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**Title**
Video Games, Historical Representation and Soft Power

**Abstract**
This article explores how historical video games have become tools for UK and Chinese 'soft power' or 'public diplomacy' and the role of historical representation in portraying cultural identity in the global marketplace. In the UK, state support has been introduced for games representing British culture, which are assumed to conduct cultural diplomacy (a subcategory of public diplomacy). In China, public diplomacy - 'telling China's stories well' - has been central to national promotion strategies under Xi Jinping. Although the success of these approaches is visible in game companies like Tencent and NetEase, regulators remain attentive to games that reflect upon China's history and cultural heritage.

What does this mean for historical representation in and around video games? Do nationalistic regulatory environments threaten the capacity of games to offer thoughtful or challenging engagements with the past? And how effectively is historical representation mobilised to project soft power through video games?

**Keywords**: history, cultural policy, soft power, cultural diplomacy, Britain, China, historical game studies, regulation

## Introduction

This article explores how historical video games have become tools for both UK and Chinese 'soft power' or 'public diplomacy' (Nye 2004; Schneider 2005), and the role of historical representation in portraying cultural identity in the global marketplace. We ask how state interventions affect historical representation in video games, and how this representation is employed in the service of soft power. In addition, we consider how pressures to make games internationally consumable combine with ownership that crosses regulatory contexts to shape historical discourse. Several factors have contributed to the significant growth of the video game industry in recent decades, including the industry's role as a driver of technological innovation, market expansion to an ever-widening range of platforms and demographics, and the increasing popularity of the content produced. This growth has inevitably resulted in games receiving greater attention from governments and consequently, over the past decade, video games have become more widely used as tools for 'soft power' or 'public diplomacy'. While economic benefits often grab the headlines, the global nature of game development has resulted in complex economic ties across companies and between countries. The largest video games are now developed and produced across multiple locations worldwide, and there are also significant trade, economic and cultural exchanges between countries because games are sold and played globally.

The political, economic and sociological importance of games has also been affected by the way that North American and Japanese industry dominance has increasingly been challenged by companies from China and Europe (Kerr 2017), and a new spatial politics has emerged as video games have become culturally important to nation-states and other global actors. The contribution of video games to historical discourse and thus to players' understanding of the past - sitting alongside film and literature as a common way that the public engage with historical narratives (e.g. Hartman et al. 2021) - is a significant component of their importance. History plays a central role in national articulation, providing the shared narrative of a country's past which can foster a sense of national identity and unity, and nation-states often seek to influence historical messaging. Within that context, the games industry faces increased challenges as governments look to harness the economic benefits of national game production whilst exercising some control over definitions of the nation and national identity, as well as the stories told about the national past.

**History, Soft Power and Video Games**

The game industry is presented as 'bigger than Hollywood', but it remains difficult to obtain an accurate picture of the global games industry and the comparison of figures across sectors is open to a range of assumptions and interpretations (Kerr 2017: 32-3). The collation, analysis and presentation of different sectors, platforms, revenues and demographics draws on a multitude of often-contradictory sources across governmental, consultancy and press organisations. It is generally accepted that games have outperformed both box office and recorded music revenues in recent years. In 2021, games revenues were estimated at some $180 billion, up from $165 billion in 2020 (Wijman 2021), which compares favourably to combined 'global entertainment industry' (theatrical and home movie or TV entertainment) revenues of approximately $100 billion in 2020, and recording industry figures of $23.1 billion in that same year (Rubin 2020; Ingham 2021).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic hit the creative industries hard (e.g. Owen et al. 2020), it had only short-term impact on the games industry workforce, and the restrictions on socialising in fact led to a temporary increase in gaming (Mena et al. 2020: 3). The pandemic seems to have contributed to a considerable gap between games and other screen media, and the relationship between games, film and television has anyway begun to shift. While the sign of a successful film was once the development of an associated video game, now films and television series are developed from successful games, with adaptations of *World of Warcraft* (2016), *Angry Birds* (2017), *Assassin's Creed* (2017) and *The Witcher* (2019) all appearing in recent years. Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* is the latest game to be adapted for television (by HBO), marking a watershed moment where such adaptations receive critical acclaim (Stuart 2023). Games not only influence other media - demonstrating their cultural significance (Muriel and Crawford, 2018: 49) - but are increasingly used to create novel experiences for broad audiences, and galleries and museums have frequently explored how games and game technologies can augment existing collections and exhibits. This approach was centrally important during the pandemic, when virtual spaces served as surrogate social and cultural hubs. Virtual heritage and art spaces emerged, such as *Occupy White Walls* (KULTURA Ex Machina 2022), an online game that allows players to create their own art gallery, and the Serpentine Gallery's exhibition of US pop artist Kaws' sculptures and paintings in *Fortnite* (The Fortnite Team 2022).

