

Video game, battleground of the culture wars

FOCUS ON 2024

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Executive summary

Recent criticisms of certain video games highlight a growing phenomenon within the industry: a shift in focus from technical aspects and gameplay to ideological considerations. The video game industry, once viewed solely as a form of entertainment and criticized as such, is now perceived as a cultural and artistic medium, capable of reflecting and perpetuating social and moral norms.

This has led players and specialized critics to sometimes praise games that reflect specific social values, such as diversity, inclusion, and positions on societal issues (LGBTQ+, feminism, ecology, etc.). Conversely, a conservative faction of players sees this shift as an over-politicization that they perceive as progressive and contrary to their values. This reflects a rigid stance against the portrayal of diversity and inclusion—a so-called “woke” vision of society transposed into games and driven by DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) policies.

Many recent games have become “victims” of this cultural war, with battles mainly unfolding online on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Reddit, which amplify ideological debates. A real echo chamber has formed, where criticisms are amplified disproportionately, overshadowing discussions about gameplay, technical aspects, or storytelling.

Editors and developers are increasingly aware of the importance of public perception, and some even aim to anticipate criticism by adopting explicit political positions. While this approach may resonate positively with certain players, showcasing a more responsible image aligned with modern values, it sometimes leads to accusations of instrumentalizing creativity, artistic freedom, or immersion for the sake of ideological agendas.

Indeed, the omnipresence of these issues means discussions about the technical or creative aspects of games often give way to ideological reading. For some, the game’s content or form is viewed through a lens of production conditions: bugs, gameplay, or storytelling are interpreted as symptomatic failures of moral evolution. Certain titles considered innovative are judged harshly for their ideological choices, while others, which align with more traditional politics, are treated more leniently.

In this study, we will highlight this issue by examining several titles released in 2024 and others set for release, many of which have not escaped controversies even before their launch. For instance, the sexualized female representation in “Stellar Blade” has sparked heated debates, overshadowing discussions about its mechanics. In “Black Myth: Wukong” the “Chinese vision” of the game was positively received by Western conservative players, despite controversies surrounding the studio’s communication. In “Dragon Age: The Veilguard”, the boycott campaign against the game responds to its representation and inclusion of sexual minorities in the narrative. For the upcoming “Assassin’s Creed: Shadows” the technical and narrative elements of Ubisoft’s title are obscured by the portrayal of Yasuke, a black samurai, as the protagonist, criticized for being forced and anachronistic in terms of ethnic diversity. We will conclude this study with the case of “Helldivers 2” which integrates politics into its gameplay and social media communication strategy but has nevertheless become a topic of controversy.



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Intro- duction tion



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The video game industry has been the subject of numerous definitional struggles since the 1990s, progressively transforming into a prime battleground for cultural wars. The problematic interpretation of video games stems from competing social groups, engaged in political and moral conflicts in other domains, who bring these disputes into the conversation surrounding video games to assert their worldview. Video games thus become a resource in various political battles.²

The concept of “cultural wars” originates from American sociologist James Davison Hunter, who identifies a series of themes that can provoke intense moral controversies: homosexuality, abortion, and recreational drug use, which structure partisan divides in the USA. As sociologist John Evans observes: “The war is declared between two groups of individuals who have completely and fundamentally opposing apprehensions of American society,

notions of moral authority, and understandings of reality.” These worldviews held by different social groups play a crucial role in the clashes over these issues. Additionally, in his analysis of the privatization of the National Endowment for the Arts, Richard Jensen highlighted how this privatization generated a conflict over the “core values” of American society. As Hunter emphasizes, the media play a decisive role in the “institutionalization and articulation of moral visions.”³

These cultural wars focus on moral definitional issues and, at first glance, resemble “moral panics,” which are symptomatic of deeper divides. The space for defining video games has historically been a battleground, where conversations become contentious around the processes of labeling: violent, addictive, immoral, woke. Because these debates are driven by specific actors and often aim at a form of regulation or even legal prohibition, these panics are, above all, moral crusades.

¹ Olivier Maucó, *Jeux vidéo: Hors de contrôle?: Industrie, politique, morale*, Paris, Questions théoriques, coll. “Lecture>play”, 2014

² Olivier Maucó, “L’institutionnalisation de la violence des jeux vidéo à l’Assemblée nationale”, *Quaderni*, 75 | 2011, 51-62. www.journals.openedition.org/quaderni/398

³ Hunter (James Davison), *Culture Wars: The Struggle To Control The Family, Art, Education, Law, And Politics In America*, New York, Basic Books, 1992

⁴ Evans (John H.), “Worldviews or Social Groups as the Source of Moral Value Attitudes: Implications for the Culture Wars Thesis” *Sociological Forum*, vol. 12, n°3, 1997, pp. 371-404

⁵ Jensen (Richard), “The culture wars, 1965 – 1995: a historian’s map”, *Journal of social history*, vol. 29, 1995, pp. 17 – 37

The initial struggles pitted gamers against non-gamers in various moral crusades led by groups with varying degrees of political engagement. The epilepsy debate was quickly reframed as a public health issue, while the discussion around violent content was largely co-opted by politicians as part of the political game of framing isolated incidents or mass shootings: video games were often portrayed as the ideal scapegoat, offering ready-made causal narratives for crisis communication. The alliance between mainstream media and politicians helped unite gamers around a desire to define video games as a legitimate form of leisure, with arguments such as the artistic and cultural value of video games, the high technical skill required for employment in the industry, or the staggering economic performance of the sector.

The second phase involves the privatization of the effects, with excessive gaming behaviors and parental authority issues coming to the forefront. The over-involvement of some young gamers left parents feeling helpless, and the backlash they faced often resulted in video games being blamed as the cause of dependency. In the background, debates on the attention economy, the decline of traditional media compared to gaming, and later, the rise of social media, played out.

The third phase relates to the dominance of social media over specialized media, leading to the importation of definitional conflicts into the video game sphere. This created a divide between purist gamers, who defended an ideal-typical vision of video games, and new gamers, non-gamers, or anyone advocating for content evolution. This internal gamer conflict shifted toward questioning video game production conditions, highlighted by issues raised during Gamergate: at the very least, crunch culture and harassment as markers of “bro culture,” alongside a broader questioning of journalistic ethics, which lost its authority to define what video games truly are.

The cultural war primarily occurs within the informational environment. Initially, it was declared by public authorities but capitalized on structural oppositions between specialized and mainstream media. This reflected a clash between traditional news logic and calls for prescriptive authority. Gradually, the cultural

war became an ordinary mode of coverage for generalist journalists, who moved away from an editorial approach in favor of a more objective framing, marked by the multiplication of perspectives.

However, over the past 25 years, the rise of social media has primarily encouraged the “unbounding of confrontation spaces,” or, in other words, the dissolution of distinct arenas or competitive spaces specific to various sectors. This has led to the emergence of new actors, new topics, and a proliferation of moral panics driven by moral entrepreneurs.

GERMINATING POINTS OF CONFLICT

Before Gamergate, video games were already rife with sometimes heated debates around four main themes that had previously sparked controversies:

1. The themes addressed in video games, particularly what is deemed acceptable or not to portray in a game. This debate ranged from veterans opposing the depiction of contemporary war episodes, as seen during the 2002 announcement of *Six Days in Fallujah*, to the game *Depression Quest* created by Zoe Quinn in 2013, a game designer who would later become central to the Gamergate controversy.

2. The representation of women, starting as early as 2013 with the depiction of a rape scene in the AAA game *Lara Croft*, which provoked a strong backlash regarding the portrayal of women, their “objectification,” and the “bro culture” prevalent in the industry. Researchers investigating the trope of the damsel in distress subsequently became targets of harassment campaigns.

3. The dependent relationship between specialized gaming media and the industry, particularly the lack of ethics explicitly highlighted during the “Doritos Gate” scandal (2012), which revolved around the blatant product placement of chips. This topic was especially contentious as the press faced an economic crisis with the transition to fully digital formats.

Difficult working conditions in some studios, exemplified by strikes and social movements

⁶ Hunter (James Davison), *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War*, New York: Free Press, 1994

⁷ « Les sociétés semblent être sujettes, au fil du temps, à des périodes de panique morale. Une condition, un épisode, une personne ou un groupe de personnes émergent pour être définis comme une menace pour les valeurs et intérêts d'une société; leur nature est présentée dans un style stéréotypé et tendance par les médias de masse; des barricades morales sont érigées par les éditeurs, les prêtres, les politiques et les autres détenteurs de la bonne pensée; des experts accrédités socialement se prononcent et émettent diagnostics et solutions; les manières de s'en défaire sont évoluées ou (le plus souvent) sensées l'être. » Cohen (Stanley), *Folk devils and moral panics*, Routledge, 2002, 3ème édition, p. 1 Notre traduction

⁸ Olivier Mauco, dir., *Jeux vidéo et Discours: violence, addiction, régulation*, Quaderni 67, automne 2008, éditions MSH, www.journals.openedition.org/quaderni/183

⁹ Becker (Howard S.), *Outsiders*, Paris: Métailié, 1985, p. 176: « L'une des conséquences majeures d'une croisade victorieuse, c'est bien sûr l'instauration d'une nouvelle loi ou d'un nouvel ensemble législatif et réglementaire, généralement accompagné d'un appareil adéquat pour faire appliquer les mesures. » p. 176

¹⁰ Dobry (Michel), *Sociologie des crises politiques*, 3e édition, Paris, Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2009

like the “EA Spouses” case (2004) or, later, the condemnation of crunch practices at Rockstar during the release of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. These events brought real-world issues into the realm of game production. Conversely, the critique of the “passion job” argument prompted backlash from certain groups of players who denounced games that they felt lacked passion.

These four themes represent major sticking points of the forthcoming crisis, as they provided an entryway for moral entrepreneurs to invade the conversation.

GAMERGATE: A CONVERGENCE POINT FOR ISSUES AND THE INDIVIDUALIZATION OF MORAL ENTREPRENEURS

The Gamergate episode marks an evolution in moral crusades. Previously driven by moral entrepreneurs organized in associations, this period saw the individualization of such practices and the emergence of a new figure: the self-employed moral entrepreneur.

Gamergate was an online media sequence aimed at defining what video games should be. It left a profound impact on the gaming world due to the violence of online harassment campaigns and the convergence of previously adjacent themes.

The movement began in August 2014 with three notable events:

- A “revenge post” sparked the fire: Eron Gjoni, the ex-boyfriend of video game developer Zoë Quinn, published a blog post accusing Quinn of having an immoral relationship with journalist Nathan Grayson.

- The creation of the hashtag #Gamergate ensured visibility. Users accused Quinn without evidence and launched a harassment campaign against her and other women in the industry, including threats of rape and murder.

- The harassment spread to other women. Feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian and developer Brianna Wu also became targets of harassment.

The treatment of this issue on social media

revealed a significant focus on condemning female figures in the industry. The alleged affair between Quinn and Grayson resulted in [a disproportionate imbalance in condemnation](#): 10,000 posts targeted Quinn compared to just 732 targeting Grayson. The campaign was driven by a group of fewer than 500 individuals who [generated more than half of the aggregated conversations](#) surrounding #Gamergate. However, the volume remained three times lower than the discussions around *World of Warcraft* and engaged only 0.4% of the gaming population. This episode ultimately highlighted the [over-engagement of already active users](#) on X (formerly Twitter), with limited conversion of others—it mobilized only those who were already engaged.

