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Cultural Hegemony in Videogames (and the rise of China)¹



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Cultural Hegemony in Videogames (and the rise of China)

Abstract

This article argues that cultural hegemony has been a central concept in game studies to describe, over the course of thirty years, how AAA videogames have reproduced sexist, racist, capitalist, postcolonialist, militarist, US-Americanocentric worldviews as ‘natural,’ in which male, white, cis-gendered, able-bodied subject positions are presented as the ‘default;’ but that nothing much has changed as a consequence of this descriptive scholarly project. Secondly, it argues that cultural hegemony is subject to historical change, and that it should be understood in the political and economic context of its time. Thirdly, that the political and economic context of the past three decades have led increasingly fewer game companies to become increasingly more incentivized to reproduce what Adorno and Horkheimer called ‘sameness.’ Fourthly, that the political and economic context of cultural hegemony is likely to change in the coming decades, and that videogames will be one of the first cultural spheres in which the increased relevance of Chinese players and their state’s policies will affect the cultural-hegemonic representations which we have become used to observing (and powerlessly critiqueing). Finally, that it would be a mistake to understand such change as *counter*-hegemonic rather than co-hegemonic. Early examples of changes to videogames’ hegemonic representations suggest that Western hegemony is not so much resisted nor replaced, but that, (for the time being), it is stretched to make place for Chinese hegemony alongside it.

Keywords

Cultural hegemony, game industry, China

1 Introduction

It may seem like there is nothing left to say about cultural hegemony in videogames, but it is high time to talk about it. This Gramscian concept has been abundantly applied in videogame scholarship over the past decades, and its relevance seems to be rising, as I will show below. Indeed, no industry illustrates cultural hegemony better than the global game industry. As a cultural commodity more expensive to make, more globally standardized, and consequently more risk-averse than movies, music and literature, AAA videogames more than any other cultural commodity tend toward the reproduction of dominant worldviews. Such cultural dominance, finally, will likely change to include Chinese co-hegemony.

Based on a review of over thirty years of game studies literature, a historical contextualization, a theoretical argument, a quantitative overview of AAA publishing, and an empirical provocation, this article argues that there are five things left to say about cultural hegemony in videogames.

Firstly, that cultural hegemony has been a consistently central concept in game studies since at least 1991 (e.g., Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Hammar, et al., 2019; Keogh, 2023; Kerr, 2006; Kline, et al., 2003; Provenzo, 1991; Shaw, 2015), and that over thirty years of this has done an important job of describing how (AAA) videogames (1) reproduce sexist, racist, capitalist, postcolonialist, militarist, US-Americanocentric worldviews as ‘natural,’ in which (2) male, white, cis-gendered, able-

bodied subject positions are presented as the ‘default;’ but that nothing much has changed as a consequence of this descriptive scholarly project.

Secondly, that cultural hegemony *is* nonetheless subject to historical change, that its origins should be understood in the political and economic context of its time in 1925 to 1945 (Gramsci, 1930a; 1930b; Lears, 1985), and that the context of Gramsci’s time is important to understand what cultural hegemony is and does.

Thirdly, that what cultural hegemony is and does in videogames in recent times (primarily using available data from 1995 to 2025), has been a consequence not of industry demographics or scholarly commentary - both of which have led to very little change - but of the political-economic context of our time, in which increasingly fewer companies have increasingly more compelling reasons to reproduce what Horkheimer and Adorno called “sameness” (1947).

Fourthly, that the political and economic context of cultural hegemony is likely to change once more, and that videogames will be one of the first cultural spheres in which the increased relevance of Chinese players and their state’s policies will affect the cultural-hegemonic representations which we have become used to observing (and powerlessly critiquing).

Finally, that it would be a mistake to understand such change as *counter*-hegemonic rather than co-hegemonic. Early examples of changes to videogames’ hegemonic representations suggest that Western hegemony is not so much resisted nor replaced, but that, (for the time being), it is stretched to make place for Chinese hegemony alongside it.

2 Centrality of hegemony in game studies (1991–2025)

Let us start with the first claim: that cultural hegemony has been a central concept in game studies; before tracing the concept’s historical and theoretical genealogy; empirically showing its presence in the videogame industry; arguing for its likely change; and drawing our conclusions.

Over the past several decades, Antonio Gramsci’s conception of cultural hegemony has become a centrally recurring one in critical-theoretical studies of games. Since theory is an attempt to explain why the world works as observed, (or to speculate on how it might work), it would be a mistake to start here with Gramsci, and then to pedantically decide whether game scholars have used the concept ‘correctly;’ instead, let us start by observing how game scholars have used the term, and then come back to Gramsci.

Early game scholarship initially talked mostly about “hegemony” as a way to off-set the *form* of games against the “hegemony” of literature and narrative. Games required different theories than the “hegemonic worship of great texts” and what made games interesting - or (ergodic) cybertexts more broadly, or adventure games more narrowly - is their “difference from [...] hegemonic forms” (Aarseth, 1997, pp. 22, 109). Similarly, Marie-Laure Ryan argued that games - or participatory interactivity more broadly, virtual reality more narrowly - were set to “liberat[e] the theatre from the hegemony of spoken language and replac[e] the text of the author with the body-language of the actors” (Ryan, 2001, p. 303). This use of the concept of hegemony (to position videogames as counter-hegemonic to the perceived dominance of narrative) appears sufficiently established that Janet Murray, in a preface to a later edition of her classic 1997 study, felt called to address that she “continue[s] not to be a narratologist and not to claim any “hegemony” for narrative over games” (2016, p. 19).

To be clear, this first use of hegemony to criticize the dominance of narrative theories, while ostensibly far removed from Gramscian uses of cultural hegemony to criticize the naturalization of a dominant ideology, is no less relevant. As both Brendan Keogh (2014) and Soraya Murray (2017) note in turn, “game studies’ obsession with purism in their object of study is tantamount to a hegemonic act that excludes certain works, and the experience of playing them, as invalid,” leading to “further marginaliz[e] the least represented producers and players of games” (Murray, 2017, p. 32).

A second, more critical-theoretical use of hegemony for understanding games is articulated in direct opposition to the previous, by Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter. Stating that the uniqueness of “interactivity [...] is often represented as a dramatic emancipatory improvement over traditional one-way mass media” (2003, p. 14), they argue that instead, “issues of hegemonic values and constrained roles and identities [are] by no means surpassed, just because the technology enables the players’ choices to be made in different ways” (p. 55). Aphra Kerr, similarly acknowledging early game scholarship’s use of hegemony to criticize the dominance of narrative theories (2006, pp. 26-27), is quick to add that

“one only needs to attend any industry event or flick through an industry magazine to be confronted by a stream of images of women, cars and guns and an adolescent male discourse about them. This form of ‘hegemonic heterosexual masculinity’ can be traced back to the origin of games in male-dominated laboratories.” (Kerr, 2006, p. 100)

Kline et al. (2003) and Kerr (2006) articulate two main arguments that will remain central to considerations of hegemony in game studies: (1) an identification of masculinity - often quickly followed by militarization - as the pre-supposed default subject position in games; and (2) the game industry’s demographics and historical genealogy as responsible for perpetuating this masculine (militarist) default. We can trace this use of hegemony to make sense of videogame representation, including the focus on gender within it, back to at least Eugene Provenzo’s argument that “the content of games included as part of the Nintendo system reflect values more widely held in our society [...] it can be argued that video games are instruments of a larger social, political, and cultural hegemony (1991, p. 115) - noting in particular that “both the boys and the girls who were interviewed” as part of his study indicated that female videogame characters were seen as boring and sub-jacent (ibid.), and that, ultimately, “video games are instruments of information that serve important hegemonic functions in their perpetuation of bias and gender stereotyping” in particular (ibid., p. 138).