Video games' cultural significance is also reflected in their growing importance to nation-states and other political actors. States no longer focus exclusively on building regional hubs or attracting and retaining skilled workforces, but now also use games to promote cultural heritage, and are keen to ensure they can influence the content being made. In short, they have come to treat video games as a means of exerting soft power. Joseph Nye coined the term soft power in the 1980s to refer to the ability of a nation-state to influence the behaviour or preferences of others through attraction and persuasion, rather than coercion or force. As Nye (2011: 11) has it, 'hard power' is 'the ability to get others to act in ways that are contrary to their initial preferences and strategies' through coercion, threat or inducement. In contrast, 'soft power' is the ability to get 'others to want the outcomes that you want', and achieve goals through 'attraction rather than coercion'. The ability to project national power and shape the preferences of others (and the associated international relations) in your favour, without having to resort to force or coercion, is naturally attractive. Hard power through, say, military action or economic influence (such as trade deals or sanctions) may be more visible and tangible but exerting influence through culture, ideology, political values and practices, as well as foreign policy, was seen as effective 'public diplomacy'. In 2005, Cynthia Schneider described this as 'all a nation does to explain itself to the world' and elaborated that for public diplomacy to achieve its goals, cultural diplomacy supplied much of the content. That content is represented through a range of forms, including film, television, music, social media and video games, and although the influence of games may not be as widely recognised or as overt as film or social media, the continued growth of the video games industry has ensured that games have become tools that governments desire to use in this way.

Governments, then, seek to influence, project and/or prevent messages and images in the media using a variety of measures. Most commonly, they provide economic support, both direct and indirect, for the creation of 'national' content; but they also make use of regulatory mechanisms to prevent information circulating. One significant aspect of cultural diplomacy involves the shaping of historical discourse, a contested space with substantial significance. History is understood as central to ideas of nation and national identity: nations have been described as 'sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories' (Smith 1991: 14), with national identity that 'crystallizes around common history, language and culture' (Habermas 1996: 285-6). In Benedict Anderson's (2006: 11) view, 'if nation-states are widely conceded to be "new" and "historical", the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past'. National history not only provides national communities with a sense of continuity, it also underpins claims to territorial ownership - 'the nation is formed around shared traditions that are not merely about a distinctive past, but a spatially situated past' (Grosby 2005: 10). It also provides justification for the contemporary political order, along with attempts to change it, as we see in Vladimir Putin's attempts to justify his invasion of Ukraine on historical grounds (Girvin 2023: 41).

Against this backdrop, this article asks what effect state interventions have on historical representation in and around video games, and how this representation is put to work in the service of soft power. We draw on two case studies, the United Kingdom and China, to consider how the combination of trans-regulatory ownership and the global circulation of games shapes historical discourse in these spaces.

**Case study 1: the United Kingdom**

Cultural diplomacy is a recognised strength of the UK (McClory 2015), in many ways a relic of the country's historical position at the centre of a global empire. The British Council, the UK's official cultural relations organisation, has a presence and relationships in more than 100 countries (British Council 2023) and alongside this the UK government has conducted successful international cultural marketing and promotion campaigns, including 'Cool Britannia' and 'GREAT Britain'. Central to British approaches in recent decades has been the development of policy around the 'creative industries', with the policy approach itself serving as another cultural export (Flew 2012: 11-12). Indeed, in opening remarks at the *Beyond* conference in 2021, Sir Peter Bazalgette, co-Chair of the Creative Industries Council, emphasised the role of the creative industries not only as the catalyst in growing the knowledge economy but also as 'the fiction in all media that enriches our national conversation, the video games which entertain us, the theatres and museums which both define place and drive tourism, the cultural exports which drive our soft power' (Bazalgette 2021).

The UK's creative industries were first presented as an idea in 1997 (Bell and Oakley 2015: 29), defined by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as 'those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property' (DCMS 2001: 5). The DCMS identified an initial thirteen sub-sectors, subsequently reviewed and reduced to nine: Advertising & Marketing; Architecture; Crafts; Design & Designer Fashion; Film/TV/Video/Radio/Photography; IT, Software & Computer Services; Publishing; Museums/Galleries/Libraries; Music/Performing & Visual Arts (DCMS 2015: 4, 10). Successive UK governments have promoted schemes to support the production and export of creative industries outputs, repeatedly hailing the sector as world leading. The DCMS itself replaced the Department for National Heritage, demonstrating the centrality of heritage in the department's history. The Heritage Alliance, representative of more than 90 non-governmental heritage bodies, describes heritage as 'integral to the creative and cultural identity of our nation', stating that it 'provides a strength of continuity from the past, creates meaning for our present, and defines the future' (Heritage Alliance 2022: 1). The role of heritage has gained in importance due to globalisation and Brexit debates (Shimko 2019), and under the DCMS it has been extensively co-opted into a strategy that combines market segmentation with history and historical representation, and instrumentalises culture.

Historical representation through film and television is arguably more widely recognised than through video games but all have been identified as areas the government wishes to support, by funding the distribution and marketing of content overseas, assisting in the promotion of creative outputs at international festivals, and providing greater assistance to companies to hire staff with skills to increase global audiences, a particular challenge post-Brexit. Such support further encourages collaboration with international partners to promote export growth and boost job creation. Whilst various schemes have been created either specifically for video games, such as the UK Games Fund (UKGTF 2023), or to incorporate them, such as UKRI schemes for the development and enhancement of Creative Clusters and Screen Talent (UKRI 2022), one of the main measures utilised to promote games as a growth sector and successful national export has been Video Game Tax Relief (VGTR), first introduced in 2014. Developers can qualify for significant tax relief if their game passes a points-based 'cultural test', which includes the allocation of specific points for games which 'contribute to or reflect British cultural heritage' (BFI 2019: 15).