The issue of journalistic ethics did not emerge immediately from the accusations—Grayson was alleged to have favored Quinn for reviews and awards. It was only after the coverage by specialized and mainstream media that the controversy expanded, transforming into a cultural war over diversity in representation, recognition of artists, and social criticism in video games. Several gaming websites revised their ethical codes in response to accusations of lacking journalistic integrity.

This episode raises ongoing questions that continue to animate the video game world: Can video games address real-world issues? What representations are conveyed in video games, and is it the responsibility of creators to craft politically engaged images of society? Is the desire to remove politics from video games not, in fact, an attempt to perpetuate conservative politics? How can professionals discuss video games in an ecosystem where platform debates are structured by gatekeeping influencers?

These questions resonate with a minority of the gaming community, but, as we will observe, such narratives have been disproportionately amplified.

MAIN NARRATIVES: INTRODUCTION TO THE CURRENT STUDY

Themes in video games, gameplay, character representation, ethics, and journalistic cove-



rage are three areas that converged during Gamergate, laying the foundation for battles over the control of “purity,” and particularly the construction of an ideal-typical image of video games.

— **Ideal of purity through exclusion:** Exclusion from the game (conceived as a “magic circle” that should exclude politics), exclusion of certain players (hardcore players versus others), and exclusion of content (pre-Gamergate).

— **Ideal of purity through valorization:** Homogeneity of characters, rejection of heterogeneity, and gendered division of social labor.

— **Enlightened autocracy vs. democracy:** Knowledge held by only a few, rigid social structures with assigned roles, singularity vs. pluralism, and an extreme focus on performance.

— **These considerations are also transposed and interpreted at the level of family economics:** Assignment of roles, gamer traditions, and the tradition of the couple.

Video games thus serve as a fertile ground for generating indignation. As was observed during the 1220s and 2000s, condemnations of video games are primarily collateral consequences of

broader political struggles. Today’s criticisms are similarly derivative of larger political and moral battles.

Unlike previous decades, contemporary critiques come from within the gaming sphere, particularly from influencers—since gaming has become a structuring theme for the audiences of YouTubers and streamers. These gaming influencers articulate their criticisms through the lens of their worldview, much like the generalist press did in the past..

Through the controversies of 2024, we will conduct an initial examination of the state of these debates, paying special attention to the circulation of narratives and the engagement they generate.

METHODOLOGY

The corpus selected focuses on games that have been the subject of significant cultural battles primarily between 2023 and 2024. From the range of controversies, we selected five cases based on their themes, the nature of the conflicts, and the parties involved. Our attention was directed more toward online discussions than the actual game content, with a focus on ideological, moral, and political debates and clashes.

The following cases will be analyzed, focusing on discussions surrounding recently released or upcoming games:

- **Case Study #1:** Stellar Blade
- **Case Study #2:** Black Myth: Wukong
- **Case Study #3:**
Assassin's Creed Shadows
- **Case Study #4:**
Dragon Age: The Veilguard
- **Case Study #5:** Helldivers 2

The data analyzed was extracted using the monitoring and data analysis tool Talkwalker. Data originated from various platforms, with their sources specified in the graphs presented: X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, forums (including Reddit), blogs, and online media. For each case, the data was extracted based on a semantic analysis, relying on associations of selected keywords.

The studies were particularly focused on a list of analytical and objectivizing criteria:

- The number of publications related to the case in question.
- The amount of engagement (likes, shares, comments) generated by these publications on social networks, blogs, forums, and online media.
- The sentiment expressed by users (positive or negative).
- The users generating the highest engagement with their publications, including a number of “influencers.”

In addition to these classification criteria, a semantic analysis of the most engaged-with publications was conducted across the various subjects studied. This analysis aimed to determine the main topics of discussion surrounding a given video game and the major conversational dynamics.

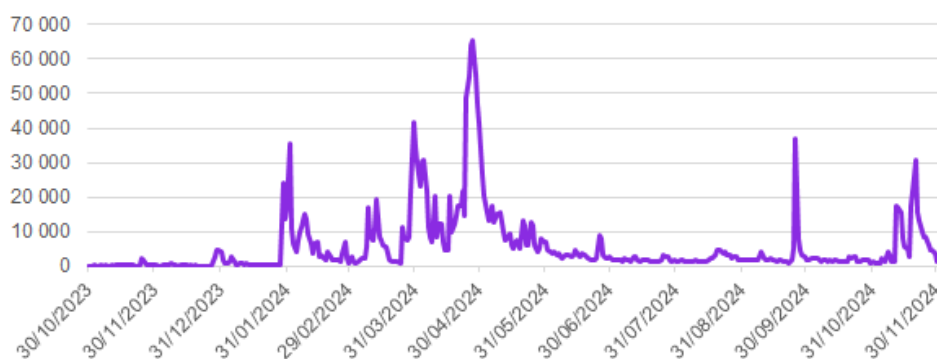
The analyses also focused on the vectors of information: through which channels does the information circulate? Who is relaying it? This approach enables us to identify whether a controversy exists, which spheres are driving it, and whether it resonates or even amplifies within the public debate beyond the gaming community itself.





Case Studies

Publication timeline for "Stellar Blade"
Corpus size 2.2 millions, from X, YouTube and Reddit



✕ Evolution of digital mentions over the last 13 months on the sexualization of Stellar Blade

as [LearningTheLaw](#) (2.8K engagements) and [ClownsWorldMan](#) (255 engagements). Debates emerged on forums like [Reddit](#) and [JeuxVideo.com](#) between users advocating for respect for the creators' artistic choices and freedom of expression in character design, and those calling for more diverse representation in games, particularly of female characters, and for addressing the effects of hypersexualization in gaming.

EVOLUTION OF DIGITAL MENTIONS OVER THE LAST 13 MONTHS ON THE SEXUALIZATION OF STELLAR BLADE

In April 2024, during the game's international release, criticism intensified. Media outlets such as [RTBF](#) and [IGN](#) criticized the hypersexualization of female characters by Asian developers in games like Stellar Blade. IGN described Eve as "a sexualized doll created by someone who has never seen a woman." These views provoked strong reactions from gaming communities, including prominent figures like Mark Kern, a well-known game designer who posted on X under his pseudonym "[Grummz](#)" (8.4K engagements), and the YouTube channel "Rev Says Desu," which [published a video](#) to its 706K subscribers. These critiques revealed a deep divide within the gaming community.

On one side, some saw the criticisms of the game as an overreach of "outrage culture" and

an example of excessive political correctness. On the other, voices defended these critiques, viewing them as necessary to promote more respectful and inclusive representation of women in video games.

Initially standing firm on its creative freedom regarding the heroine's appearance, the Korean studio Shift Up altered its stance by late April. Players noticed the release of a corrective patch that slightly toned-down Eve's outfits, making them less provocative. This led some gamer communities to denounce the move as



mentorship, with posts on X by profiles such as “Grumz” (3.5K engagements on his post), [pressuring the game’s developers to justify their decision](#).

A REFLECTION OF CULTURAL DIVIDES BETWEEN ASIA AND THE WEST

The controversies surrounding Stellar Blade underscore significant geopolitical and cultural differences in perceptions of female representation in video games. In the United States and Europe, critiques of Eve’s sexualization became a focal point, driven by discussions on platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, and specialized forums. These criticisms often originated from progressive, feminist, or “woke” circles, which denounced sexist tropes for perpetuating outdated stereotypes and alienating certain audiences. These groups advocate for greater diversity and nuance in female representations, situating this debate within broader discussions on women’s roles in popular culture.

Prominent figures such as YouTuber “The Act Man,” known for his analyses of sexism in the industry, contributed to these discussions with videos surpassing 200,000 views. Conversely, personalities like “ENDYMIONtv,” who take a critical stance against progressive movements,





















mobilized a polarized audience by condemning so-called “woke feminists.” These communities align around divisive themes: mainstream gamers debate artistic freedom and gender stereotypes, while feminist and LGBTQIA+ activists call for greater diversity. Meanwhile, skeptics of progressive shifts, often labeled “anti-woke” reject what they perceive as excessive politicization of the medium. Geographically, the controversy is most pronounced in North America and Europe, where it intersects with broader societal debates.

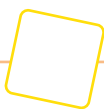
In contrast, in Asia, and particularly in South Korea, where Stellar Blade was developed, these criticisms have been much more marginal. Eve’s design is seen as a legitimate expression of an aesthetic influenced by manga/anime culture and local artistic codes. In these regions, the sexualization of female characters is often considered a form of art and entertainment, not a subject of social controversy. Asian fans, as well as international communities attached to this visual style, defended the game by denouncing what they perceived as “mentorship” and Western interference in legitimate artistic choices.

This divide highlighted fundamental differences in cultural expectations regarding video game works. More conservative or anti-woke



 Main influencers dealing with Stellar Blade controversies

Influenceur	Réseau	Publications	Portée	Portée par mention	Engagement	Engagement par mention
 The Act Man http://www.youtube.com/		1	907.2K	907.2K	42.7K	42.7K
 ByMiguel ΔOX @ByMiguel18_		2	2.9K	1.4K	35.8K	17.9K
 ENDYMIONtv http://www.youtube.com/		2	452.9K	226.4K	29.6K	14.8K
 LearningTheLaw @Mangafawyer		6	77.5K	12.9K	24.4K	4.1K
 Pirat_Nation @Pirat_Nation		1	117.1K	117.1K	14.8K	14.8K
 Black Maya @flakogarcia09		1	717	717	11.1K	11.1K
 Kay @Kaybearmomma		1	1.2K	1.2K	8.4K	8.4K
 Perma Banned @GiveMeBanHammer		2	36.7K	18.3K	8.3K	4.2K
 YellowFlash 2 http://www.youtube.com/		1	70.5K	70.5K	6K	6K
 Kung Fu Man @KungFuMan316		5	20.1K	4K	5.1K	1K





communities, primarily in the United States and Europe, used the controversy to denounce what they perceive as “overcorrection” or an infringement on creative freedom in the name of political correctness. These voices, often very active on platforms like X and YouTube, criticize debates over representation as harmful interference in cultural industries.