Subsequent decades of game scholarship would flesh out this argument consistently. Shortly after Kline and co-authors, David Leonard broadens the focus on gender by stating that games are often overlooked as trivial rather than “sophisticated vehicles inhabiting and disseminating ideologies of hegemony [...] teaching Americans about race, gender, sexuality, class and nationality identity[sic]” (2004, p. 2). Janine Fron and co-authors most straightforwardly explain the analogy of the “hegemony of play” to refer to how (within the triad of game journalism, player cultures and industry,) the “game industry has influenced the global culture of play in much the same way that hegemonic nations, such as the British Empire or post-WWII America, have, in their times of influence, dominated global culture” (2007, p. 309).

In the surrounding years, Dovey & Kennedy (2006), and later Everett & Watkins (2008), Corneliussen (2008), Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter (2009), Crogan, (2011) and many others - straight through and beyond game studies’ *World of Warcraft*-obsessed era - built on and expanded our understanding of games as vehicles for hegemony. Over the next decade,

studies abound on hegemony in videogames broadly and theoretically (Cassar, 2013; Hammar, 2020; Saber & Webber 2017), about hegemonic game(r) culture (Dovey & Kennedy, 2007; Voorhees & Orlando, 2018), hegemonic game production (Kerr, 2017; Keogh, 2023) and such related concepts as non- and counter-hegemony (Hammar, 2017; Shaw, 2015), Empire (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Mukherjee, 2015; 2017), cultural imperialism (Baeza-González, 2021; Chen, 2013; Šisler, et al., 2023), and soft power (Nieborg, 2009; Urueva & Uchaev, 2023). The multi-headed conclusion is that games reproduce hegemonically sexist (e.g., Cote, 2020), racist (Leonard, 2003), capitalist (Harambam, et al., 2011), colonialist (Mukherjee, 2018), petrocultural (op de Beke, 2024), Orientalist (Höglund, 2008; Šisler, 2008), authoritarian (Jennings, 2022), militarist-interventionist (Hammond & Pötzsch, 2019; Leonard, 2004), and other such worldviews.

My aim here is not to give a complete overview, but to show that cultural hegemony is one of game studies' central concepts (and later, to show that very little has changed as a consequence). Before considering the context, consequences and changes to such critiques, however, I want to give one more full consideration of this first claim. One might think that beyond the handful of sources above, my insistence on hegemony's centrality to game studies as a concept of consistent and even growing attention, may be based on my own favourite authors and interests. A quick word count nonetheless shows that "hegemony" does in fact occur throughout a large and growing percentage of all articles published since the establishment of four central (or at least representative) game studies-journals. Figure 1 displays the number of articles that make use of the term - most likely as the Gramscian concept, although quantitative analyses are inevitably reductionist - as a percentage of the total amount of articles published in each journal in that year (as well as a cumulative amount).

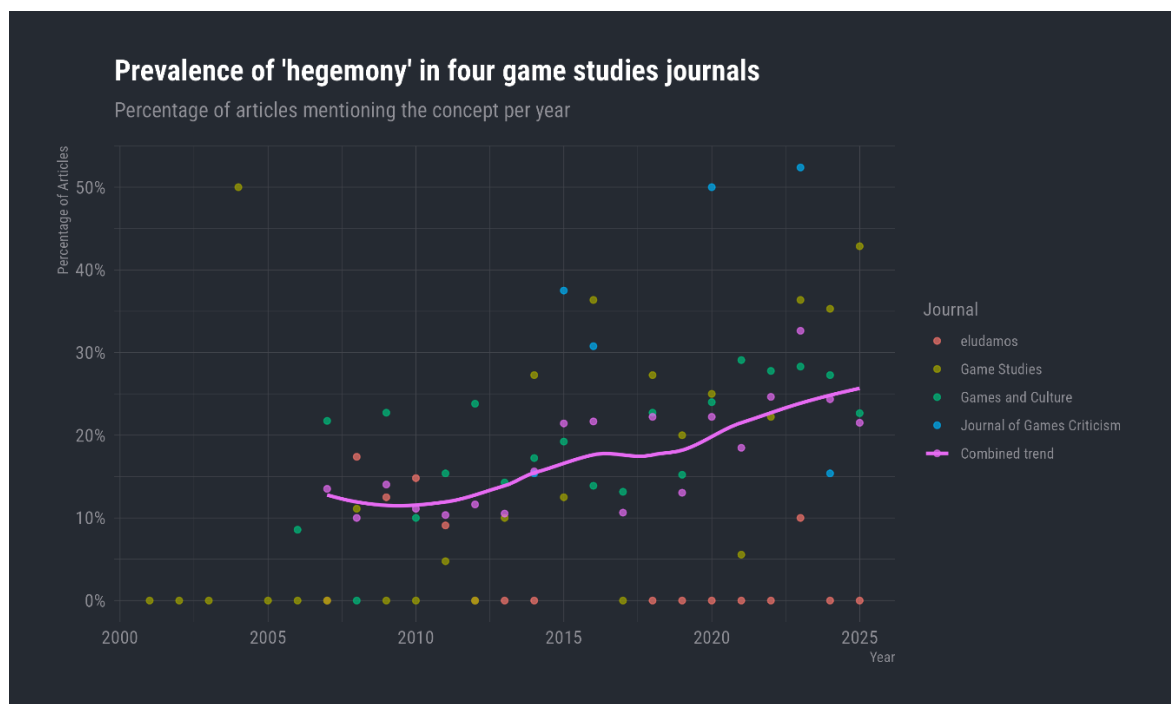


Figure 1. The number of articles using the term 'hegemony' in four game studies journals (eludamos, Game Studies, Games & Culture, and the Journal of Games Criticism) between 2001–2025, as a percentage of total articles published; as well as the combined trend across these journals.

This descriptive project, of identifying and calling out the reproduction of cultural hegemony in the game industry, has been one of the central and most important projects of game studies during these past three decades. It remains an important project of growing interest: not as a trivial exercise in counting representational quota, then judging game companies and players for not meeting them - as a small but loud minority of self-described 'gamers' might decry (cf. Chess & Shaw, 2014; Massanari, 2017; Mortensen, 2018) - but as a critical societal problem as much as a critical-theoretical one.

3 Context of Gramsci and hegemony (1926–1945)

Across the game-scholarly studies discussed above, cultural hegemony has been used as a concept to describe how videogames reproduce the dominant worldviews and subject positions of their time. Over the last few decades, this has primarily meant that games present (1) sexist, racist, capitalist, postcolonialist, militarist, U.S.-Americanocentric worldviews as 'natural,' in which (2) male, white, cis-gendered, able-bodied subject positions are presented as the 'default.'

