

# Digital Political Science: Pixelating International Relations

Sandra Yao  
University of Ottawa  
75 Laurier Ave. East  
Ottawa, Canada  
1-(647) – 975-1747  
syao015@uottawa.ca

## ABSTRACT

Video games have the ability to be political products and their virtual nature gives them the freedom to reflect, interpret, and even redefine the political dynamics with which we engage on a daily basis at both personal and international levels. This paper will serve as an initial proposal to a research project that will seek to create a branch of Digital Political Science outlining a method for the study of video games in International Relations and ask questions regarding the type of research possibilities in the interfacing of International Relations with games research.

## General Terms

Design, Human Factors, Languages, Theory

## Keywords

International Relations, Game Study, Pop Culture, Research Methods, Video Games

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The use of video games as a medium of academic research is not a new concept. Disciplines like Media Studies, Communications Studies, Games Studies, and Digital Humanities have been at the forefront of not only presenting the video game genre as an important area of study, but have also developed various approaches and theories that bridge the space between player and game.

Unlike the other disciplines, IR has not had significant engagement with digital forms of knowledge production—even though in many ways, video games are political products themselves. They are created through the establishment of a framework determined by a set of norms and practices that define the boundaries of play, reflecting an image of the international system. The virtual nature of games gives them the freedom to reflect, interpret, and even redefine the political dynamics with which we engage on a daily basis at both personal and international levels.

I believe that IR's aversion to engage in meaningful interaction with video games is partly due to a more dominant "conservative"

tradition that maintains that the study should be concentrated on the "international"—meaning the state. IR developed as a discipline that was not interested in the politics of the "domestic" and "personal". The reality however, is that this separation between the state and the individual is arbitrary in nature. The state does not exist with the presence of its people and the people *are* the state. Games are often representative (re)interpretations of the many ontological assumptions of the current political atmosphere, it is therefore not farfetched to say that IR is happening in the living rooms of families across the world.

More importantly however, I believe that the discipline lacks a structured methodology that can be applied to the study of video games within IR. As IR has taken a more critical turn, new approaches to research are often introduced as a way to reveal innovative ways to interpret the discipline and different areas of research. Often influenced by work from other disciplines, these new methods introduce original ways through which to analyze and interpret various aspects of IR and its sub-disciplines. [1] As an example, IR's ethnographic turn borrows from anthropology and is inspired by cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz's description of ethnography as a "thick description" of a personal encounter between the researcher and another culture. [2] It seeks to reconnect the "international" and "domestic" through the repopulation of international politics with human life and reveal the complicated fabric that is political life and experience. [3]

## 2. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND VIDEO GAMES

To put in bluntly, IR does not know what to do with video games. This of course is not to say that IR has never engaged with the medium, but interactions are not frequent and often limited to analyzing its connection to militarism. [4] There is a lack of understanding regarding the way other disciplines have treated themes that are of inherent interest to IR: race, gender, otherness, etc.

Games Studies critically engages with video games, focusing on game design, players, and their role in society and culture. As an inter-disciplinary field, it has been able to bring together researchers from both social sciences and humanities. For example, by utilizing the social scientific and humanities approaches to study, Games Studies has explored questions regarding the effect of games on people and the meanings that are produced through them. Other more sociologically inclined methods have taken the task of understanding their role in everyday life. [5] Even economists have begun to utilize video games as a way to study the development of in-game economies and use observations to explain real-world occurrences. [6] Other work has explored the ways in which imaginative digital experiences interconnect with formal real-world rules. [7]

Works produced within the fields of Games Studies and Digital Humanities have been driven by questions related to the interest in the intimate relationships between player, game, meaning, and technology. Nevertheless, neither discipline has sought to explore the political narratives that exist in relations to the establishment of international power dynamics, statecraft, the formation of the ‘enemy’, or the perceptions of warfare and violence—all topics that of inherently interest to the study of International Relations (IR).

In essence, my project’s main focus will be to establish a video games research design method that will define the type of projects that can be done through video games, in addition to becoming a point of reference for others looking to conduct similar work of their own. It will create a critical research method that will explore the objects of study, the research questions that can be formed, research design, and the advantages/disadvantages related to the method. The end result will be an approach that will clearly define the object of study; its key concepts; methods of data collect; the type of data collected; its relations to IR; and the type of research it is suited for. More importantly, it will serve to bridge the gap between disciplines dealing with digital mediums and IR.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES

The goal of my thesis is to be able to formulate the parameters of a digital research project and apply the method to a case study that will analyze changes in storyline of games released post-9/11 from the *Call of Duty* franchise and their reflection of current political environments. *Call of Duty* has been chosen because of its consistent record-breaking sales and large target audience, but I realize that it is an obvious choice and solely studying this specific franchise may not be representative enough.

Currently, I am playing with the idea of either doing a larger sample of mainstream and indie first-person-shooters or perhaps a more mixed sample that would be open to the inclusion of more sandbox type games such as *Grand Theft Auto*. What I am most concerned in this case is finding a good balance of games that are both representative of the medium and the types of games that are played by the general public.

Alternatively, instead of concentrating on specific games, I would like to research the concepts of otherness and *othering*, both within games themselves and within multiplayer online scenarios. I am most interested in the use of gendered and racialized language as tools of exclusion and enforcers of difference. How does their use reflect the current conceptions of the enemy and of military participation within conflict? Is the type of language used reinforced within games or does their use legitimize the game’s narrative? The reflections of Anne Sarkeesian and others like her on the misogynistic environments of online multiplayer games provide a starting point for what I think would be valuable insight

into the perpetuation of exclusionary narratives that reflect current political realities.

Since I am in the beginning stages of research, the largest challenges that I am facing are understanding the type of research that is plausible, the types of research questions that are feasible, and the projects that will be able to best reflect the work of games research and its importance to the study in IR. Also, as my background is within International Relations, I think that it is important that I familiarize myself with the foundations and debates that exist with games research and be able to fairly integrate them with the theories and works of IR.

### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper is really meant to be an introduction into the importance of the creation of a research method that is able to provide a structured approach to the study of digital products—most specifically, video games—within International Relations. It is also a starting point to begin exploring the challenges that arise in attempting to introduce an inter-disciplinary approach to IR research. Creating a concrete framework for more a more significant inclusion of video games into the field will not only help to further overall project of pushing International Relations towards the beginnings of a digital turn, it will also push the discipline to become more reflective of current societal trends.

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