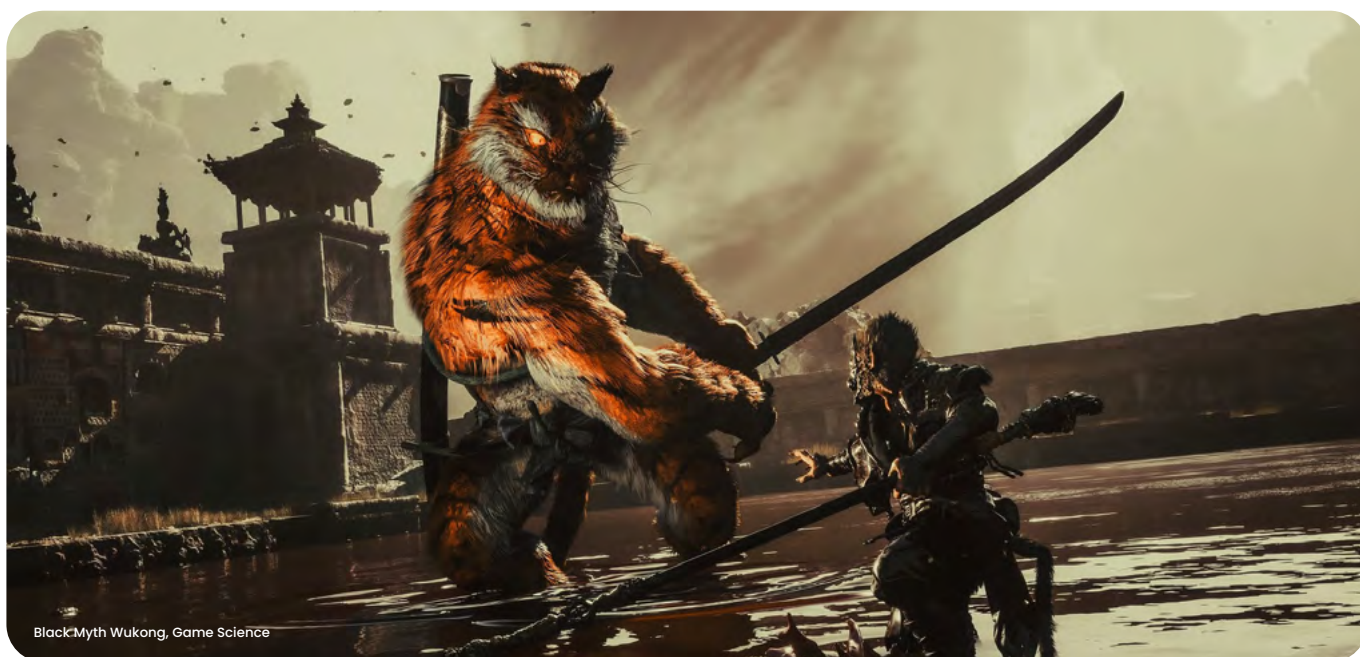
These discussions have illustrated tensions between different cultural sensitivities. The North American and European markets, dominant in the industry, exert growing pressure on creators to align with shifting social and cultural norms. In response, Asian studios must balance asserting their cultural identity with meeting Western consumer expectations.

CASE STUDY #2

“Black Myth Wukong” :

A Lesson in Soft Power: When Chinese Mythology Becomes a Model for American Conservatives

RPG ACTION ADVENTURE : PUBLISHER : GAME SCIENCE
REALEASE DATE : AUGUST 20, 2024



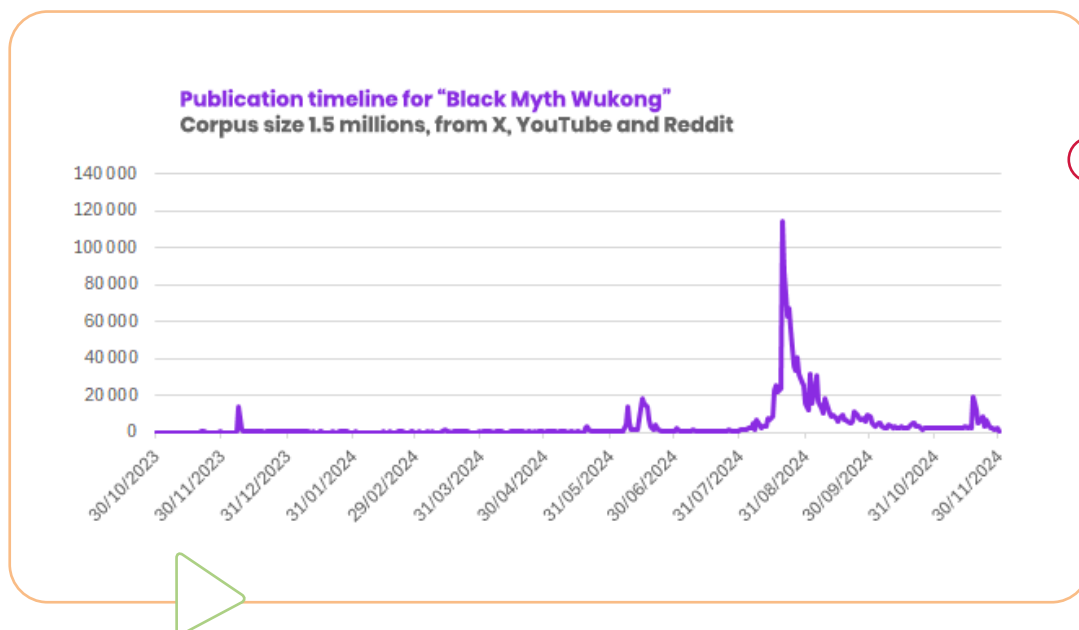
“Black Myth: Wukong” is the first game developed by the Chinese studio Game Science, inspired by the novel Journey to the West, written by Wu Cheng’en in the 16th century. This novel, considered one of the “Four Great Classical Novels” of Chinese literature, is set in a mythological 7th century infused with Buddhism, Taoism, and Chinese folklore, and is one of the most significant works in Asian culture. It recounts the journey of the monk Xuanzang accompanied by a fantastical en-

tourage, including Sun Wukong, an immortal monkey who serves as the main protagonist of the video game Black Myth: Wukong.

Regarded as the first true Chinese AAA game (referring to high-budget productions), this title marks a significant milestone for the video game industry in China, which has been more accustomed to developing mobile games. While these are lucrative, their cultural impact has been relatively low.



Digital mentions of Black Myth: Wukong over the last 6 months



This paradigm shift is exemplified by Tencent, a major internet services company and the world's largest video game company, which had long focused on developing mobile games. The group now holds stakes in some of the world's largest studios and invested in Game Science in 2021.

A CONTROVERSY ROOTED IN THE STUDIO AND ITS PRACTICES RATHER THAN THE GAME?

The game's early stages, however, were marred by several controversies. The game's co-publisher, Hero Games, sent content creators and live streamers (mainly on platforms like YouTube and Twitch) a set of instructions along with a free game key. This common practice allows influencers to provide new content for their communities while enabling developers to advertise their games and generate word-of-mouth publicity at a low cost. However, this time, the instructions accompanying the game sparked significant criticism.

The list of instructions contained two parts: the first simply recommended "enjoying the game." The second, however, was more detailed, instructing streamers not to discuss politics, violence, nudity, or "feminist propaganda." It also advised avoiding polarizing terms like "quarantine," "isolation," or "Covid-19." Finally, it concluded by requesting that streamers refrain

from mentioning Chinese politics, particularly in relation to video games.

It is unclear whether these instructions, which are common in China but clumsily communicated to a Western audience, were mandated by the country or the Communist Party, or if they were an effort by the studio to shield itself from potential backlash from authorities in case of displeasing content on foreign video platforms. The specific reference to "feminist propaganda" also echoes an investigation by the gaming media outlet *IGN*, which had [highlighted issues of sexism within the studio](#) months before the game's release. This included obscene and misogynistic remarks directed at women by several employees on social media.

In response, several foreign influencers refused to discuss or

DO'S

- Enjoy the game!

DON'T

- Do NOT insult other influencers or players.
- Do NOT use any offensive language/humor.
- Do NOT include politics, violence, nudity, feminist propaganda, fetishization, and other content that instigates negative discourse.
- Do NOT use trigger words such as 'quarantine' or 'isolation' or 'COVID-19'.
- Do NOT discuss content related to China's game industry policies, opinions, news, etc.

promote the game, and numerous specialized gaming websites criticized the instructions. Other critics went further, condemning [the lack of diversity and inclusivity within the game itself](#). This perceived lack, according to some commentators, aligns with the misogynistic statements allegedly made by developers and reflects the typical “boys will be boys” culture that dominated Western gaming before the last decade.

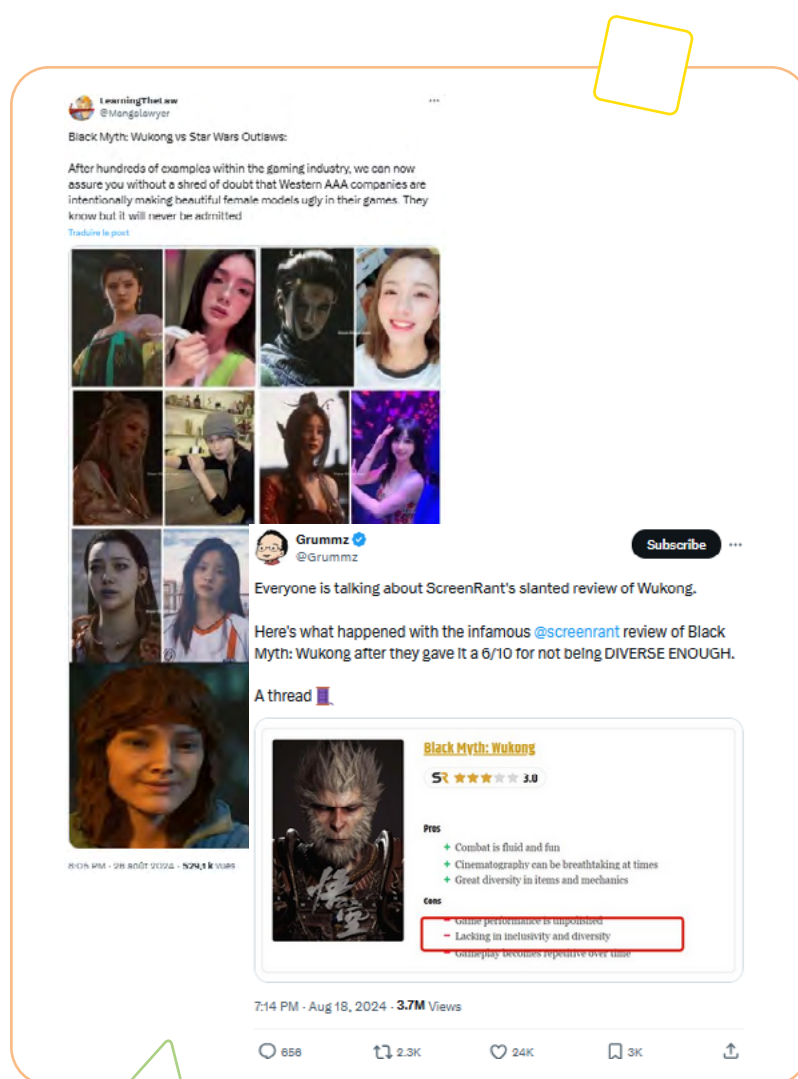
Opposing the critics is an influential “conservative” community, which views the backlash from media and influencers labeled as “leftist” as a form of validation for the Chinese game. The success of Black Myth: Wukong is seen as emblematic of their fight against “wokeism.” Online media outlet [Vox](#) notes that fans of the Chinese game using it to denounce progressivism are not necessarily supportive of Chinese culture but instead exploit the game as a pretext to attack other titles with different representation policies. As the media aptly points out, the controversies surrounding Black Myth: Wukong have little to do with the game itself but are instead “meta-arguments” used to justify a critical stance.

Indeed, when analyzing mentions of Black Myth: Wukong on social media over the past six months, there was a significant spike in posts at the game’s release, alongside other peaks during the various controversies preceding or following its launch (a total of 1.4 million mentions). Among the most prominent influencers associated with the game are familiar figures who often criticize Western titles deemed “woke” or diversity policies in studios and media. On platforms like X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Reddit, accounts such as [@Grummz](#), [@Mangalawyer](#), [Asmongold TV](#), and [@Pirat_Nation](#) are among the most significant in creating and amplifying narratives opposing “progressivism” in video games. Unsurprisingly, these accounts are also among the most active in discussions surrounding the Chinese game’s various debates.

Praising the game, they also used the controversies to [antagonize the specialized press](#), which they accused of launching an unjustified crusade against the studio, allegedly going so far as to

lie and [manipulate votes](#) in anticipation of the much-anticipated [“Game of the Year” election](#).