However, we should understand not just what cultural hegemony *has* meant from the 1990s to the mid-2020s, but to understand what it will or might mean in future. After all, as T.J. Jackson Lears rightfully insists, "cultural hegemony can only be understood within a variety of historical and intellectual contexts" (1985, p. 568). To establish how I use the concept and how it is subject to historical context, I want to briefly trace its historical and theoretical genealogy, starting with Antonio Gramsci. In 1924, the communist party leader Antonio Gramsci became one of the few and popular remaining leftist politicians under the near-absolute rule of Benito Mussolini. After a widely publicized assassination attempt on Mussolini in 1926, he invoked a temporary state of exception that would turn into nearly twenty years of dictatorship, and declared Leftists a danger to Italian society. As a result, Antonio Gramsci was put into custody and would be held there for the remaining 12 years of his life.

During his time in jail under fascism, Gramsci struggled among other things with the problem of "economic determinism" in Marxist theory: the "classical"-Marxist insistence that the economics of social reality determine the non-economic, and consequently that this would lead to the historically inevitable overthrow of capitalism by the proletariat (Resnick & Wolff, 1982). These revolutions never materialized, at least in Europe: instead, many analyses - both contemporary (e.g., Wilkinson & Conze, 1935; Trotsky, 1944), and historiographic (e.g., Delzell, 1971; Kershaw, 2014) - contend that the invention and financing of fascism were a direct response to the rise of socialism, itself a consequence of (male) workers' right to vote. Indeed, before the historical March on Rome that led to Mussolini's eventual rule, local and national elections had become overwhelmingly dominated by socialist and communist parties as a result of the growing inequality between factory- and landowners, and workers and peasants. Gramsci's struggle, then, was to "explain why workers under advanced capitalism have not behaved the way Marx said they would" (Lears, 1985, p. 567). In Gramsci's words, the problem seemed "that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (Gramsci, 1930a, p. 33).

Gramsci's way of understanding this problem, that the necessary political-economic conditions for communism were met, but did not lead to a revolution - leading instead to an accelerated re-assertion of industrialist and conservative interests - was that of cultural hegemony. Rather than a 'classical' hegemon, say, in the sense that the city-state of Sparta was the military and political 'hegemon' (ἡγεμών means literally, 'leader') of the Pelo-

ponnese peninsula from 404 to 371 BC; a *cultural* hegemon dominates a society not by direct force but by means of implicit consent. That is,

“the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (Gramsci, 1930b, p. 145).²

The difference between such spontaneous consent and repressive domination is akin to what Althusser would later call the difference between the Repressive State Apparatus [RSA] and the Ideological State Apparatus [ISA] (1970), or what classical Marxists call ‘false consciousness,’ following Marx & Engels’ assertion in *The German Ideology*, that:

“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.” (Marx and Engels [1846] 1970, p. 64)

In other words: cultural hegemony became one way of conceptualizing - one which the previous section showed particularly popular with game scholars - how people might come to think of the world and themselves in a way that is in the interest of a small dominant group in the world, that is not necessarily in their own interest, and that they nonetheless consider to be natural and obvious. As Raymond Williams would later add, cultural hegemony “supposes the existence of something which is truly total, which is not merely secondary or superstructural, like the weak sense of ideology, but [...] which saturates the society to such an extent [it] even constitutes the limit of commonsense for most people under its sway” (1973, p. 8). For example, cultural hegemony’s limiting of commonsense leads to what Mark Fisher once called “capitalist realism,” or “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (2009, p. 2). Hence, the recurring assertion (with an unnecessarily confusing genealogy), “that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (Fisher, 2009, p. 2, citing Jameson, 2003, citing Žižek, 1994, citing Jameson, 1994, based on Franklin, 1979, which is an analysis of Ballard, 1961). Of course, limiting commonsense understandings of how the *world* works, leads to equally limited ideas of *ourselves* and our place in that world: in the words of cultural studies scholar John Storey, such “hegemonic truths [...] assume an authority over the ways in which we think and act; that is they invite us to take up ‘subject positions’ from which meaning can be made and actions carried out” (Storey, 2003, p. xi).

² Unlike elsewhere, I find this translation by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Gramsci, 1930b) preferable over Joseph Buttigieg’s translation of the fourth notebook, §49 (Gramsci, 1930a), for reasons of clarity. The latter translates this passage into a less clearly differentiated analytical distinction between hegemony (as a consequence of consent) and state power (as a consequence of coercion), i.e., the corresponding section of Buttigieg’s *Volume II* reads that the “hegemony of a group and that group’s domination of the state [...] have the function of organizing the consent that comes from the prestige attached to the function in the world of production and the apparatus of coercion for those groups who do not ‘consent’ either actively or passively or for those moments of crisis of command and leadership when spontaneous consent undergoes a crisis” (Gramsci, 1930a, pp. 200-201), which reads altogether more confusing.

4 Critique and consequence of games as hegemony machines (1995–2025)

To sum up this historical-theoretical understanding of cultural hegemony: people come to understand power relations in the world as *commonsensically* natural, even when these are historically contingent power relations that are not in the majority interest to uphold. Just as it is, for example in the post-war ‘Western’ influence sphere, not in the interests of the great majority of people in this world to believe that men, white people, North-Americans, or any such relatively small demographic should represent the default. Nonetheless, several ‘virtual censuses’ show that game scholars have frequently observed this culturally-hegemonic default over time. In 1998, Tracy Dietz analyzed a sample of the 33 most popular Nintendo and Sega titles from 1995 - shortly after Provenzo was theorizing Nintendo’s role in cultural hegemony (1991) - finding that most games overrepresented men as heroes (85%), while the number of games portraying women as heroes was as high as games portraying no human characters at all: 5% in both cases (Dietz, 1998, pp. 433-434). A third of games did not represent women at all, and when they did, they were positioned behind men, highly sexualized, damsels in distress, or objects of violence (ibid.). In 2001, Christina Glaubke and co-authors analyzed 60 games to find that male characters accounted for 75% of player-controlled characters (15% were non-human); and 78% were white (Glaubke, et al., 2001). In 2005, Karen Dill and co-authors analyzed 20 best-selling games to find 70% of main characters male (10% female, 20% “could be either”), and 68% white, noting that, by contrast, “middle Eastern males are overrepresented as targets of violence” and that “the typical role of the depicted minorities is soldiers” (2005, p. 125). In 2009, surveying 150 games, Dimitri Williams and co-authors found 85.23% of characters to be male and 80.05% to be white - noting “a strong resemblance to the game developer workforce itself” (Williams, et al., 2009, p. 830): 88.5% male, 83.3% white (Gourdin, 2005; qtd. in Williams, et al., 2009). In perhaps unintended support of scholarship on cultural hegemony, both studies were concerned only with the United States as a place and cultural context to study videogames - going so far as counting only for ‘African American’ as a race, thereby dismissing about 14% of the global population.

After over 25 years of game scholars’ great efforts to identify and critique hegemonic subject positions, a 2025 virtual census “2.0” nonetheless shows that very little has changed (Jones, et al., 2025). 81.02% of characters were male, 77.16% were white, and 42% of all playable characters were white adult men, concluding that “white male players benefit from the privilege of being the ‘default’ in videogames” (ibid. p. 16).