The cultural test has a relatively low points threshold, with a pass awarded to games scoring 16 points out of a possible 31. Points are scored based on 'British' or European Economic Area (EEA) content – including the game setting, lead characters, and subject matter – but the test also includes points for 'cultural contribution' (creativity, heritage, diversity), use of 'cultural hubs' (UK-based production locations), and the nationality or residence of key personnel. The guidance for the test, published by the BFI (2019), states that 'Britain's cultural heritage is an important determinant of the British national identity. It is therefore important to preserve British cultural heritage in video games for audiences of the present and the future'. This position thus recognises historical discourses (included here within a wide-ranging concept of heritage) as a key constituent of the national community. It is significant, then, that the guidance also emphasises that representations of British cultural heritage do not need to be based in the UK, and a qualifying game might relate the story of a British historical event which took place elsewhere. The example provided is *Total War: Napoleon* (Creative Assembly 2010), the sequel to *Total War: Empire*, which allows players to recreate Napoleon's campaigns in Italy and Egypt, and to fight a European campaign either as France or as the Coalition nations (Austria, Russia, Prussia and Britain). Notably, this game would anyway meet a range of test criteria through its attention to British and EEA content, but it was clearly felt to be important to make a claim to this particular narrative of national military achievement. Furthermore, and in a manner similar to certain other countries which use cultural tests (e.g. Portugal; see O'Brien and Webber 2021), the definition of a 'character' here has both historical and colonial overtones, incorporating any character 'who was a subject of a state or kingdom prior to that territory becoming part of the United Kingdom or another EEA state' or 'who, at the time the video game is set, was a Subject in a colonial territory' (BFI 2019: 14).

These examples ably demonstrate the intersection of national interests with historical discourse. Here, the nuances of what could or should be construed as content that is culturally British or European have also been to some extent caught up in the politics of the UK's ongoing 'culture war' (Duffy et al. 2022). Within this space, history and heritage have become acutely contentious, especially when the idea of representation is at stake, and there is substantial discomfort among conservatives around reassessment of the country's imperial/colonial past. This has manifested in, for example, a rejection by some of the idea that Roman Britain was ethnically diverse (Dwyer 2017) - a position echoed frequently for a range of historical periods, for both ethnic and gender representation, in respect of video games (e.g. Brandenburg 2020). Elsewhere, a report produced for the National Trust (Huxtable et al. 2020) received criticism for its 'wokeness' from right wing politicians and media (McGivern 2021), and campaigns that resulted in the removal of public statuary prompted Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden to imply funding would be cut to cultural institutions which failed to act 'impartially', telling museum and heritage leaders that they 'must defend our culture and history from the noisy minority of activists constantly trying to do Britain down' (Harris 2021).

The UK government's support for the games industry is both politically and economically motivated, therefore, but games companies have (financial) reasons to support interventions as well. VGTR has received significant criticism (Holmes et al. 2019), some of which reflects doubts which emerged in respect of the original rationale for the tax relief. Aphra Kerr (2017: 147–8) has noted that the European Commission's Directorate General for Competition,

initially sceptical about the tax relief, was persuaded that it would support ‘a small number of distinctive, culturally British games’ which had struggled to attract private finance. However, she goes on to note that, of seven games put forward in the UK’s proposal as qualifying in one-quarter of 2013, the majority were produced by UK-branches of multinational publishers (Kerr 2017: 148). This criticism has remained valid: since the scheme was launched, almost half of all relief has been claimed by Rockstar Games and three other large multinational corporations (Sony, Sega, Warner Media). Rockstar, headquartered in New York and owned by publisher Take Two, also based in New York, routinely qualifies for VGTR as it has five UK-based subsidiaries which have led (or contributed to) the development of some of the largest gaming franchises: *Grand Theft Auto* and *Red Dead Redemption*.

Beyond Rockstar, VGTR has flowed to a range of recognisably British game makers, and while these include historical game makers such as Creative Assembly (a subsidiary of Sega famous for the *Total War* series), they also include many companies which are not typically associated with national historical discourse, even though their games may incorporate engagements with the past: Sports Interactive (another subsidiary of Sega), famous for the *Football Manager* series; Traveller’s Tales (subsidiary of Warner Brothers Interactive), known for the *LEGO* video games; and Media Molecule (subsidiary of Sony), famous for the *Little Big Planet* series. Initial estimates had suggested the VGTR scheme would cost approximately £35 million per year (HM Treasury 2014), but since 2019 the annual cost has exceeded £100 million. In 2020-2021 it was estimated Rockstar alone benefitted from almost twice that original estimate, claiming some £68.4 million. The UK based think tank TaxWatch estimated that Rockstar had claimed £205 million in VGTR by 2021 (Dunnagan 2021).