The Chinese game was also leveraged by this community to draw comparisons and attack Western companies such as [Ubisoft](#), which they have been opposing for several years. The theme of feminism was prominently featured. Some posts highlighted the women who lent their faces and voices to Black Myth: Wukong, [praising their beauty](#) and comparing them to female characters who, according to them, were “uglified” by Western studios.



A MAJOR COMMERCIAL SUCCESS THAT RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF CONTROVERSIES ON CONSUMERS

The controversy, however, did not harm the game’s sales, which broke the record for the most concurrently played single-player title on the PC gaming platform Steam. With 20 million copies sold and nearly a billion dollars in revenue since its release, it is one of the biggest commercial successes of 2024, surpassing Western studios with significantly greater resources. This exceptional launch was largely driven by Chinese players. A few days after the release, 88% of sales came from China, according to the video game industry monitoring agency [GameDiscoverCo](#).

This is the general takeaway from the Black Myth: Wukong controversy. The vast majority of players seemed unaffected by the warnings and criticisms voiced by progressive influencers and much of the specialized press. In fact, the rift between players and the media covering the industry has widened further. It began with Gamergate in 2014 and has [continued in today’s discourse](#).

It also appears that China’s directives to avoid political discussions, particularly in their cultural productions, align with the sentiments of many young players today. This sentiment is especially true for young men, who still dominate a significant portion of the console and PC gaming market. The various criticisms about the lack of inclusivity in the Chinese game by the specialized press, such as those from [Screen Rant](#), were largely ignored or even mocked.

IN CHINA, MANDATORY CELEBRATION, CONTROVERSY SUPPRESSED

In China, the narrative is entirely different. The state news agency [Xinhua praised the breakthrough of a national game](#) in a market dominated by the West and Japan, where, for the first time, the default language of a AAA game is Chinese. Other Chinese media outlets described it as “an important milestone in the expansion of Chinese culture abroad” highlighting a surge in tourism to historical sites featured in the game. This patriotic fervor, however, must be tempered by the fact that nearly 80% of the game’s sales came from China.

Chinese state media also responded to articles focusing on the game’s launch controversy, accusing Western media of [using the game as a means to attack China](#). In typical Chinese rhetoric, the Global Times criticized the Western strategy of “politicizing every Chinese success” and “wrongfully accusing China of censorship to diminish the country’s international image”. Speaking of censorship, the platform Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of X) [deleted all posts and](#)



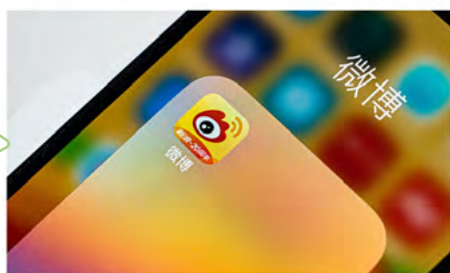
Influenceur	Réseau	Publications	Portée	Portée par mention	Engagement ↓	Engagement par mention
CGTN http://www.facebook.com/		12	124.5M	10.4M	887.2K	73.9K
LearningTheLaw @Mangalawyer		39	990.1K	25.4K	433.8K	11.1K
Dexerto @Dexerto		25	23.9M	955.1K	426.8K	17.1K
Hamster Kombat http://www.youtube.com/		1	4.7M	4.7M	400.1K	400.1K
Grummz @Grummz		70	13.4M	190.9K	395.6K	5.7K
theRadBrad http://www.youtube.com/		16	13.6M	848.8K	355.1K	22.2K
Black Myth: Wukong @BlackMythGame		340	47.2M	138.7K	269.8K	793.7
Asmongold TV http://www.youtube.com/		14	10.5M	752.4K	260.9K	18.6K
penguinz0 http://www.youtube.com/		4	9.5M	2.4M	244.9K	61.2K
FaZe Jev http://www.youtube.com/		8	5.6M	695.2K	242.9K	30.4K
JorRaptor http://www.youtube.com/		40	8.9M	222.5K	237.7K	5.9K
gameranx http://www.youtube.com/		11	8.7M	793K	231.8K	21.1K



accounts discussing or fueling controversies around the game, labeling them as irrational.

Weibo cleans up irrational comments related to 'Black Myth: Wukong,' suspending 138 accounts

By Global Times
Published: Aug 22, 2024 05:04 PM



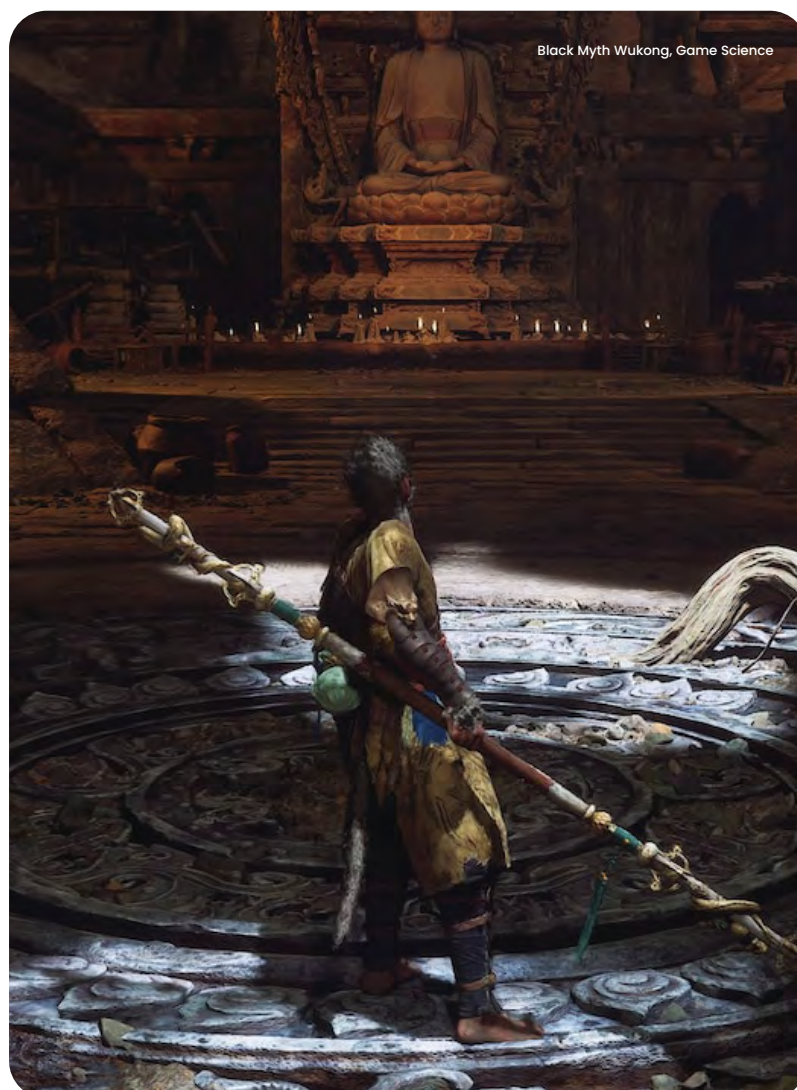
In a country where video games have often been viewed negatively by authorities—who have implemented restrictions for minors and limited licenses for foreign games—this controversy once again highlights the contentious relationship between the government, the industry, and players. A new draft law in China recently emerged, [prohibiting certain themes](#), such as elements opposing the fundamental principles of the Chinese Constitution, threatening national unity, or endangering the country's culture. This law also envisions using video games as a means of extending China's influence internationally. Developers are encouraged to promote socialist culture and to convey the excellence of Chinese culture through their games.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHINESE CULTURAL SOFT POWER?

Has China just realized how to export its culture and a form of soft power by producing high-quality cultural products? It already knows how to do so, but the tone and narrative often struggle to resonate with audiences, who may perceive it as an awkward attempt to imitate Japan or Korea. Could it appeal to a certain segment of gamers? Perhaps. The sentiment

among some conservative Western youth of being alone against a media or political system “dominated by progressivism and corrupted by it” could align with the values promoted by China domestically and abroad.

In China, there are no diversity policies, visible feminist movements, debates on sexual orientation, or gender representation. Similarly, the Chinese mantra of excluding political messages from its cultural productions resonates well with many gamers disillusioned by the endless controversies within the industry. If future high-budget Chinese video games follow this model, they already have a foreign audience. And after the financial and cultural success of Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, why not repeat the experience?



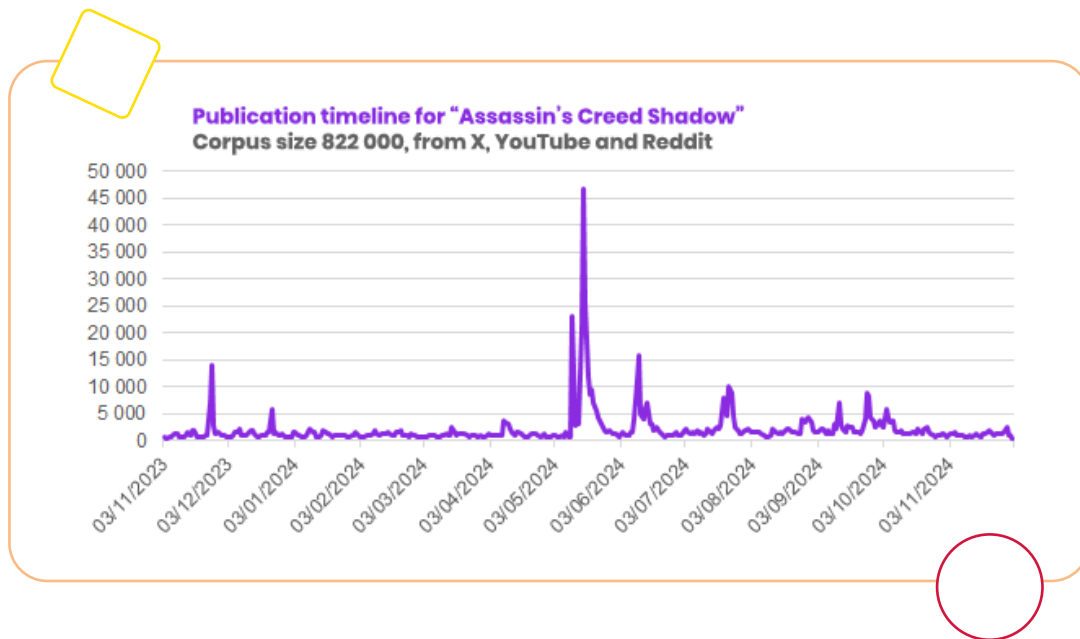
Assassin's Creed: Shadows, Ubisoft

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

CASE STUDY #3

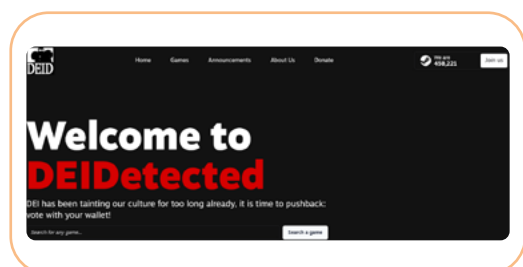
"Assassin's Creed: Shadows": Yasuke Facing an American Conservative Moral Crusade and Japanese Politicization

RPG ACTION ADVENTURE / PUBLISHER: UBISOFT / RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 14, 2025



On May 16, 2024, during the release of the Assassin's Creed: Shadows trailer, controversies intensified, and Ubisoft's stock price dropped. Many influencers posted harsh criticisms on X targeting the game's trailer and the French company. At this moment, anti-woke communities leveraged the controversy to promote their ideological agenda. Profiles like [Grummz](#), a pro-Trump account, and the YouTube channel [EndymionTV](#), with 306K subscribers, contributed to the discussion. These critiques highlighted a deep divide within the gaming community. On one side, some saw DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) and "wokeism" as harmful forces killing the video game industry. On the other side, others defended the game.