There has, in other words, been a crushing lack of overall change in what counts as the ‘default’ subject position in videogames, or indeed many of the worldviews diagnosed as hegemonic by the scholarship cited in the previous section. Much like Gramsci and other European Marxists in 1926, then, game scholars in 2026 might be frustrated to see their critical-theoretical conclusions resulting in very little real-world change. The abundance of scholarly work that identifies and criticizes the reproduction of cultural hegemony in best-selling (‘AAA’) videogames is important and convincing, and our analyses were clear, unambiguous, and supported by the right data and argumentation; but very little has changed. Videogames place us into roughly the same worldviews and subject positions as 40 years ago - often asking us to play the role of angry, white, male U.S.-American soldiers, superheroes and other such power fantasies - regardless of where and whether they are played by women, BIPOC players, postcolonial subjects and other marginalized people equally.

At the same time, many game scholars have shifted their interest to counter-hegemony as a potential site of change. In his quintessential studies on counter-hegemonic play, Emil Hammar (2017; 2020) argues that AAA games such as *Assassin’s Creed: Freedom Cry* “open up [the opportunity] for players to activate counterhegemonic commemorative play,” ena-

bling “the recognition of marginalised identities and histories within larger frameworks of cultural memory” (2017, p. 389). While Hammar calls for videogame developers to more often create such opportunities – *Freedom Cry* is, in the end, a relatively marginal spin-off release of *Assassin’s Creed IV* – this is a relatively rare “intervention into the White male hegemony of mainstream games” (ibid., p. 375).

Outside of AAA, Rashmi Pithavadian and Joshua Battin argue, “due to not seeking the high profit margins of mainstream AAA games, indie videogame companies may be more inclined to promote more liberal content that deviates from Whiteness norms” (Pithavadian & Battin, 2024, p. 739). Indeed, a large body of literature finds counter-hegemonic potential not so much in the *Assassin’s Creeds* and *Call of Duties* of AAA, but in indies: the “art-house” alternative within a billion dollar industry (Warr, 2014), of which Anna Anthropy first lauded its counter-hegemonic potential for diversity and unconventionality in the margins, “outside of the mainstream,” in which indies show us “new perspective through their unconventionality, their creativity [...] real diversity, a plethora of voices and experiences” (2012). Paolo Ruffino calls this the “discourse of emancipation” around indies, saying that “In this view, [their] unique vision of game design is brought into the video game, making it a direct expression of personal, individual feelings and thoughts. [...] something strictly personal, and this therefore blurs the boundaries between the game designer’s work and home lives.” (2012, p. 113-115). Other authors have chimed in to say this allows space in the margins to “diversify the industry away from testosterone-blasted aggression” (Kline, et al., 2003), to represent “a greater diversity of voices in the production of culture” (Martin & Deuze, 2009), through counter-hegemonic expressions against Western military interventionism (Saber & Webber, 2016), hegemonic gender (Harvey & Fisher, 2015; Lima, 2018), sexuality (Shaw, 2009; Stone, 2018), race (Passmore, et al., 2017), indigeneity (Lapensée, et al., 2022), religious identity (de Wildt, 2023), able-bodiedness (Jones, 2016; Stone, 2018), and other such marginalized identities (e.g., De Smale, et al., 2017; Šisler, 2008; Sterczewski, 2016). This “lone developer myth” portrays “the auteur in full control of the creative process [...] unadulterated by focus group feedback, market pressures, and other such commercial concerns shared by bean-counting AAA publishers” (Sinclair 2019, p. 1).

Even then, among the authors mentioned above, for indie games, “the pattern of lack of racial diversity holds” (Passmore et al., 2017), while “relegating GLBT representation to the realm of independent game developers could result in a ghettoization of content similar to that seen in the ‘girl games’ movement” (Shaw, 2009, p. 248). Ruffino concludes that outside of a job reproducing hegemony in the AAA industry, “there does not seem to be anything intrinsically emancipatory in the practices of [indie] production” bar for the “freedom to fail – the vast majority of independent games do not succeed. There are more risks in moving from a relatively safe position in the industry to a form of self-employment that does not offer the same economic guarantees” (2012, p. 116). Indeed, in the end “there is little such space for deviation” when many indies “just need to make a living” (de Wildt, 2023, p. 74). As Sam Srauy argues: while the onus for correcting “representational inequities within games [...] shifts on to often-precarious indie developers,” their very precarity is “why indie developers are *less* able to address such inequities” than AAA-developers (2019, p. 804, emphasis added); and according to Saber & Webber, counter-hegemonic representation even “often reproduces similar hegemonic frames,” despite “attempt[s] to produce counter-hegemonic perspectives, [because] the history presented cannot be challenged; by limiting agency, players are no longer actors but acted upon, thus undermining the games’ simulation value and pushing them back towards inaccurate, ideological representations of the past” (Saber & Webber, 2016, p. 90).

So, while scholarly attention to the margins risks inflating its revolutionary potential, the lack of change is disillusioning; and meanwhile the centre holds – or arguably has only fur-

ther consolidated. To borrow Latour's words, game scholars who wait for the counter-hegemonic potential of the margins to realize, risk being perpetually "one war late, one critique late [...] go[ing] through the motions of a critical avant-garde" (2004, p. 226). Because if it seems that critique has ran out of steam, it is because the game industry is a hegemony machine - and game scholarship has done little more than identify a situation that has barely changed. As noted above and throughout, diagnoses of cultural hegemonic reproduction in videogame content have always been linked to the demographics of the game industry, but while these demographics have significantly changed - to stay with the most commonly referenced demographics: from 88.5% male, 83.3% white, 92% straight (2005), to 63% male, 72% white, 72% straight (IGDA, 2024) - game content has overwhelmingly not. In fact, it seems that industry demographics - the idea that people making games will make game protagonists similar to themselves, and game worlds similar to their surroundings - are not a sufficient explanation for the reproduction of cultural hegemony.

If we stick with theory as an attempt to explain why the world works as observed, (or to speculate on how it might work), we find an arguably more convincing theory in Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno's theory of the "culture industry" and what they propose is its "reproduction of sameness" namely,

"unending sameness [...] is the exclusion of the new. The machine is rotating on the spot. While it already determines consumption, it rejects anything untried as a risk. In film, any manuscript which is not reassuringly based on a best-seller is viewed with mistrust. That is why there is incessant talk of ideas, novelty and surprises, of what is both totally familiar and has never existed before. [...] only the universal victory of the rhythm of mechanical production and reproduction promises that nothing will change, that nothing unsuitable will emerge. To add anything to the proven cultural inventory would be too speculative. The frozen genres [...] represent the average of late liberal taste threateningly imposed as a norm" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947, p. 106-107)

What Horkheimer and Adorno essayistically observed in 1947, has been theoretically expanded on since, and seems to hold true empirically more than ever, nearly eighty years later. Theoretically, we find continuing echoes of this idea that the culture industry tends toward re-hashing tried-and-true formulas, with the advent of multi-medial, networked and participatory media only further exacerbating this tendency toward sameness, e.g., in "convergence culture" (Jenkins, 2006), "remix culture" (Lessig, 2008), "hauntology" (Derida, 1993; Fisher, 2013), and more recently in generative AI's automated re-production of (visual) content (cf. e.g., Laba, 2024).