In addition to concerns over cost and value, there is warranted cynicism about the extent to which interventions like VGTR are about anything more cultural than differentiation in the global marketplace (see Mac Síthigh 2014: 19). There is arguably an expectation that the games that qualify for VGTR not only represent British culture, but by doing so conduct cultural diplomacy (Webber 2020: 145). While ‘Britishness’ is historically a component of Rockstar's brand identity (Wright 2022: 16), claiming that franchises such as *GTA* and *Red Dead Redemption*, both set clearly in the USA, qualify as ‘culturally British’ invites concern and even scepticism, as does the idea that UK subsidiaries of global corporations are producing qualifying games. Although these companies are creating products for a global market which meet a set of cultural criteria, they are typically the result of a global effort across multiple studios, and there is an established assumption that cultural outputs produced ‘in a place’ are ‘of a place’ (see Webber 2020: 143; Garda et al. 2022: 2). Even where development is located in one place, those contributing to the creation of the game are typically reflective of a global talent pool. In 2022, UK video game trade body Ukie estimated that 20% of all employees were from the EU and 30% held a nationality other than British (Taylor 2022). Criteria such as location of production and residency (rather than simply nationality), though, seem to argue that national culture can somehow be inhabited, and will shape cultural production as a result. In the UK, then, explicit cultural policy in support of video games as economic and soft power assets becomes implicit cultural policy, shaping historical discourse in a British or generally Western mould.

**Case study 2: China**

In China, public diplomacy has also been at the heart of national promotional strategy. Under Xi Jinping, this is summarised in the idea of 'telling China's story well' (讲好中国故事), alongside the notion of the 'Chinese dream' (中国梦; see Liu 2018; Huang & Wang 2019). These initiatives build on China's adoption of international models of development in the cultural sector, for example the introduction in the mid-2000s of the 'creative industries' approach (O'Connor & Gu 2014). The outcomes of these policies are visible in the extensive presence of Chinese television on streaming platforms, and in several highly successful video games companies. The gaming landscape in China is largely perceived in the West as dominated by free-to-play mobile games, fueled by microtransactions and targeted at the domestic market. Successful companies in this space, such as Tencent, NetEase, Perfect World and IGG, have helped transform the character of Chinese game development, though, and the video games now being produced are demonstrably more expansive and targeted towards a global audience. Early footage of upcoming titles like *Black Myth: Wukong* and *Wuchang: Fallen Feathers* have gained significant traction on both Chinese and Western streaming sites, and released games such as *Genshin Impact*, *Naraka: Bladepoint* and the early access *Dyson Sphere Program* have received critical acclaim in the West for their visuals and gameplay (Chan 2022).

Even so, China continues to have a deep-seated wariness of the video game medium, reflected in an August 2021 editorial in state media outlet *Economic Information Daily*, which made headlines in the West when it reiterated the longstanding criticism of online games as 'spiritual opium' (Goh & Shen 2021; and see Szablewicz 2010). There has been ongoing debate in the country about whether games should be understood as productive or as pathological, an argument tied up with concerns about internet addiction over more than two decades (L. Zhang 2013; Liboriussen et al. 2015). In terms of academic literature, while there is interest in approaches to games outside the orthodoxy presented in state media, this is usually marginalised: 'there are almost no incentives to extend the ''mania'' over novel philosophical concepts and media theories to further the understanding of the actual experiences of digital games in the Chinese context' (G. Zhang 2016: 333). Video games are significant in China, then, but are seen differently from the way they are in the West, an issue in part underpinned by a different and sometimes unpredictable regulatory environment. This includes a historic presumption that media made available in China is suitable for all, meaning that media such as films are not 'age-rated' (Grealy et al. 2019) and games have only been so since 2020 (Dealessandri 2020). Chinese gaming is also heavily PC-based, after a national ban on games consoles between 2000 and 2015, and the fluidity of regulation is demonstrated by a 2018 ban on all video game releases, which lasted for nine months (Holmes 2021).

The specific issue of historical representation, and its role in soft power projection, also has a controversial past. For example, in 2009 the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) raised concerns about 'myth- or legend-based [television] dramas filled with absurdity' which were seen to trivialise Chinese history and traditional culture (Bai 2014: 60). Although the production of historical dramas - for example about the Chinese Communist Party - had long been encouraged, these required approval by the Party's Propaganda Department and could be blocked from broadcast even after approval,

something demonstrated in the case of *Marching Towards the Republic* (2003), which required last minute edits and was never repeated because its 'interpretation of major historical figures and events contradicted the official history' (Bai 2014: 55-56, 59, 63). Recent interventions into the sub-genre of historical palace dramas demonstrate that the representation of the past remains contentious, with the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), successor to SARFT, banning a number of shows. Reportedly, these dramas had had negative effects, including causing people to idolise royalty and use 'historical speech as catchphrases', and promoting extravagant lifestyles at odds with values of virtue and hard work (Abby 2019: n.pag.).

