diplomacy. In: Melissen, J., ed. *The new public diplomacy: Soft power in international relations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 3-27.

Minter, A., 2016. China's new weapon? Video games. *Bloomberg*, [online] 5 July. Available at https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2016-07-06/china-s-new-weapon-video-games, accessed 1 December 2025.

Muggah, R., 2024. The role of geopolitics in a multipolar world. *World Economic Forum*, [online] Available at https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/05/why-geopolitics-matters-more-than-ever-in-a-multipolar-world/, accessed 12 December 2025.

Mukherjee, S., 2016. Playing subaltern: video games and postcolonialism. *Games and Culture*, 1-17. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015627258.

Never Alone (Kisima Innitchuna), 2014. [video game] (multiplatform) Upper One Games, E-Line Media.

Norris, M. J., 2010. Exploring Japanese popular culture as a soft power resource. *Inquiries Journal*, 2(5). Available at http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=253, accessed 1 December 2025.

Nuttall, M., 2008. Climate change and the warming politics of autonomy in Greenland. *Indigenous Affairs*, 1-2(8), 44-51.

Nye, J. S., 2019. Soft power and public diplomacy revisited. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 14(1-2), 7-20. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191x-14101013.

Obreja, D. M., 2024. Video games as social institutions. *Games and Culture*, 19(7), 831-850. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231177479.

Pamment, J., 2013. *New public diplomacy in the 21st century: a comparative study of policy and practice*. New York: Routledge.

Pamment, J., 2014. The mediatization of diplomacy. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 9(3), 253-280. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-12341279.

Parker, R., 2018. Video games: The future of documentaries. *First person scholar,* [blog] 21 November. Available at https://www.firstpersonscholar.com/video-games-the-future-of-documentaries/, accessed 28 November 2025.

Pérez, E., 1999. *The decolonial imaginary: Writing Chicanas into history*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Rodríguez Espínola, A., 2021. *Video games as tools for non-state cultural diplomacy: A case study of the video game Never Alone*. [PhD Thesis] Boulder: University of Colorado. Available at https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/graduate_thesis_or_dissertations/4x51hk28f, accessed 8 June 2026.

Rodríguez Espínola, A., 2022. Mediación de la diplomacia pública: Los videojuegos como espacio virtual para la resolución de conflictos. *Global Media Journal México*, 18(35), 132-150. DOI: https://doi.org/10.29105/gmjmx18.35-7.

Schrier, K., 2015. EPIC: A framework for using video games in ethics education. *Journal of Moral Education*, 44(4), 393-424. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2015.1095168.

Simon, M., 2008. Sovereignty from the North. *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, 7(1). Available at https://sfonline.barnard.edu/sovereignty-from-the-north/, accessed 8 June 2026.

Šisler, V., 2008. Digital Arabs: Representation in video games. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11(2), 203-219. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407088333.

de Smale, S., Kors, M. J. L. and Sandovar, A. M., 2017. The case of this war of mine: A production studies perspective on moral game design. *Games and Culture*, 14(4), 387-409. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017725996.

Stang, S., 2019. "This action will have consequences": Interactivity and player agency. *Game Studies*, 19(1). Available at https://gamestudies.org/1901/articles/stang, accessed 28 November 2023.

Tach, D., 2025. How TiMi makes Honor of Kings, the world's most-played mobile MOBA. *Epic Games Store*, [blog] 20 September. Available at https://store.epicgames.com/en-US/news/how-timi-makes-honor-of-kings-the-world-s-most-played-mobile-moba, accessed 11 December 2025.

The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings, 2011. [video game] (online) CD Projekt Red, CD Projekt Red.

This War of Mine, 2014. [video game] (multiplatform) 11 bit Studios, 11 bit Studios.

Urgent: EVOKE, 2010. [video game] (online) World Bank, World Bank.

Xiang, J. and Yuan, S., 2025. ESports and gaming: China's quest for global soft power. *East Asia*, 43, 61-80. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-025-09459-x.

Yuan, S., 2025. From play to power: China's video games as instruments of soft power. *The Pacific Review*, 38(4), 728-749. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2024.2433748.

@nzcer, 2017. *NZCER GfL conference 2017—Day 1: Amy Fredeen's featured talk*. [YouTube video] Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Azc9KGno2VY, accessed 5 May 2025.