Empirically, sameness in the videogame industry may be directly observed by proxy of their sales figures. Although videogame industry figures are notoriously imperfectly tracked (cf. Aarseth, 2019), the NPD Group reports reliable data for each year's top ten best-selling games, although they are not *directly* publicly circulated by NPD; so we must rely on reported data in indirect sources, which have been then aggregated, updated and cross-referenced by *Wikipedia* users (NPD Group, 1998-2025, as cited in "List of best-selling video games," 2025). If we accept these imperfect circumstances, and then take the NPD's reported sales figures for each year's top ten best-selling games in the United States from 1998 to 2025; and if we then group games by their publishers (correcting for mergers and acquisitions in recent years), we get a spread as illustrated in Figure 2:

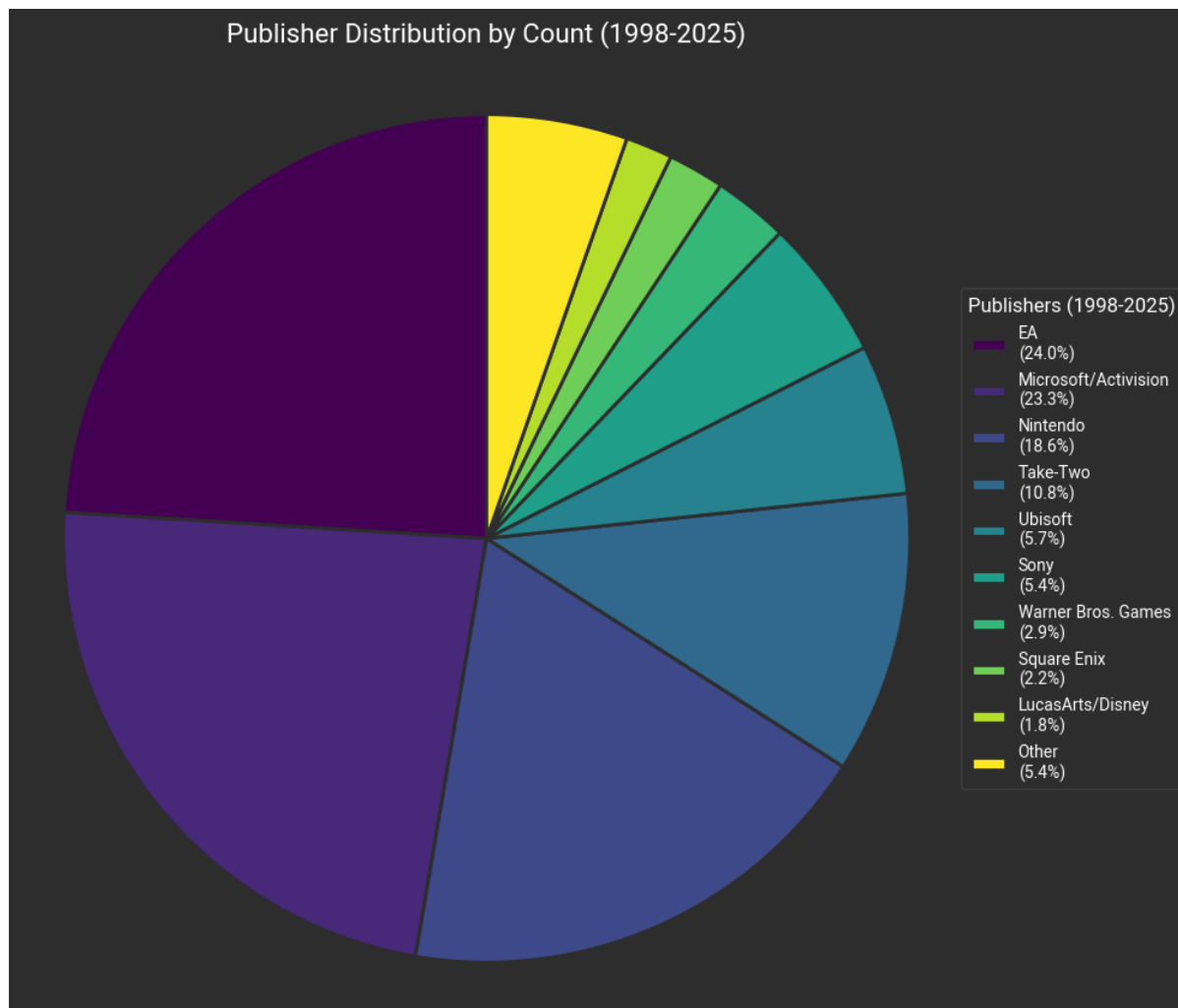


Figure 2. Distribution of publishers within the NPD's lists of best-selling games in 1998-2025.

Indeed, it is nothing new to say that the videogames industry is heavily consolidated, or that total revenue goes primarily to just a handful of companies (e.g., Hammar, et al., 2021; Kerr, 2017), many of which themselves are the Frankensteinian result of colossal mergers and acquisitions. Just as I began writing this, Electronic Arts - representing 24% of games featured in Figure 2, above - was announced to be the object of a \$55 billion buy-out led by a Saudi-Arabian investment fund called PIF (van Dreunen, 2025), which had previously bought mobile developers Scopely and Niantic, and has an almost \$6 billion combined stake in Nintendo (18.6% of Figure 2) and Take-Two (10.8%). This is of course only the *second*-largest transaction in the history of the industry, after Microsoft's \$68.7 billion purchase of Activision-Blizzard (23.3% of the above figure). Due to the cost of such acquisitions and the financial organization of these parent organizations - whether private equity or large diversified conglomerates and holding companies - these publishers tend toward safe investments with relatively risk-free returns. In comparison to movies, consider that some of the most expensive *Marvel* and *Star Wars* movies cost about \$500 million U.S. dollars and two years to make (e.g., D'Alessandro, 2019; Reid, 2023); whereas making a new *Call of Duty* or *Grand Theft Auto* requires anywhere from 700 million to a billion USD, up to eight years, and the labour of thousands of people (cf. Ali, 2025; Totilo, 2025; Yin-Poole, 2025). With such investments on the line, any significant departure from tried-and-true formulas presents an enormous financial risk.

Nonetheless, a critical reader might say that reducing videogame ‘sameness’ to publishers is to mistake the oligopoly of corporate ownership for hegemonic sameness of *content*: in other words, we might ask whether the sameness of the culture industry itself actually leads to the formulaic reproduction of (cultural-hegemonic) representation; or whether, hypothetically, the large cash reserves of these companies might surprisingly lead to original and diverse cultural production? It will be a disillusioning first insight to consider that, of Figure 2’s 23.3% share by Microsoft(-Activision-Blizzard-King), 32 out of 65 of their best-selling games were a *Call of Duty* game. In fact, this one franchise has been in the top ten every year since 2005, and in many years, two of the ten best-sellers were *Call of Duty*-games. To give a better overview of how industry consolidation leads these few publishers to churn out the same titles over and over, Figure 3 shows an overview of the most frequently occurring franchises among the ten best-selling video games in the United States.