These are not purely internal matters for China, of course, especially not given the increasing presence of Chinese media globally, with some television shows achieving billions of streams internationally (Keane & Wu 2021: 161). It is important to China that it be respected internationally as an ancient culture with a long history (d'Hooghe 2005: 94), and this history is part of arguments for ideas like the Belt and Road initiative, as well as the educative practices of the Confucius Institutes (Liu 2018: 3-4). Even as a regional power, however, the Chinese historical narrative is not uncontested, as Koichi Iwabuchi (2010: 207) has demonstrated:

> Chinese criticism of the distortion of historical representation in the Korean drama series *Jumong* shows the increasing role which media culture plays in the disputes over the ownership of national culture and historical narrative. Especially pertinent is the dispute over historical issues regarding Japanese colonialism in Asia, which still has a strong downside for the inter-Asian dialogue.

Furthermore, the penetration of China's messages internationally must also be considered critically, given that large scale engagement does not necessarily translate into positive reception, nor do sizeable viewing or playing figures outside China indicate that media has engaged an audience beyond the very substantial Chinese diaspora (Keane and Wu 2021: 161-162, 165).

In terms of video games, the tension between internal and external needs has proven very visible, in part because of the aforementioned globalised nature of production. For example, Lin Zhang (2013: 2398) draws our attention to the case of *The Prefect's Decision III*, a WWII game developed during 1996 in Tianjin, by a Japanese-owned company. Eleven Chinese employees of the company resigned in protest, claiming the game was 'seriously distorting history by glorifying the Japanese invaders' and were invited by a wealthy Chinese entrepreneur to develop an anti-Japanese video game (*Anti-Japan I: Mine Warfare*) instead. At the game's launch, its producer reportedly cautioned Chinese people against forgetting history and national humiliation. Such an intervention clearly addresses internal Chinese concerns about the representation of the past, something echoed in more official forms of protest, such as the banning of *Hearts of Iron* for 'distorting history and damaging China's sovereignty and territorial integrity' (a clear testament to the connection between history and nation) by representing Manchuria, West Xinjiang and Tibet as independent states, and Taiwan as under Japanese control (China Daily 2004).

Yet there is also evidence of dissatisfaction with the focus of internal historical narratives, not least when it comes to earlier periods of China's history. For example, players of *Oriental*

*Empires*, a 2017 strategy game from Thailand-based Shining Pixel Studio, applaud the developers' attention to China's past, observing that Chinese culture and history have long been absent from global game history (Li and Webber 2022). This goes beyond a positive response to the inclusion of Chinese culture, though, as further comments indicate:

> what about our domestic game companies? [...]have you ever thought of making a game that belongs to China with your heart? (Steam User 纹身啊？黑社会? 2016: n.pag.)

> The Chinese themselves seldom have strategy games based on history, let alone developed by a foreign team! (Mikoto 2016: n.pag.)

The implication here is that internal politics around historical representation may in fact undermine rather than strengthen the coherence of national historical discourse.

***Honour of Kings***

Such criticism is echoed elsewhere, for example in the case of *Honour of Kings* (TiMi Studio Group 2015), where social media users pushed back against state commentary, taking the opportunity 'to stage their own criticism of China's primary school system and its teaching of history' (Liboriussen & Martin 2020: 335). Released in 2015 by Tencent, *Honour of Kings* is a multiplayer online battle arena game (MOBA), made available internationally under the name *Arena of Valor* (TiMi Studio Group 2016). Influenced by Riot Games' hugely successful *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009),[i] the game proved very popular and became the top-grossing title in China in 2016, and internationally in 2017; in January 2023, it remains one of the highest-grossing games on both Android and iOS. Whilst the game benefitted from simpler design and gameplay mechanics for mobile, the MOBA genre was already very popular. The specific success of *Honour of Kings* was in connecting popular game mechanics with Chinese history and mythology.

For the Chinese market, the game's playful deployment of familiar characters was a winning formula, even whilst eschewing any notion of historical accuracy, and the game is usually represented as fantasy-themed rather than historical. It can therefore seem somewhat strange in the West that the game has become the source of contention between the Chinese state and game publisher Tencent. At its core, *Honor of Kings* follows the same conventions as those that made *League of Legends* a phenomenon in the United States, though in moving it to a mobile platform (to better access the Chinese market) these were simplified. The game has several different game modes where players compete in matches (in teams of five) with the aim of destroying enemy bases. As with *League of Legends*, player-controlled characters are referred to as heroes, and each hero has unique abilities that can be upgraded by earning gold and experience. The heroes are loosely based on historical and mythological Chinese characters, although connections are tangential, if culturally familiar, for Chinese players.

Commenting in the *South China Post* (Yan 2017: n.pag.), analyst Chen Xiaohuan attributed the popularity of the game in part to the fact that heroes were instantly recognisable to Chinese players: 'its characters are named after famous ancient Chinese figures, rather than

translations of foreign names'. The hero Sun Wukong is based on the legendary mythical figure, the Monkey King, best known from the 16th-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. Zhang Fei, is loosely based upon the military general, a central character in 14th-century historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. This connection to classical Chinese Literature exists in other characters, even if the in-game connection is purely nominal. The hero, Li Bai, is very loosely based upon the famous Chinese poet but in the game is classed as an assassin.