This community of influencers, referred to as "anti-DEI," particularly focuses on "exposing" [inclusive characters in video games](#), often ignoring other aspects like gameplay, story-line, and other criteria. A dedicated platform, [DEIDetected](#), was even created for this purpose.



AN ANTI-DEI COMMUNITY FOCUSED ON "OUT-GAME" CRITERIA

The controversies surrounding Assassin's Creed: Shadows reveal significant societal divides, making video games a continuation of the Gamergate controversy of 2014. Much of the English-speaking sphere's criticism revolves around Ubisoft's ties to Sweet Baby Inc., a consultancy specializing in inclusivity in video games. Such critiques, often originating from Trumpist and conservative circles, focus on recruitment policies based on inclusivity criteria. For this community, boycotting games is seen as a legitimate way to "vote with their wallets."

The main accounts generating hostile content toward Yasuke and Assassin's Creed: Shadows operate within an "anti-woke" network. Some of these accounts come from the gaming industry, like Grummz and TinkererYorch, or are influential in this space, such as Mangalawyer. Others belong to a network of micro-media outlets and influencer marketing channels, like The Park Place or Bounding into Comics.

These accounts create hostile content targeting the game and Ubisoft, attack users who support the game, and amplify all types of negative content they identify outside their sphere. Key detractors of Ubisoft's title claim to have contacts within the company to fuel sensationalist claims. Their content expands anti-DEI critiques to economic issues (like microtransactions), gameplay concerns, and



INFLUENCEURS

Influenceur	Réseau	Publications	Portée	Portée par mention	Engagement ↓	Engagement par mention
Asmongold Clips http://www.youtube.com/	YouTube	32	29.8M	930.5K	1M	32.6K
ENDYMIONtv http://www.youtube.com/	YouTube	49	8.7M	177K	644.3K	13.1K
Grummz @Grummz	Twitter	66	12.2M	184.3K	439.9K	6.7K
theRadBrad http://www.youtube.com/	YouTube	33	14M	425.1K	283.3K	8.6K
SKizzle http://www.youtube.com/	YouTube	204	6.1M	29.9K	254.3K	1.2K
KingMisty http://www.youtube.com/	YouTube	350	7.9M	22.6K	229.2K	655
HecticSherlock Gaming http://www.youtube.com/	YouTube	6	3.7M	618.8K	204.1K	34K
JorRaptor http://www.youtube.com/	YouTube	96	6.3M	65.7K	195K	2K
BigData News http://www.youtube.com/	YouTube	71	2.3M	32.2K	184.4K	2.6K
Arktes http://www.youtube.com/	YouTube	419	5.8M	13.9K	176.9K	422.2

△ Main influencers dealing with the “Assassin’s Creed: Shadows” and “Yasuke” controversies

bug findings to maximize negative impact.

Around these narrative-creating accounts, a group of 16 YouTube channels and 11 X profiles amplify the original content and distribute it within their own networks. These accounts experienced significant growth in their follower base during the U.S. presidential campaign.

In addition to these influential users, many highly active accounts with a significant focus on Ubisoft were identified. Some of these non-authentic accounts posted the same mes-

astroturfing campaign (a simulation of a spontaneous or grassroots movement to influence public opinion). Notably, many of the accounts criticizing Assassin’s Creed: Shadows also defend the game Stellar Blade (see related case study).

In total, a community of at least 728 highly interconnected accounts was identified. While they represent only 0.8% of speakers on the topic of Assassin’s Creed: Shadows in the U.S., they account for 22.1% of all related coverage. Despite being a marginal group, they function as a highly effective echo chamber, generating 16% of the digital activity on X. The repetitive nature of their messaging or variations thereof significantly influences the broader digital community’s perception.

Eighty-five percent of the 45 negative narratives that emerged about Ubisoft and the game Assassin’s Creed: Shadows between April and September 2024 originated from this community.

Nick	Followers	Increase from March until October
SmashJT	14,565	x5.21
Paral_Nation	118,722	x4.81
EndymionYT	20,126	x4.66
pollicolorwake	39,308	x4.07
Vana_Dark	32,654	x3.12
plucker_gif	10,125	x2.88

Nick	Subscribers	Increase from March until October
Doctor Disaster	76,200	x16.44
Minimal Effort Live	10,200	x16.33
Dreadroberts	21,800	x7.39
The Trent Report	9,900	x6.43
SmashJT	78,100	x3.53
Jon Del Arce	42,200	x2.87

sages and replies hundreds of times, targeting Ubisoft and its title Assassin’s Creed: Shadows. They consistently share the same posts from the most influential detractors. The identical behavior (down to their X bios) suggests an

A PRIMARILY AMERICAN CONTROVERSY DRIVEN BY THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Unsurprisingly, an analysis of publication distribution reveals that the United States was



Period of Analysis: 01/04/2024 – 15/09/2024. Language: English and French. Location: Global.

6th April: SWO Community Manager is attacking white males.
8th April: Ubisoft, Lucasfilm, and Disney are using bots to deceptively promote SWO.
9th April: SWO trailer looks bad.
9th April: the main character of SWO is unattractive. They hate women.
10th April: SWO is overpriced with a paywall for the Jabba the Hutt mission.
10th April: SWO trailer sparks gamer backlash.
10th April: Ubisoft used bots to promote Star Wars once again.
11th April: Massive gamer backlash over the paywall for Jabba the Hutt mission and dissatisfaction with the character's design.
11th April: Ubisoft is retracting The Crew licenses, implying gamers don't own their games.
22th April: Leaked memo reveals Ubisoft's internal turmoil over failed DEI effort.

May 14th: Leak claims a worker said the story and main character were changed due to DEI.
May 15th: It's senseless not to have a Japanese character as the protagonist.
May 15th: Yasuke was never a Samurai.
May 15th: Ubisoft is editing Wikipedia to support the story of Yasuke.
May 16th: Japanese gamer backlash.
May 16th: Stock prices fall due to negative reaction to the AC trailer.
May 16th: Massive rejection of the AC trailer in Japan; more dislikes than likes.
May 22nd: Yasuke will be portrayed as gay.

June 12th: Compilation of messages reveals Japanese gamer backlash.
June 13th: AC Shadows "Ultimate Editions" merchandise boxes sent to streamers are full of defects.
June 14th: Reddit thread on AssassinsCreed is now banning users.
June 17th: Ubisoft stole the Sekigahara Rifle Corps flag without permission.
June 28th: Ubisoft CEO condemns gamers.
July 1st: A petition on change.org in Japan aims to cancel ACS. Let's share it.
July 7th: Ubisoft only apologizes for stealing the Sekigahara Rifle Corps flag. Gamers' backlash forces them to do it.
July 13th: Thomas Lockey caught changing Wikipedia.

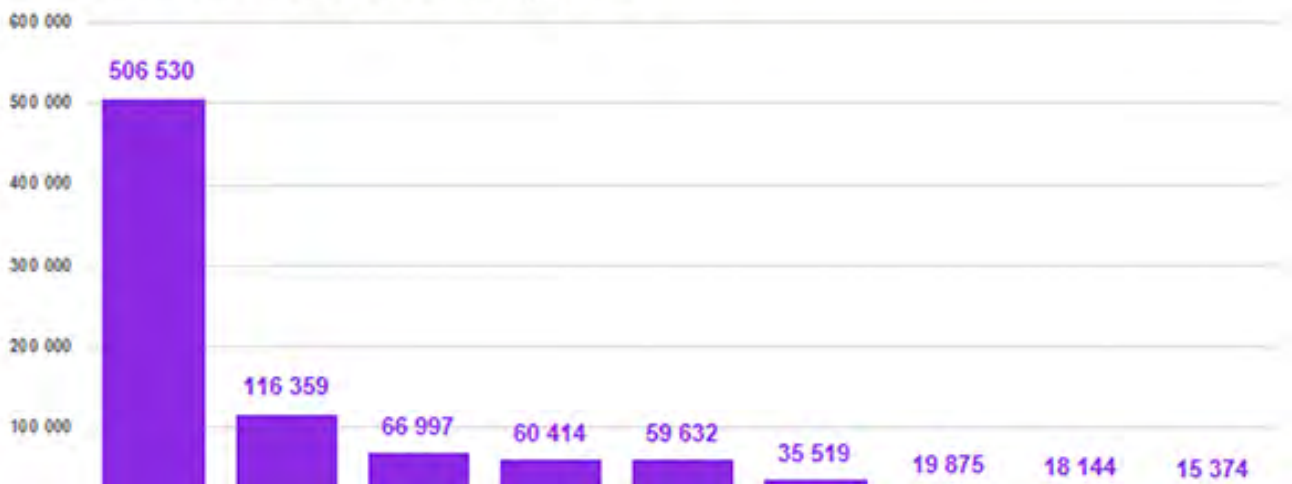
July 13th: Ubisoft steals Zoro's Katana and gives it to Yasuke.
July 19th: Confirmed: Yasuke will be gay.
July 19th: Potential diplomatic conflict as Japanese celebrities and media criticize ACS.
July 21st: Ubisoft apologizes again, admits Yasuke is a lie.
July 21st: Japanese historian claiming Yasuke was a samurai is a communist.
July 27th: Star Wars gameplay looks bad.
July 27th: Gamers roast Star Wars gameplay.
July 28th: Reddit thread on AssassinsCreed is again banning users.
July 31st: Gamers backlash Star Wars gameplay get worse. The game is broken.

August 3rd: Star Wars Outlaws Creative Director insults gamers.
August 5th: Ubisoft caught bribing influencers and YouTubers for positive sentiment around SWO.
August 7th: Thomas Lockley faces backlash for lying about Yasuke.
August 10th: Ubisoft lied about community positive sentiment of ACS.
August 26th: SWO bad reviews, plagued by bugs.
August 26th: Gamers destroy SWO.
August 28th: Star Wars is broken.
August 29th: Insider claims ACS preorders are not selling.
August 31st: SWO graphics are worse than games from many years ago.
September 4th: Stock market drop follows the poor sales of SWO.
September 6th: Ubisoft is buying the review scores.



Distribution of the number of publications by country

On a corpus of 1 million publications between October 28, 2023 and November 8, 2024



the primary hub of discussions surrounding the game over the past year, with 506,530 posts, followed by Japan (116,352), and then a cohort of three countries with comparable weights: Brazil (66,227 posts), Turkey (60,414 posts), and France (52,632 posts).

Negative sentiment was particularly pronounced in the United States, reflecting the highly ideological nature of the discussions (38.6% negative sentiment compared to 13% elsewhere) regarding a game that has yet to be released. The prominence of anti-DEI and anti-woke discourse suggests that the U.S. presidential campaign has been the main driver of controversy related to Yasuke.

FOCUS ON JAPAN: BETWEEN A QUEST FOR HISTORICAL ACCURACY AND POLITICAL BUZZ

As the setting for the latest installment of the series, Japan constitutes the second-largest hub of online conversations. The release of the game's trailer was exploited by politician [Satoshi Hamada](#), a populist and anti-communist, who was supported by accounts advocating for the preservation of Japanese culture. This occurred against the backdrop of disputes over interpretations of the country's history. Hamada's community rallied around a petition that garnered approximately 105,000 signatures. He also attempted to publicize complaints allegedly sent to him by players following the trailer's release.