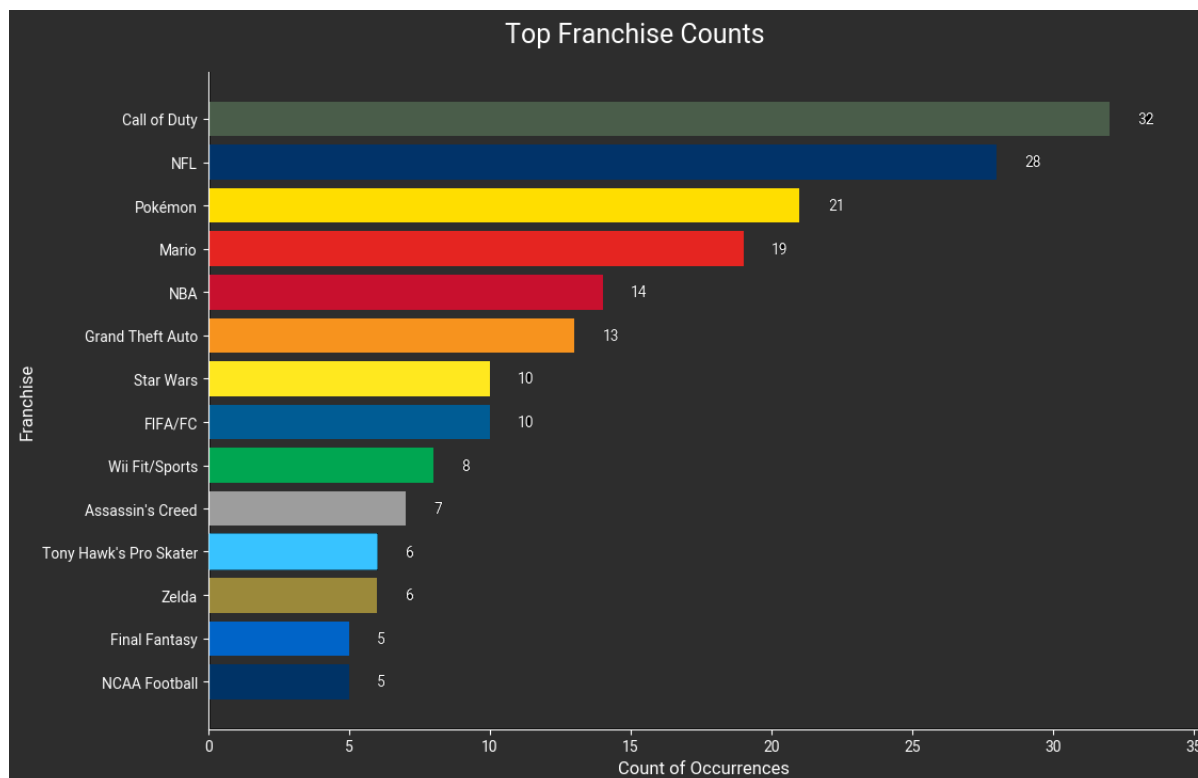


Figure 3. Top occurring franchises within the NPD's lists of best-selling games in 1998-2025.

Of the 280 games in the list since 1998, then, 63% belongs to just fourteen franchises (and more than one in ten is a *Call of Duty* game). I argue that this is already showing us a lot, even before we consider that certain franchises in the list of best-sellers - such as *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honor*, *Battlefield* and many *Tom Clancy* games - could be considered all-but-indistinguishable to those who are not fans of the genre; and that others - *Kingdom Hearts*, *LEGO Star Wars*, *Super Smash Bros.* - are simply a combination of established formulas.

Nonetheless, what this shows us is not *only* that what Horkheimer & Adorno called ‘sameness’ has become the *de facto* business strategy of the handful of publishers that dominate the videogame industry. It also shows that it works: these data are based on sales figures. Moreover, it shows something more subtle, namely that it does not matter demographically who makes games or geographically where they are made: *Call of Duty* is made in California, Wisconsin, Shanghai, Warsaw, Dublin and other places; *Assassin's Creed* is made in Montréal, Singapore, Bordeaux, Bucharest, Kyiv, Chengdu, the Philippines, Abu Dhabi and elsewhere. More importantly, the end result rarely betrays these origins: while

scholars might argue for the Scottish-ness, Québécois-ness, and Japanese-ness of *Grand Theft Auto*, *Assassin's Creed*, and *Mario* respectively (e.g., Miller, 2007; de Wildt & Aupers, 2023; Montoro, 2021), all three franchises are produced to appeal to the widest possible global audience.

Videogames' "sameness" then (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947), is the consequence of a handful of companies reproducing the same formulas that are proven to sell. In turn, culturally hegemonic representations are inevitably reproduced, no matter who or where makes a game. Both Soraya Murray and Emil Hammar have separately shown the *Metal Gear* franchise to be exemplary for the formulaic "persistence of Western mnemonic hegemony in mainstream videogame production," even for an ostensibly auteur-driven, explicitly Japanese franchise (Hammar, 2019, p. 280; cf. Murray, 2017). To illustrate this visually: pictured on the left of Figure 4 is an American game about American soldiers fighting terrorists and/or Russians; and pictured on the right is a Japanese game about American soldiers fighting terrorists and/or Russians. Their visual styles, narrative context, and basic premise are similar to the point of being formulaic (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Two images from the *Call of Duty* and *Metal Gear* series side by side, for comparison.

Of course, each game is slightly different - and the examples above are still relatively far apart in terms of game-play - but I argue that sameness is the face of cultural hegemony. That is, the reproduction of cultural hegemony in videogames (and game scholars' rightful obsession with it) is not a conspiratorial process, nor simply a consequence of industry demographics.

5 Change, Compliance, and China (2005–2025)

I have so far argued that the (AAA) videogame industry is a cultural hegemony machine, as a consequence of (1) the industry's consolidation into a small amount of publishers, (2) the cost and risk of investing in AAA games, and (3) the resulting sameness of the great majority of best-selling videogames, from which even 'indie' games struggle to escape. In other words, the reproduction of cultural hegemony has been a political-economic result

of a small handful of publishers' profit-driven inclination to reproduce existing formulas, rather than take the financial risk of changing what is proven to sell.

However, something else has nonetheless started changing while we game scholars were writing our critiques: the rise of China. Without wanting to negate or trivialize the great majority of studies on cultural hegemony, nor what I wrote above (the observation stands that white, male, American, militarist and other such hegemonic representations became the default for the above-argued reasons): just outside of the scope of the majority of the scholarly analyses and data above, China rose toward economic, military, political and cultural might.

More narrowly within our context, Chinese gamers have rapidly grown to represent 26.7% of global revenue (Buijsman, et al., 2025) - slightly more than the US, together representing 52.8% of global revenue from videogame sales. If three decades of game scholarship showed that videogames from the 1990 to 2025 have overwhelmingly reproduced white and U.S.-American hegemony, and if the argument above was that videogames' reproduction of cultural hegemony is shaped by economic considerations (rather than industry demographics or ideology), we should expect such a large change in the market to have an effect. The Chinese market has long been noted to be significantly shaped by mobile (Fung, 2016), and social play (Shen & Chen, 2015), and by female player demographics (Huang, 2025; Liu, 2024; Liu & Lai, 2022). While many of the demographics of Chinese and Western players are otherwise similar in terms of age and gender (Niko, 2020; Xiong, 2012) - it seems obvious but important to state that the majority of Chinese players is not white, not American, and perhaps less prone to romanticizing American military intervention.