Bjarke Liboriussen and Paul Martin (2020) have analysed the game's usage of historical characters, and the ensuing debate and criticism, through the lens of 'popular heritage'. Through an analysis of the social media platform Zhihu, they reflect on the dissonance between the Chinese state, Tencent and the public, with regard to the way they each view the uses, meaning and interpretation of Chinese history within the game. Liboriussen and Martin consider pre-existing tensions between the government's use of heritage as a political resource and Tencent's use of it as a commercial one, emphasising that the public debate would potentially result in change, with the government taking measures to ensure they could more directly influence corporate decision-making. This collision between the Chinese State and games companies was almost inevitable, given the potential wealth that access to the Chinese market could bring. For Western companies, understanding what Chinese gamers want requires access to and partnership with Chinese companies.

Liboriussen and Martin were reflecting on restrictions on gaming content that came into force in China in 2016, but those restrictions were themselves an extension of existing rules and regulations - not all of which were clear or coherent. Commenting on the difficulty of interpreting and navigating the rules, *Guardian* journalist Oliver Holmes (2021: n.pag.) observes that, '[b]ecause the official guidelines are so vague, foreign developers tend to abide by a fuzzy, speculative and ever-changing set of unwritten "rules", many of which are gleaned from trial and error'. In 2019, restrictions were introduced that only allowed children to game for an hour and a half per day on weekdays, and up to three hours on weekends and public holidays, during daylight hours.[ii] In addition, outside of those hours, gaming companies were restricted from providing online gaming services to children. In 2021, those restrictions were tightened, further limiting the online gaming time allowed for minors. Tencent was one of many gaming companies that responded with additional measures, including tracking measures, algorithms to push prompts to players and adoption of facial recognition technology, all to try to ensure compliance. In addition to tightening regulations on physical interaction with games, regulation of gaming content by the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA) - China's gaming watchdog - was also to become stricter. The *South China Morning Post* reported that a leaked memo emphasised that video games were 'no longer apolitical "pure entertainment" but a new form of art that must highlight "a correct set of values" and accurate understanding of China's history and culture' (Ye 2021). The continued commercial success of *Honour of Kings* highlights the tension that exists between economic competitiveness and state-led requirements to avoid 'historical nihilism'. To that end, China's approach recognises that video games speak inwardly and outwardly, and China is concerned about this representation because it sees games as strongly connected to soft power.

**Discussion**

The United Kingdom and China are not alone in considering how their games industries should be supported and regulated. However, the continued growth of the industry through greater audience reach, and commercial and critical success, increases the attention paid to the content of games. Where games become vehicles for soft power, this will also result in a sharper focus on the way they represent national history and cultural heritage.

***Historical representation in and around video games***

The nature and status of historical representation in video games is complex, as a wealth of literature in Historical Game Studies demonstrates (e.g. von Lünen et al. 2020; Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke et al. 2021). Video games provide an interactive and engaging way to experience and learn about the past, and history themed games retain a popularity that crosses over and between genres. However, the representation of history in video games can be shaped by the technology used to make them, their developer's creative vision, and their publisher's market concerns, even before regulatory pressures come to bear. Given that the nature of historical representation can vary widely, and there is often criticism that video games oversimplify or distort historical events, it is important to consider how this is influenced by national policies.

As we detail above, there is clear evidence that history, especially national history, can be contentious in the space of national media regulation. This issue is not limited to the UK and China but is international in scope, articulated not only by governments but also through game communities. While, for example, *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* was banned by the Iranian government for presenting 'false and distorted information' about the 1979 revolution, this ban was also justified on the basis that the game had 'not been well received by gamers' (Tehran Times 2016: n.pag.).[iii] Similarly, although never explicitly banned, *Company of Heroes 2* was withdrawn from sale in 2013 by its Russian distributor due to public controversy about its representation of the Red Army in World War 2 (Yin-Poole 2013). Overwhelmingly in these discussions, the sense is that 'history' - meaning specific historical narratives which underpin conceptions of the nation and national identity - must be 'protected' and must not be 'distorted', challenging the idea that history is subjective and open to multiple different interpretations. In each case, historical representation is incorporated as a central component of an authoritarian nationalist discourse which lays claim to popular support.

With that said, the consequences of the regulation of historical games have *seemingly* been heavier in China than in the UK, with bans including *Hearts of Iron* (noted above) and *Football Manager 2005* (Bramwell 2004) for representing disputed territories such as Tibet and Taiwan as independent, and *Command & Conquer: Generals* and *Battlefield 4* for negative depictions of the Chinese military, the PLA (Jou 2013). Significantly, in the latter two games, players could play forces which opposed the PLA, and could undertake conflict in Mainland China. Furthermore, in *Battlefield 4*, the principal antagonist is Chinese, and the narrative involves him plotting to overthrow China's government with the support of Russia, bringing China into conflict with the United States. This perceived 'smearing' of China's national image was, perhaps not unreasonably, seen as an example of the West utilising its media and entertainment sectors to undermine Chinese culture and stability. It should be noted, too, that the UK is hardly inactive in the space of video game regulation, and where games are seen as contributors to controversial issues, there have been movements to ban

them or to discourage distributors from selling them (see, for example, deWinter 2015: 247-248).