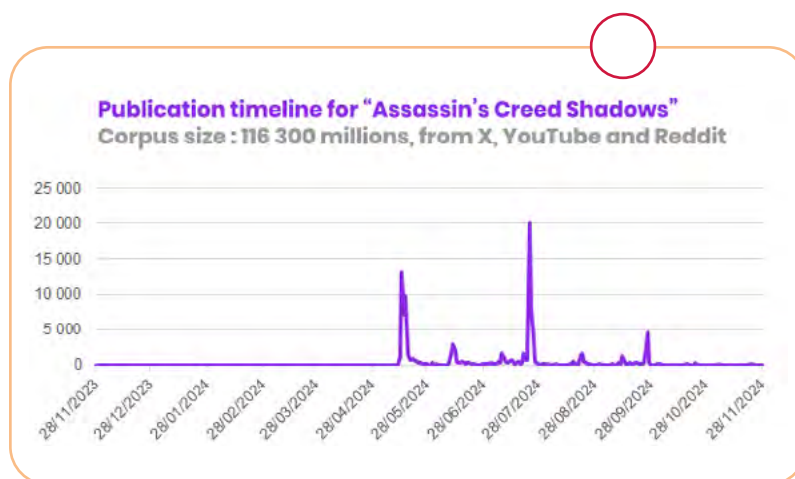
This stance by the leader of the small Japanese political party NHK was primarily amplified by one of the major American anti-DEI media

outlets already identified (The Park Place).

Overall, the impact of Assassin's Creed: Shadows on Japanese conversational spaces remains limited. A notable spike in negative mentions was observed on a Japanese online discussion site, though its authenticity is difficult to assess.

Critics sought to establish the historical accuracy of Yasuke and the game's aesthetics in the name of Japanese "purity":

— Criticism of the trailer, with some elements deemed too "Hollywood-like" and disconnected from [Japan's historical and cultural context](#).



— Criticism of the use of English voice acting for a character meant to embody Japanese culture.

— Debates on the realism of the aesthetics corresponding to the Sengoku period, with demands for [a more faithful and respectful representation of Japan](#).

However, not all users shared these concerns. Some argued that it is difficult to accurately determine the aesthetic context of the time and that video games should be allowed a degree of creative freedom. This feedback had a performative effect on the development team, which chose to delay the game's release to enhance the realism of its depiction of 15th- and 16th-century Japan.

The community driving the critique of the game's historical accuracy in Japan later shifted its focus to criticizing explanations from Western journalists and "experts." Posts



on X expressed anger at what they perceived as racism and resentment toward **non-Japanese experts who claimed to understand Japanese history better than its own people.** Some posts also conveyed a sense of Westerners being perceived as “condescending.”

Overall, in Japan, despite a political entrepreneur’s attempt to spark controversy, positive opinions dominate: 14.6% negative sentiment compared to 12.2% positive sentiment over the period.

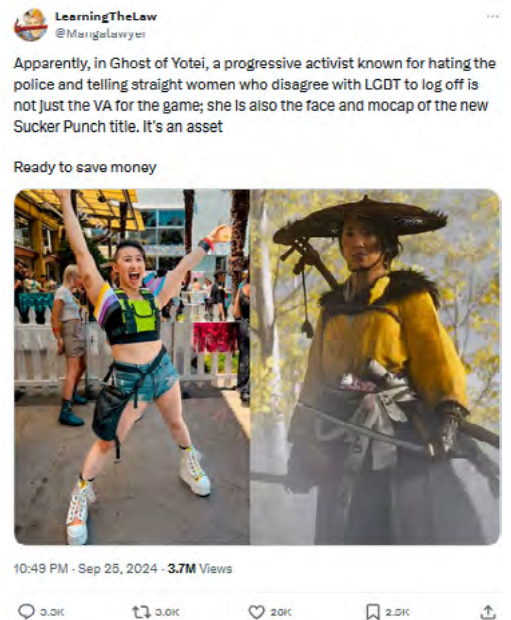


THE DEBATE WITHIN THE DEBATE: THE RELEASE OF “GHOST OF YOTEI”

This game is the sequel to the highly successful “Ghost of Tsushima”, released in 2020 (13 million sales). The second opus takes place in the 17th century during the Edo era (1600-1868, then the Meiji Restoration), where players embody Atsu, a female character.

The controversy surrounding this game stems from a number of “anti-woke” groups, who criticized the pro-LGBTQ+ stance of actress Erika Ishi, and claimed that the studio was participating in the “replacement of masculinity” by female characters.

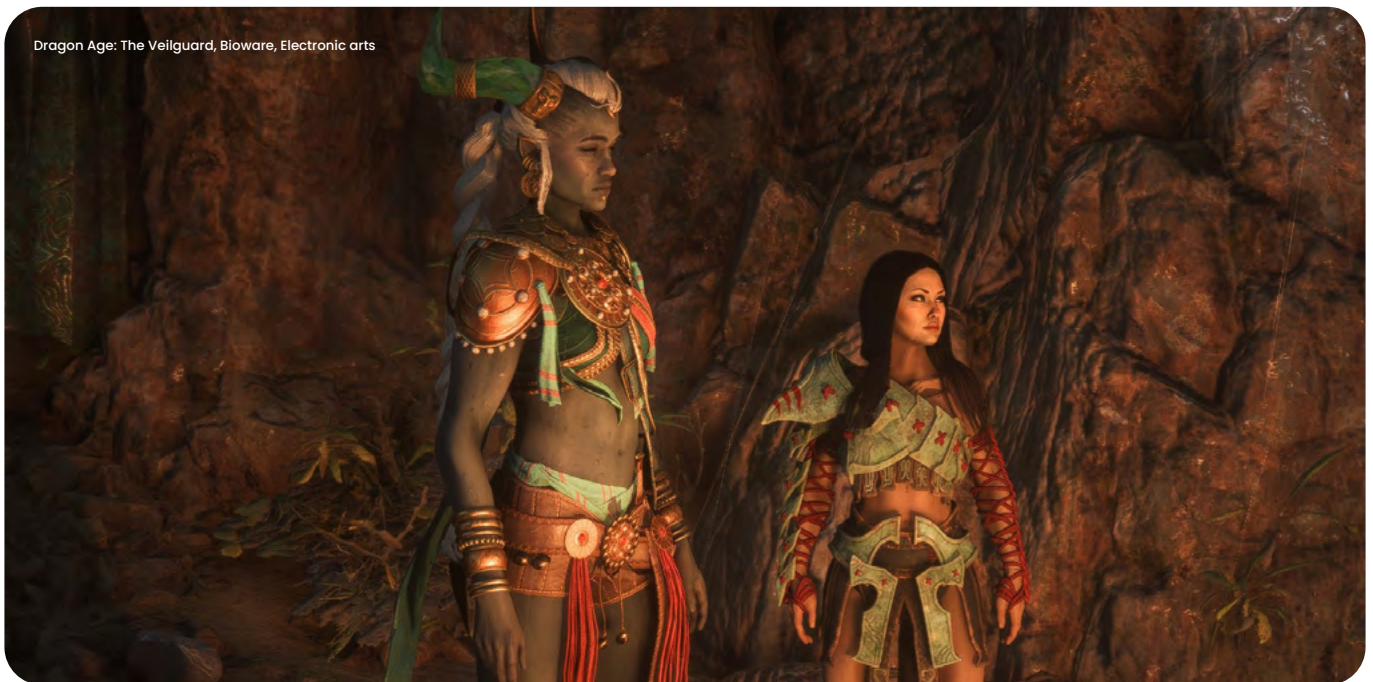
As the game is set in the same topos as “Assassin’s Creed: Shadows”, links were drawn between the two games, fuelling the controversy.



CASE STUDY #4

“Dragon Age: The Veilguard” : Conservative Gamers on the Offensive Against Gender Identity

RPG / BIOWARE, ELECTRONIC ARTS / GAME OWNERS: 663,200 / RELEASE DATE: OCTOBER 31, 2024

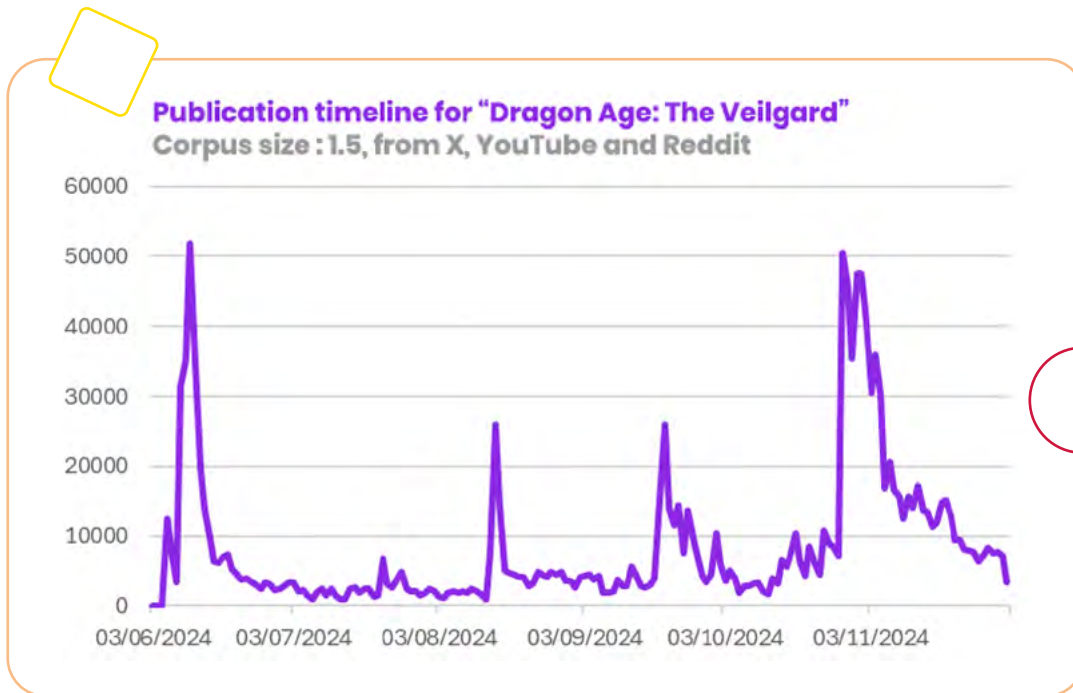


BIOWARE, PIONEERING RPG STUDIO

Bioware studio is historically known for offering role-playing experiences of outstanding quality, often marking the genre by the freedom, choice and emergence of the characters embodied, and the maturity of the themes tackled. The company’s achievements include several landmarks in the history of role-playing video games, such as “Baldur’s Gate”, “Knight of the

Old Republic” and “Mass Effect”.

It was one of the first to provoke controversy with the lesbian kiss scene between two aliens in the successful Mass Effect series, or to introduce non-binary characters such as Jack. The reception of Dragon Age is thus to be seen in the light of players’ history, and in particular an initial betrayal: the ending of Mass Effect 3, which did not live up to the initial promise of being impacted by players’ choices, generating such an outcry from players that it had to be



✕ Digital mentions of Dragon Age : The Veilgard over the last 6 months

rewritten. This episode set a precedent in the industry. Politicization is an evolution in the relationship between creative teams and players.

DRAGON AGE, THE LATEST TARGET OF CONSERVATIVE GAMERS?