Aside from presenting a rapidly grown demographic shift in global gaming, gaining access to these players is made difficult by government policies demanding that gaming companies adjust their content. As many others have noted (e.g., Felczak, 2024; Fung, 2018; Jiang & Fung, 2019), the content of videogames in China is strictly policed by government officials. The name and focus of the relevant administrative body has changed and merged over time, but the selection process of which videogames to allow and why, has since 2018 been the remit of the National Press and Publication Administration [国家新闻出版署]

(NPPA), informed by the advice of the Online Game Ethics Committee [网络游戏道德委员会], all three of which fall under the Communist Party's Publicity Department, sometimes called the Propaganda Department or 中宣部. To add some nuance here, while the People's Republic of China heavily censors its videogame market against what it deems to be age-inappropriate play and against certain (especially foreign) content; China is not entirely unique in this. In many ways, PEGI and ESRB ratings in Europe and North-America have similar child-protection roles; and various countries have (had) traditions of demanding game companies change the content of their games, such as Germany's short-lived 'green blood' period, in which many games were forced to remove blood, swastikas and other such content seen as objectionable for the German market (Ellefsen, 2024).

However, what makes Chinese videogame policies particularly distinct from German, Japanese, Korean and other national game cultures' (eventual) subsumption under global game-industrial sameness, is how strictly and ideologically Chinese policies intervene in the global videogame offering. To start with the 'strictness' of it: each year, China approves only an average of 1300 videogames for yearly release, on average only 95 (<8%) of those licenses are granted to foreign games (see Table 1).

Year	Domestic Approvals	Foreign Approvals	Percentage of Foreign out of total
2018	2,040	55	2.6%
2019	1,385	185	11.8%
2020	1,314	97	6.9%
2021	679	76	10.1%
2022	468	44	8.6%
2023	977	98	9.1%
2024	1,306	110	7.8%
2025	1,676	95	5.3%

Table 1. Yearly game licenses granted by the NPPA from 2018 to 2025, consisting of ‘Domestic Approvals’ for Chinese-made games and ‘Foreign Approvals’ for non-Chinese games applying for license with the NPPA to be legally sold on the Chinese market; with the percentage of foreign games out of the total games approved.

Furthermore, all foreign developers and publishers must pair up with a Chinese partner to be allowed to submit their game for approval. The NPPA announces all licensed games, with only their Chinese titles and Chinese partner publishers, via their official public database (NPPA, n.d.). The data in Table 1 compiles the monthly domestic and imported game approval lists published directly on the NPPA portal between 2018 and 2024. In most cases it is easy to find the original publisher: e.g., the imported game 动物王者, given a foreign license on 10 December 2022, is listed as being published and operated by Duoku Game (formerly Baidu Game), a mobile game company owned by Chinese internet giant Baidu. However, the game (动物王者) is a ported version of *Zooba*, a battle royale game developed in Brazil by AVL Aplicativos Ltda., now called Wildlife Studios.

Without making such reconstructions the focus of this section, when we look at this 6-12% of foreign games, we find that many of those in turn are Japanese (30%), and Korean (8%). Moreover, many foreign licenses are granted to games from Taiwan (5%) and Singapore (3%). Even, then many games are from Hong Kong (2.6%) and, unexpectedly, from Mainland China (8%), due to Chinese game developers applying through the foreign license route, either by mistake or because it has sometimes been faster, for instance after the 2018 un-freezing of foreign licensing. Finally, there are games in this category made by and for the Chinese market, that are based on foreign Intellectual Property, such as the *Dragon Ball* games by Beijing Babeltime, and the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* games by Thumbplay and FLMobile: Chinese-made games by Chinese developers and Chinese publishers for a Chinese audience, but licensed as foreign imports for reasons of IP. Taken together, 55% of foreign licenses are granted to games from inside or directly adjacent to China. After that, 13% of games are from the US - not even half of the amount of Japanese games approved for the Chinese market - 6% from the UK, 5% from France (mostly Ubisoft), and 3% Canadian. Although a more detailed future analysis should correct for popularity (or sales figures): taken together, less than half (43%) of Chinese foreign licensed games were developed and published originally in North-America, Europe, or Oceania.

In stark contrast to cultural hegemony elsewhere, then, Western companies have very little grip on the (enormous) Chinese videogame market - in large part due to the gatekeeping done through Chinese state policies.

Aside from being strict, Chinese videogame policies are also explicitly ideological. Despite Chinese youth forming the largest global market for videogames, *China Youth Daily* [中国青年报], the official newspaper of China's Communist Youth, declared the game *Honor of Kings* a 'digital/electronic opium': "电子鸦片" (Xie, 2017; qtd. in Li, 2024, pp. 237-238). The comparison to opium has been repeated across Chinese media and studies of Chinese media culture alike (e.g., Li, 2024; Rao, 2024; Szablewicz, 2010) and invites historical associations with the opium war and the 'century of humiliation' [百年国耻]. That is, a fundamental national narrative that divides Chinese history and its pride as a nation into a glorious past before the Opium Wars; and "a century of humiliation and weakness" after the introduction of opium trade into China by British imperialist powers (Harris, 1959; cf. Callahan, 2004; Kaufman, 2010).³

Within this historical context, it makes sense that opium's newly 'electronic' equivalent receives particular scrutiny, as a potentially addictive, imperialist foreign import. To this end, foreign videogames applying for Chinese videogame licenses are required to adapt to "China's core social values" (Kuhns, 2020). This prohibits foreign videogames from containing a broad range of representations: of death, religion, and anything that "endangers national unity [...] endangers national security or harms national reputation and interests" (McCallum & McMahon, 2023). Instead, games should aim to "consolidate national unity, and promote social stability" (Chinese Ministry of Culture, 2010; qtd. in Jiang & Fung, 2019, p. 813). In practice, anything the NPPA (and related governmental bodies under different names) deems unsuitable for the Chinese audience, will block a game from receiving a license: this includes any dark themes or nihilism, religion, skulls, zombies, gambling, "money-worship and effeminacy" (Xinhua, 2021) "gay love" (Ye, 2021), drug use, and any implicit or explicit threat to Chinese national unity - including any representation of the Republic of China as a legitimate political entity occupying Taiwan as a separate country/territory from the People's Republic of China.

Non-compliance leads to prohibition: *Hearts of Iron* and *Command & Conquer* were deemed as "distorting history and damaging China's sovereignty and territorial integrity" and "smearing the image of China and the Chinese army" (Xinhua, 2004a). *Battlefield 4* was accused of "endanger[ing] national security and constitute[ing] a form of cultural aggression" by the Chinese Ministry of Culture, and "wantonly vilifies and smears China" according to China National Defense Daily (Geng, 2013). In each case, these games "violated China's gaming regulations that prohibit introduction and publication of games that hurt China's national dignity and interests" (Xinhua, 2004b). Ideological compliance extends to videogame paratexts and practices: the promotional trailer for *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* was removed and edited because it included images of the 1989 Tian'anmen square protests, and a livestream of competitive *Hearthstone* play was cut by (Microsoft-

³ Although a structural comparison to Japan and Korea is somewhat outside of the scope of my current argument, it is meaningful to add that China's historical relation to Western trade stands in stark contrast to the deep-rooted entanglements between Japanese, Korean and American post-war industries - particularly within the semiconductor "chip war" originating in the 1970s (Miller, 2022) - that led, on the one hand, directly to the development of companies like Sony, Nintendo and Samsung; and, on the other hand, to the lasting disadvantage of post-Cold War China's place within global semiconductor development (and consequently its need to innovate and catch up by other means). For a far more comprehensive historicization of China's exception to post-Cold War media imperialism, see, e.g., Mirrlees, 2023.