It is certainly the case that global dominance of video game development by Western companies has meant that US developers in particular have taken to transforming other people's countries, most notably the Middle East (Šisler, 2008: 208), into virtual battlegrounds. This occurs alongside a process where nationalities and ethnic groups constructed as the enemies of the moment are placed inside the frame of otherness: 'The elastic borders of the frame would stretch to include new others, more others – as the United States and its Western allies wage new wars, more wars' (Saber and Webber 2017: 80). In terms of the UK and China, examples of this activity can even be seen in educational games, for example the Wellcome Trust-commissioned *High Tea*, where players win by recreating the trading practices which led to the Opium Wars (Birchall and Henson 2011). While the game was seen as valuable in educational terms, it follows the approach of other games which engage with colonial-era trading practices in Asia, such as *East India Company* (Nitro Games 2009) and *John Company* (Wehrle 2017), in that the colonised are presented as resources rather than agents.

***Localisation readiness***

The development dominance of Western nations has also been linked to a history of market dominance, although this has changed significantly in recent years, with China becoming one of the largest games markets globally. The established practice of Chinese video game regulation regarding historical material, alongside the fluidity of the regulatory framework, means that developers looking to sell into the Chinese market are likely to take a cautious approach to content, indulging in self-censorship of contentious material, historical and otherwise (X. Zhang 2012). As games have become increasingly complex and shifted to games-as-a-service models, where live content is regularly updated, both developers and publishers have generally steered away from controversial content. This becomes increasingly complicated as games are sought out on the one hand to provide engaging educational experiences and on the other have to navigate historical content that some players dispute. History themed games can provide thoughtful and challenging engagements with the past but if developers and publishers - already aware of the risk of commercial and critical failure - need to comply with nationalistic regulations that apply to historical content, they will look to avoid controversy or censorship by removing, altering or simplifying historical events.

These interventions are often part of a broader practice that, following Kerr (2017: 126), we might describe as making games 'localisation ready'. Localisation here refers not only to translation in terms of languages but also addresses regulatory frameworks and cultural context. Localisation-readiness often requires specialist knowledge, and the employment of legal and/or geo-political experts. Larger publishers have internal departments and teams that take into consideration matters that the gaming public are often unaware of, from ensuring that artists have not created 'unlicensed' car models to the exclusion of logos due to concerns that brands may be subverted. This extends to covert (and often overt) political messaging, as was the case with Apple's decision to reject *Endgame: Syria* due to its 'political' content (Dredge 2013), and consequently to games that use historical disputes as a core theme. This has occurred notably between China and Japan but also between Japan and Korea: in both cases territorial disputes over islands in the East China Sea have been

introduced into games with a more antagonistic tone. The 2012 iPad game *Defend the Diaoyu Islands* (Feit 2012) challenged players to defend Chinese military positions on the disputed islands, and an update for 2013's *Glorious Mission,* the Chinese army's video game/recruiting tool, included a mission where players were tasked to invade those same islands (Dewey 2013). In contrast, a less antagonistic approach was taken by the 2012 Japanese Android game *Takeshima Struggle*, which had players race a cartoon rabbit to claim the disputed island of Takeshima (if Japanese) or Dokdo (if South Korean), with the developer stating he hoped the game would help improve relations between the two countries.

The collective pressures of localisation readiness, caution due to shifting regulatory sands, and specific points of historical or contemporary antagonism can all affect historical representation in games, therefore, resulting in a reduction of complexity and nuance, and limiting the ability of games to provide meaningful engagement with the past. Arguably, the (self-)censorship of certain elements of history that might be deemed inappropriate or offensive will not only further reduce the capacity of games to offer a challenging engagement with the past but potentially also mean they become more propagandistic. With that said, censorship 'at home' can often become broadly invisible, as games are produced within, and thus adjusted to align with, prevailing cultural norms. This is becoming an increasingly visible aspect of the discussion, however, as greater focus on global circulation and international markets brings different perspectives into conflict. Perhaps ironically, 'woke' histories that are less ideological about the Western past are likely to be more palatable internationally than established Western narratives.

***Historical representation and soft power***

While game companies are extremely proficient at navigating these regulatory challenges, it remains difficult to predict how they will change, meaning that even successful products may become problematic when public mood shifts and acceptability changes, and criteria are reinterpreted or guidelines revised. This is significant in terms of soft power projection: telling China's story well in 2023 may prove to be very different from doing so in, say, 2030. In the UK, the national story in 2014 was a resoundingly European one, but in 2023 this is far less the case.