Dragon Age: The Veilgard, developed by BioWare, is the fourth installment in the iconic RPG series Dragon Age, released on October 31, 2024. The game immerses players in the fantasy world of Thedas, where they take on the role of Rook, a hero tasked with confronting ancient gods freed from their prison. Some long-time fans lamented the franchise's shift away from its traditional roots in strategic RPG gameplay, moving toward a more action-oriented approach.

The release of The Veilgard was accompanied by significant controversy, particularly surrounding its inclusive approach to representations of gender identity and sexual orientation. The game allows players to create a character with a fluid gender identity, include surgical scars, and form relationships with any character, regardless of their orientation or identity. This openness was criticized by some players who viewed these choices as the imposition of a «woke agenda.» A major quest in the game

directly addresses these gender policies, sparking backlash from certain gaming communities.

The most vocal critiques came from conservative groups and accounts on social media. Among the most influential were many of the same figures previously identified in this study when similar themes were invoked: [@Grummz](#), [@Mangalawyer](#), [ENDYMIONtv](#), [AsmongoldTV](#), and [@Pirat_Nation](#). These critics denounced

what they perceived as the politicization of video games and accused BioWare of straying from the franchise's roots to cater to diversity demands.

Some players aligned with this rhetoric engaged in a review bombing campaign, posting negative reviews of the game, particularly on sites like Metacritic. Unlike the Steam gaming platform, Metacritic does not require players to own or have played the game to post a review, making astroturfing easier. There are numerous 0/10 reviews from players featuring keywords aligned with this rhetoric: "woke", "DEI", "political agenda", "sexual ideology" etc.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE BOWARE STUDIO?

After mixed sales results for *Dragon Age: The Veilguard*, Bioware has fewer employees, due to a series of redundancies and departures following internal restructuring, notably in preparation for development of the next *Mass Effect*. EA had officially announced that *The Last Dragon Age* had missed its targets by almost 50%.

AESTHETICS AND GENDER IDENTITY

Criticism of *Dragon Age Veilguard* is also to be found on the aesthetic side, with some accusing the game of being Pixarated, in reference to the animation studio's style.

This virulent criticism is associated with gender issues, which is not surprising since the industry has built the gamer's identity around masculinity, notably the trope of militarized masculinity in the 1990s. Advertising rhetoric around technical performance and teaching young boys a form of coolness was at the heart of the battle between Sega and Nintendo.

In this respect, Michael Gamble, Executive Director at Bioware, had to take the floor after the release of *Veilguard*, addressing **two key points of the next *Mass Effect***: the tone will be in line with that of the trilogy, with all the diversity it offered in terms of relationships, and the graphics will tend towards photorealism.

The "Dragon Age" case illustrates the evolution of gamers' relationship with games, and is to a greater extent in line with the changes observed between consumers and highly desirable products. Since the emergence of social networks, they have been taking their discontent into increasingly public spaces. The politicization of discontent is one of the most mobilizing processes, accelerating its passage into the mainstream media public arena. It reflects not so much the representativeness of the conflict as its intensity and its ability to set the agenda. In this sense, the debates illustrate how a minority is capable of causing significant harm through the emotional overload of its causes.

Dragon Age: The Veilguard

PS5 [View All Platforms](#)

Released On: OCT 31, 2024

METASCORE

Generally Favorable

Based on 73 Critic Reviews

82

USER SCORE

Generally Unfavorable

Based on 7,708 User Ratings

3.9



Michael Gamble · Oct 28, 2024

@GambleMike

Lots of people asking me about *Mass Effect* now that *Veilguard* reviews are out, and Oct 31 is close.

Both are from the studio, but *Mass Effect* is *Mass Effect*. How you bring a Sci Fi RPG to life is different than other genres or IPs...and has to have different kinds of love.



Michael Gamble

@GambleMike

Regarding tone questions: *Mass Effect* will maintain the mature tone of the original Trilogy. This is all I'm gonna say for now.

3:41 AM · Oct 29, 2024



CASE STUDY #5

“Helldivers 2” : Pervasive Politics as a Major Engagement Lever on Social Media

THIRD-PERSON SHOOTER, ONLINE CO-OP / DEVELOPER: ARROWHEAD GAME STUDIOS (SWEDEN) / PUBLISHER: SONY (JAPAN) / RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 8, 2024 / 15 MILLION SALES BY NOVEMBER 2024 / PLATFORMS: PLAYSTATION, PC

“Helldivers 2”, developed by Swedish studio Arrowhead Games and published by Sony Interactive Entertainment, was released in February 2024. A third-person shooter (TPS), the game immerses players in a universe strongly reminiscent of Starship Troopers.

Another key feature of the game is its cooperative nature, reflected in strong interactivity between the studio and the player community. Mission orders are communicated via the franchise’s social media accounts and within the game itself.

THE UNIVERSE OF “MANAGED DEMOCRACY”

To recall: this 1997 film, directed by Paul Verhoeven and adapted from the science fiction novel of the same name by Robert A. Heinlein (published in 1959), depicts a world where humans, a multiplanetary species, are at war with another intelligent insectoid species, the Arachnids. What left the strongest impression—and sparked controversy—was the political regime governing humanity in the “Terran Federation” where only citizens, those who have completed military or “federal service” are allowed to participate in government. The film was criticized by some for promoting a militaristic and authoritarian vision of social organization.

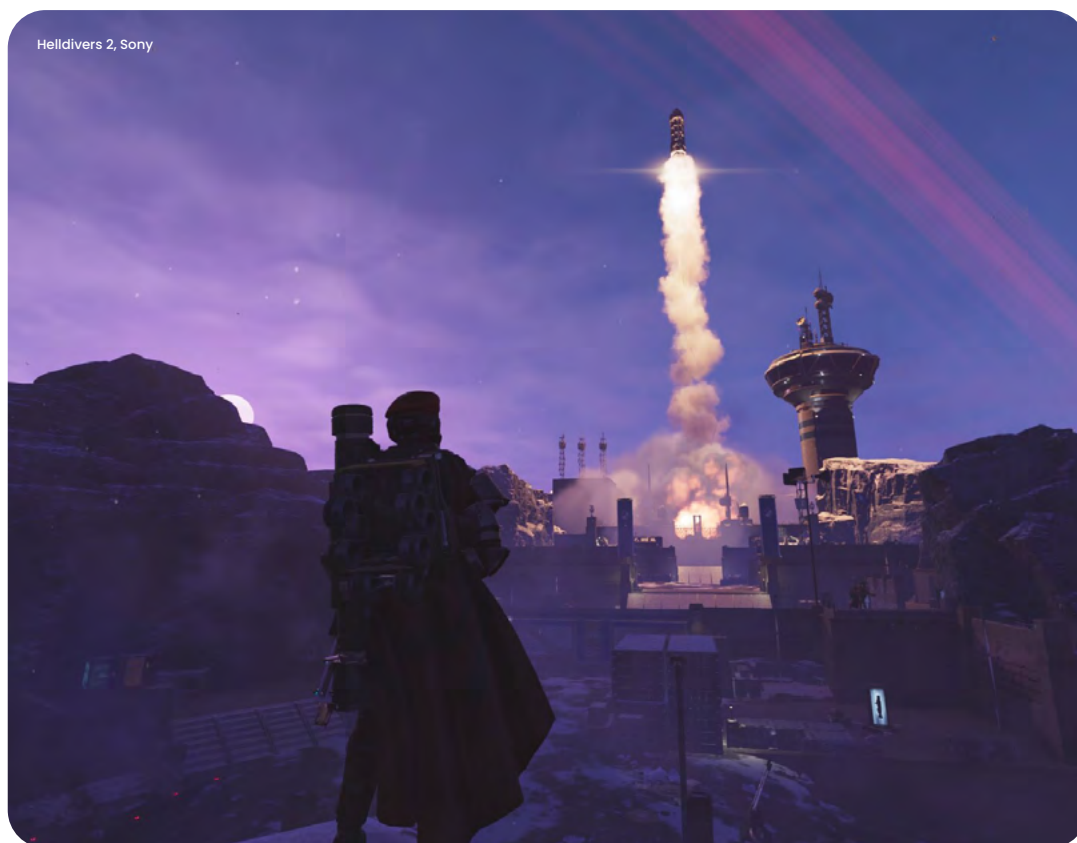
In Helldivers 2, the “Super Earth Federation” mirrors what is described as “managed democracy.” Citizens’ responses to a series of questions are analyzed by a quantum supercomputer, which determines the resulting course of action. The concept of democracy is therefore highly relative.

POLITICAL MOBILIZATION, NARRATIVE RESONANCE, AND PERVASIVE GAMING

Between October 28, 2023, and November 27, 2024, 2.5 million posts about the game were published globally across X, YouTube, and Reddit, generating 50.1 million engagements (likes, shares, and comments).

Among these, 77,200 posts, generating 2.4 million engagements, mentioned the term “democracy” invoked by players within the game’s narrative. The slogan “For democracy” used as a war cry to motivate troops before missions, is central to the game.

The official PlayStation accounts broke the “fourth wall” by extending the concept of “managed democracy” into promotional campaigns. A YouTube video published on July 23 (107,800 engagements, 784,653 views) announced the DLC Escalation of Freedom, urging players to return to the “fight for freedom and managed democracy.” [Another video](#) published on September 20 (44,700 engagements, 784,000 views) shared the anthem of the “Super Earth



Federation” featuring striking lyrics: “Managed democracy is the true path / All who resist it shall suffer our wrath.”

This diegetic approach, transcending gameplay and spilling onto social media, stands out as a key innovation in how the creators engage with their community. The game extends beyond the traditional “magic circle” of play to dominate social networks. By integrating political mobilization into its gameplay and narrative, *Helldivers 2* has expanded into social media spaces, effectively converting players into community members and followers of the game’s accounts.

In addition to traditional announcements (promotions, updates, and DLC releases), immersive posts that extend the game’s experience are regularly published. These include mission orders on the *Helldivers 2* X account, updates on ongoing missions, and reports of collective successes or failures.

This interactive approach has proven successful: the X account @helldivers2 boasts a strong

following of 627,800 subscribers—compared to 102,600 for @Darktide40k, the account for *Warhammer 40,000: Darktide*. *Helldivers 2* has 11 million game owners, yielding a subscription-to-owner conversion rate on X of 5.7%. By contrast, *Warhammer 40,000: Darktide* (released in 2022) has 2 million game owners, with a conversion rate of 0.0051%. For another blockbuster, *Elden Ring* (2022), the @ELDENRING account has 1.1 million followers, yielding a conversion rate of 0.08%.

The conversational approach adopted by *Helldivers 2* does not seem to have significantly impacted the subscription conversion rate—though the long-standing presence of the *Warhammer 40,000* and *Elden Ring* licenses (both X accounts created in 2012) must be considered when evaluating these results.

It is in terms of engagement that the results become striking. Between February 8 and November 28, 2024, @helldivers2’s posts generated 4.7 million engagements (likes, shares, comments), compared to 74,800 for @Darktide40k and 2.6 million for *Elden Ring*.

AN APOLITICAL POLITICAL GAME?

On social media, several relatively influential but isolated accounts have engaged with the ideological themes present in the game. This form of politicization of discourse around video games is reflected in the “top” publications mentioning the term “democracy.”

— The YouTube channel SMii7Yplus (3.65 million subscribers) titled one of its [gameplay videos](#) as “The Most Patriotic Game Ever Made.” This video generated 333,100 engagements and 2.7 million views, making it the second most-viewed video in this category.

— On X, user @revenant_MMXX (44,800 followers) [tweeted](#) that the commercial success of Helldivers 2 is a sign of an intellectual defeat for “progressives.” This tweet followed a publication discussing the theme of otherness presented in the film *Starship Troopers*. The post generated 2,800 engagements and 72,600 views.