Activision-)Blizzard(-King) because Hong Kong-based player Blitzchung stated a call to “Liberate Hong Kong, the revolution of our times” (Matthiesen, 2019).

In compliance, developers have resorted to making separate versions of their games, adapted to reach this combination of China’s growing market, divergent preferences, and state policies. Such ‘Chinese versions’ are typical for the earlier decades of China’s growing market for foreign games. Widely published examples are, from 2005, the removal of priests and skeletons - and the replacement of skulls with loaves of bread - for the Chinese version of *World of Warcraft* [魔兽世界, literally ‘Magic Beast World’] (Lindtner, et al., 2008; Tai, 2010); and from 2013, the replacement of terrorists with monsters for *Call of Duty Online* [使命召唤Online]. In 2020, *PUBG Mobile* got a Chinese re-release, without blood and gore (and without yellow jackets) as the “patriotic alternative” *Peacekeeper Elite* [和平精英], alongside a statement that it “pays tribute to the blue-sky warriors that guard our country’s airspace,” i.e., the Chinese air force (Goh & Jiang, 2019). In 2021, possibly following the newly reiterated ban on “gay love” and “effeminacy” (Xinhua, 2021), Riot changed the artwork of champion Taric to be more masculine - again, these changes are not the consequence of developer demographics, but political economy: over half of all *League of Legends* [英雄联盟, lit. ‘Hero Alliance’] players is Chinese (Powell, 2025).

In many cases, not just the representative layer was changed, but the gameplay too: Chinese *World of Warcraft* featured more microtransactional content, and a government-mandated “anti-obsession mechanic” which reduced characters’ abilities after three consecutive hours of play (Andrews, 2014). *Call of Duty Online* came to be much more single-player focused, had to encourage players to use the ‘aim down sight [ADS]’-mechanic that Western players were used to, and, amusingly enough, received a one-handed mode - in which the player shoots from an autonomously moving helicopter - because “we found out that in internet cafés, players preferred to keep one hand free to smoke with” (Nick Heindl, personal interview).

However, the age of separately adapting Chinese versions seems to have ended. Instead, Western game companies are pivoting to a strategy of global compliance: one version for all (international) audiences. In 2018, Ubisoft announced that they were “working towards preparing *Rainbow Six Siege* for expansion into Asian territories. As such, there will be some adjustments made to our maps and icons to ensure compliance” (Ubisoft, 2018). Rather than make a separate version, “by maintaining a single build, we are able to reduce the duplication of work on the development side. this will allow us to be more agile as a development team, and address issues more quickly” (ibid.). For all players anywhere, *Rainbow Six Siege* no longer features sexual content, gambling, or skulls. Again, the reasoning is political economic: it is simply more cost-efficient to make one version for all, than a separately adapted Chinese version, or worse, to lose out on 25% of the market. Other developers are following suit: whereas *Call of Duty Online* was still a (very much) adapted version, its 2020 replacement, *Call of Duty Mobile*, was made by Shenzhen-based TiMi Studio Group for an international audience including Chinese players, from its inception.

5 Conclusion: Chinese Co-hegemony, not Counter-hegemony (2025—)

This two-part situation, in which China exerts incredible economic leverage over video-games while also being ideologically strict about which game content is allowed, leads to my final argument. Namely, that the reproduction of cultural hegemony, as described

above and before, will change to include Chinese worldviews. It would be a mistake to understand such change as *counter*-hegemonic rather than co-hegemonic. Early examples of changes to videogames' hegemonic representations suggest that Western hegemony is not so much resisted nor replaced but stretched to make place for Chinese hegemony alongside it. For one particularly illustrative example, we need only look one final time at *Call of Duty*: that quintessentially American-military game, occupying >11% of the bestseller lists since 1998 - 22% if we start counting in the year of its release - consistently bringing white, male, masculine, military-interventionist US-Americanocentric action to the world since 2003. However, one need only look at the Chinese promotional poster for *Call of Duty: Mobile* to catch a glimpse of cultural hegemony going forward (Figure 5).



Figure 5. A promotional poster for *Call of Duty: Mobile*.

At the end of the theoretical, empirical, quantifying, historicizing argument above, it is my position that everything we need to know is simply to be seen in the figure above. The Chinese soldier - represented here by Jay Chou, a singer of Taiwanese origin, no less - does not replace the white male American soldier; but takes place beside him. More elaborately, I want to move from the data-driven, historicizing argumentation of the previous sections toward a more speculative conclusion. Namely, by taking a position on what I expect will be the consequences of what I have described above. Having argued

- (1) that cultural-hegemony is a dominant concept throughout the past decades of game studies, that has led to the long-standing conclusion that videogames reproduce a specific cultural hegemony; and having argued
- (2) that cultural hegemony is in the first place to be understood within the context of its own historical, political and economic context; and having argued
- (3) that the reproduction of cultural hegemony in videogames is not a consequence of industry demographics, nor has it been meaningfully affected by academic scholarship, but that it is a consequence of political economy; and having argued

(4) that the videogame industry is pivoting from separately adapted Chinese versions of their games to global compliance with Chinese player preferences and state policies for political-economic reasons;

(5) it is my position that we will see (and must study) how Chinese players and policies will require a change to decades of white, male, Western-hegemonic game content. In other words, China presents a growing challenge to the cultural-hegemonic defaults that the AAA videogame industry has relied on.

To be clear, I am not reiterating what plenty of others have argued, namely that “as a discipline, game studies (and discussions of videogame culture in general) tend to gravitate towards a Eurocentric or a North American centre” (Mukherjee & Hammar, 2018, p. 33). Similarly, Bjarke Liboriussen and Paul Martin wrote in 2016, about the “unequal global relations within gaming culture” which according to Feng Chen and co-authors reduces Chinese game studies to “regional game studies” which serve “largely as a point of comparison” to that hegemonic centre. We are, however, beyond this point: my position based on the above is that we should not just ‘also’ look at China, in the way that we study other ‘local’ or ‘regional’ game cultures. Instead, I expect that the U.S.-American, Eurocentric centre *itself* will change to accommodate a consequence of Chinese players and policies. ‘Global’ game culture, as a whole, will be one of the first cultural spheres in which Chinese co-hegemony will become apparent for studies of culture; and game scholarship regardless of region, method or focus will have to take this into account.

In short, then, while researchers in other fields have studied China’s rise to share or replace Western political, economic and military hegemony (Clark, 2011; Layne, 2008; Rucki, 2011; Schindler, et al., 2022), I suspect that the global game industry, more than any other cultural industry, is economically incentivized to shift toward making games with China in mind from the start. This is because no commodity is driven toward the reproduction of cultural hegemony more than videogames: as a cultural commodity more expensive to make, more globally standardized, and consequently more risk-averse than movies, music and literature, videogames invariably tend toward the reproduction of dominant worldviews. Again, as a consequence of (1) the game industry’s consolidation into a small amount of publishers, (2) the cost and risk of investing in games, and (3) the resulting sameness of the great majority of best-selling videogames, videogames will be at the vanguard of this development: to adapt from decades of reproducing Western cultural hegemony, to accommodate Chinese power alongside it. As a consequence, decades of a cultural hegemony that has been presented as natural, obvious, and realistic, will be challenged - rather than replaced - not through ideological conviction, but by cold, hard market logic.

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