It is evident that historical representation in video games can be effectively mobilised to project soft power, and this is recognised by national governments as an area of interest and growth. This is not limited to the historical representation that occurs through narrative: video games set in a particular country or featuring that country's history can help to promote its cultural heritage, historical landmarks, and traditions. This makes them attractive to governments, as they can communicate a specific national image by showcasing technological advancements, economic development, and political stability. By presenting specific images of particular nations, then, video games help to shape global perceptions and increase those countries' soft power. The representation of real-world locations in the virtual world has led to increased interest in video game tourism, both virtually and physically (Rough Guides Editors 2021). Virtual game tourism is already established across a range of spaces, in which recognisable 'hero' buildings or locations, from both 'real' and 'fictional' worlds, are available for players to explore in the context of the game world. Physical game-related tourism occurs when people travel to sites around the world on holiday, inspired by the games they play. These practices are reflected in a range of cultural output, including

travel guides that explore games beyond traditional gameplay, giving them the full tourist information treatment, with travel tips and in-game 'photographs'. The *Rough Guide to Xbox* (2021) includes some games which incorporate real world locations (like *Forza Horizon 5* and *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*) and some which took place in entirely fictional worlds (such as *Anthem* and *Sea of Thieves*). Such collaborations and partnerships are a growing indication of the infrastructure and potential that surrounds the games industry, but are also an indication of how historical/heritage representation is part of a broader process of cultural diplomacy.

Beyond matters of landscape, the political discussion around history in both the UK and China is conditioned at present by similar, emotive language which makes arguments about the validity and value of particular national histories (in the UK the 'culture war' dialogue, in China tensions around a 'correct' national past). This of course directly affects the projection of soft power, not least because it is easy for strong national messages to become antagonistic, as some of the games we discuss seem to, rather than persuasive. Although ideas around games' ability to persuade often consider their rhetorical value as systems (Bogost 2007), it is typically narrative content that produces the regulatory effects (including bans) that we discuss. In any case, it appears games developed in the UK have yet to conflict directly with government interests, and the commentary in China around history seems to acknowledge the newness of this discussion ('a new form of art'; Ye 2021). It is likely, therefore, that the issue of games, history and soft power will develop significantly in the coming years. With that said, the situation appears to be that hegemonic Western historical narratives still dominate, but China's growing significance as a market means that parts of those narratives are becoming muted due to developer caution. It is not clear, however, if this caution applies to UK-based game production in respect of games designed to meet VGTR criteria and thus pass internal regulatory barriers, although it manifestly does for Chinese games aimed at Chinese audiences. In the case of VGTR, we can imagine that guidelines may be interpreted in a manner which means that making a *critical* historical British game is a choice with a distinct financial cost. Similar balancing acts can be seen in China, around *Honor of Kings*. Concerns of soft power projection, then, can draw out benefits from historical representation in video games but they can also create costs as a consequence.

**Conclusion**

The significant role played by history in defining and imagining the nation places it at the centre of activities concerned with national identity, including efforts to shape internal and external perceptions of a given nation's qualities. As we have seen, not only does this mean that it is inherently part of soft power initiatives - national histories are, almost by definition, persuasive and positive interpretations of a nation's past - but also that national governments are keenly interested in how these historical narratives can be effectively communicated. The increasing number of video game players worldwide, and their continued interest in games with historical content, provides a ready-made audience for such narratives, with the added incentive that this is an area of huge economic interest as well.

What does this mean for the nature and status of historical representation in and around video games? While the developing field of Historical Game Studies demonstrates that scholarly interest in this area continues to grow, the question of exactly how historical games are history is not yet settled, and academic historians have remained cautious about the

potential of such games, perhaps because the majority are created with entertainment rather than education in mind. Although the games industry has made a range of attempts to consolidate the value of these games *as* history in themselves - including arguments about their 'authenticity' or 'accuracy' (e.g. Burgess and Jones 2021; Donald and Reid forthcoming) - they have also been supplemented with out-of-game content which presents historical discourse in a more recognisable manner (Wright 2022). The employment of paratextual material such as trailers and supporting websites to communicate historical information bears on our discussion here, as it removes regulatory risk from the game itself and places it into spaces which are more readily modified for, or overlooked by, censors.

The status of games as entertainment, and their increasing cultural significance, may in fact enhance their value to nation states as venues to disseminate cultural values alongside national historical narratives. As we indicate, there is a clear desire in both the UK and China to control representations of the past, and policy affecting video games contributes - sometimes indirectly - to attempts to achieve this objective. While the international nature of the games industry makes exercising such control more difficult, game makers also often find themselves caught between global regulatory frameworks which encourage the removal of national historical representation and policy supports - such as VGTR - which encourage its inclusion. In any event, developers intentionally play with historical content, both for gameplay reasons and to gain greater resonance with their audiences, connecting characters and diegetic narratives to well-known historical events and people to help build familiarity. As elsewhere, then, historical representation in games is a space of contention, and game makers must navigate an environment in which the competing desires of nation states to control narratives about the past force them to make significant compromises to achieve global economic success alongside local cultural support.

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[i] Tencent acquired Riot in 2011.

[ii] Note that such restrictions aren’t entirely new: in the past, online games have included an ‘addiction prevention system’ which restricts underage players to three hours of gaming (Szablewicz 2010: 464).

[iii] Note that the developer claims the game is ‘authentic’ and ‘historically accurate’ (iNK Stories 2016: n.pag.)