This type of publication, although created by users addressing (unequally sized) communities, does not at this stage represent a real controversy between supporters of the “managed democracy” virtually experienced by players and its opponents.

This is noteworthy: a game that places political factors—the nature and ideology of the ruling regime—at the core of its narrative universe does not, by that fact alone, provoke notable ideological confrontations among players or spark debates among a broader audience within

public discourse.

This relative apoliticism in the reception of *Helldivers 2* is also evident in overall trends. Between October 28, 2023, and November 28, 2024, 82,700 publications were recorded in online press outlets. A keyword analysis (see the keyword cloud below) reveals that terms associated with *Helldivers 2* in this space pertain more to analyses of the game and its creative context rather than its political-ideological dimension: mentions of the game platforms (“PlayStation”), the creator (“Arrowhead,” “developer”), or gameplay elements (“gameplay,” “shooter,” “play,” “players”) dominate.

The overall dynamics of conversations reveal that the two main peaks in conversations on social media (see the graph below) are concentrated on two specific sequences:

— February 12 and 20, 2024, during the players’ discovery of the game, its rapid success, and the overload of servers (76,100 publications).

— The announcement by PlayStation regarding the decision to abandon the requirement for PC players to link their Steam account to PlayStation Network to continue playing, a decision that had crystallized community opposition (206,200 publications).



Helldivers 2, Sony



Become a Helldiver!



Conclusion



The analysis of these cultural battles follows the historical continuity of controversies surrounding video games. Over the past 25 years, controversies about video games as an object (violent, immoral) supported by public, political, associative, or institutional actors have gradually become individualized on two levels:

- First, video games as an object are no longer the systematic subject of moral crusades. Instead, particular cases of individual representations, especially avatars embodied by the player, draw attention and fuel controversies: gender, origins, colors, homogeneity, historicity.

- Second, we observe the emergence of opinion leaders who are not integrated into institutions, parties, or associations. This privatization of moral enterprises is particularly visible on X (formerly Twitter) and in the United States, where the “outrage market” incorporates criticism of video game representations into the broader spectrum of moral condemnations.

This dual individualization finds fertile ground for cultural battles in social media, which, in video games, are primarily moral battles over cultural representations. The rare proponents of a cultural battle are those with public responsibilities or connections, as exemplified by the defense of Japanese history supported by a parliamentarian, reminiscent of the criticism of Robespierre’s portrayal in *Assassin’s Creed Unity*.

The confrontation between video games and historical reality does not occur from a scientific perspective but rather a purely moral one, serving as a tool for perpetuating influencers’ visions of society and the nation.

We are witnessing a reversal from cause to symptom: video games, once the ideal culprit as generators of social ills and certain crimes since *Littletown* in 1999, have become the ideal symptom of current social changes and the debates they generate. They even act as a manifesto for a desire to present a form of cultural, moral, and social avant-garde. This interpretation, like the earlier one, illustrates the use of video games for other purposes, with shifting contours depending on the political and moral landscape and the social diffusion spaces.

The circulation of various controversies reveals recurring patterns, particularly the activity of a group of online opinion leaders. A cross-analysis of the “Top 30” influencers, ranked by the number of engagements their publications received, shows that some profiles play a leading role in conversations around the main games that generated some form of controversy: *Assassin’s Creed: Shadows*, *Stellar Blade*, *Black Myth: Wukong*, *Ghost of Yotei*, and *Dragon Age: The Veilguard*.

These five omnipresent users alone represent 6.1 million engagements across these five games, nearly 7% of all engagements generated by the



Users in the "Top 10" most influential accounts by video game

X= présent (*)=position	« Assassin's Creed: Shadows »	« Stellar Blade »	« Black Myth: Wukong »	« Ghost of Yotei »	« Dragon Age: The Veilguard »
Grummz	X (2)	X (3)	X (5)	/ (25)	X (1)
Asmongold Clips/ TV	X (3- 14)	/ (19)	X (9)	/	X (9)
ENDYMIONtv	X (11)	/ (24)	/	/ (22)	X (6)
Pirat Nation	/	/ (15)	/ (21)	/	X (10)
MangaLawyer	X (9)	X (1)	X (3)	/ (18)	X (5)

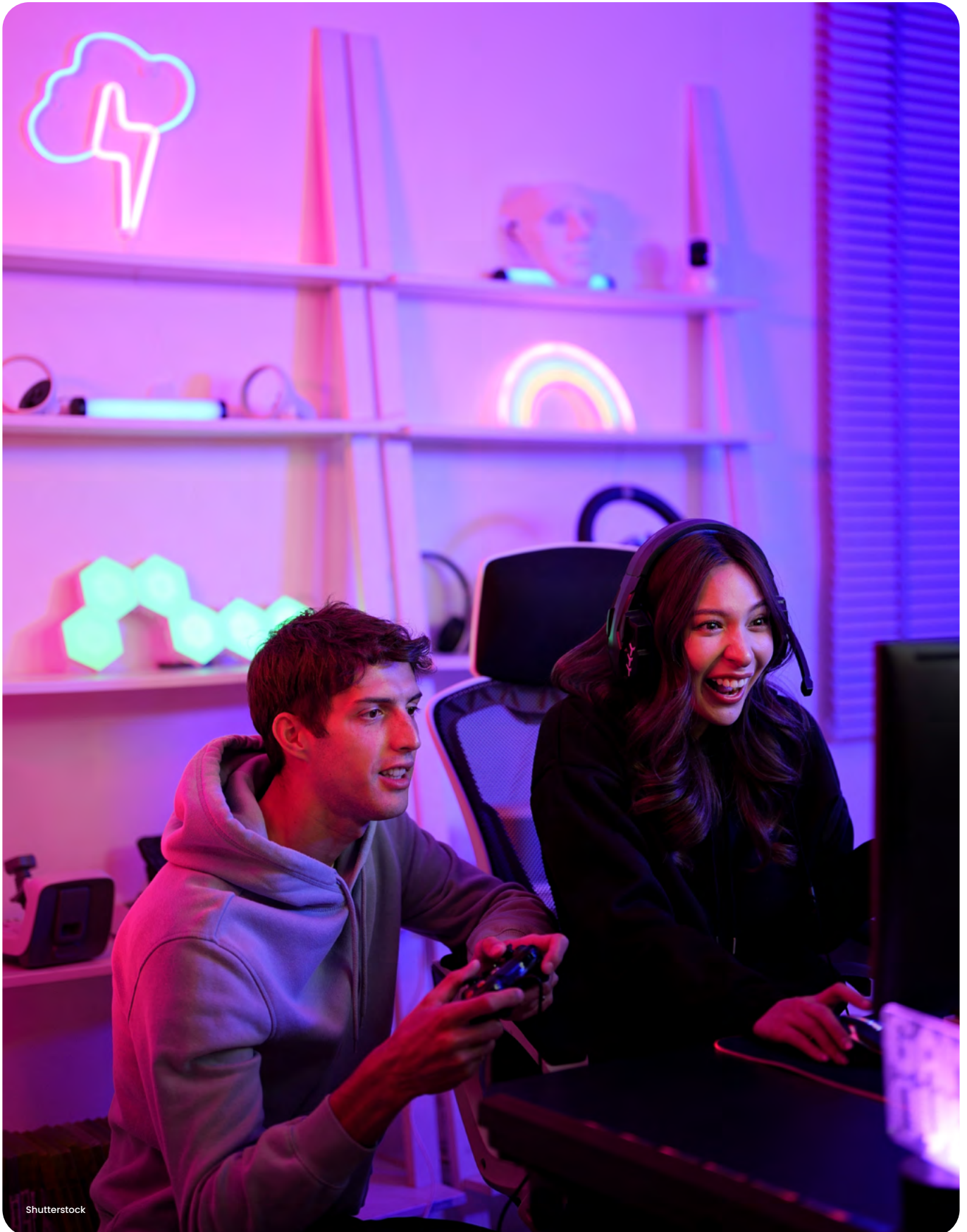
738,200 users active throughout the year.

Politics thus remains a topic of engaging conversations for those already invested, but it does not seem to convert new participants or alienate players, especially when it targets the content of cultural works. Conversely, issues concerning production conditions can clash with moral denunciations of content: in such cases, crises can become politicized, and the entire production process—from manufacturers to the final product—can be condemned, as was seen with the amplification of Gamergate when it shifted to a critique of the conditions of video game criticism production.

The success of the Helldivers 2 mobilization campaign demonstrates the capacity of politics to generate content, inspire imaginations, and ultimately produce strong engagement, in this case through a fully controlled approach to communication on social media.

The communication strategy of Helldivers 2 represents a turning point as significant as that of GTA upon its release in terms of how politics is leveraged as a commercial tool. While GTA generated controversy by fostering the belief in video games' societal effects, Helldivers 2 simulates politics in a pervasive manner, extending the game's universe into social media.

Paradoxically, the omnipresence of politics in-game does not politicize the relationships between players nor does it generate controversy. This remains the result of a process of publicization—that is, a passage into the public sphere through the media—which can be accelerated by moral entrepreneurs when engagement levels are high, and the topic pertains at least to the production conditions of the video game industry (studio, media) and, at most, aligns with the political agenda, particularly during an electoral campaign. In such cases, the game serves as a topic and point of discussion to gain visibility and position oneself on other issues.



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The European Video Game Observatory

Video games simultaneously serve as actors in cultural battles by creating representations of the world and as platforms for other battles to unfold. In light of this, we have established **the European Video Game Observatory**.

The European Video Game Observatory is the essential entity for analyzing opinions and trends in the video game industry. Its analyses and strategic reports cover various fields:

- Analysis of players' behaviors within video games.
- Perceptions of key industry topics by players and non-players alike.
- The infiltration of video game spaces by external actors and themes.

The Observatory targets all European stakeholders seeking to deepen their knowledge and refine their public messaging:

- European public institutions: DG-Comm, DG-Security, European Parliament, Council of Europe.
- Private entities aiming to enhance their understanding of emerging practices in their markets.
- NGOs.

The mission of the Observatory is to collect and analyze perceptions, practices, and expectations of young Europeans, linking these findings to legislative work to identify major developments and upcoming challenges. This would allow proactive communication on these issues.

The European dimension of the Observatory enables both a global perspective and a comparative approach to practices across EU countries, creating opportunities for engagement with European institutions, media, and, by extension, national and local platforms.

To ensure the scientific rigor of the Observatory, we plan to collaborate with researchers and experts in social and digital sciences with whom we already work on European research projects. Their contributions will guarantee the quality of analyses and recommendations produced by the Observatory.



Olivier Mauco is a video game designer and political science researcher. His approach combines academic research, game creation and critical analysis to explore the many facets of this constantly evolving medium. He holds a doctorate in political science from Panthéon-Sorbonne University, with a thesis on the impact of regulatory policies on video game content. He is recognized for his expertise in analyzing the discourses and ideologies of video games and their socio-economic impacts. He has published several books, including *GTA IV: l'envers du rêve américain* and *Jeux vidéo hors de contrôle*. He regularly appears in the media to analyze video games and their political and ideological content, as well as debates on violence, gaming addiction and socio-economic change. He also teaches video game economics and game design at Dauphine, Sciences Po Paris and Toulouse, and ISART. He founded Game in Society, an agency dedicated to gaming communication for private and public actors at national and European level, as well as to research into issues such as media education, emotions in democracy and mental health, again through the creation of experimental video games

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