



JLPH: Journal of Law, Politic and Humanities

E-ISSN: 2962-2816
P-ISSN: 2747-1985<https://dinastires.org/JLPH> ✉ dinasti.info@gmail.com ☎ +62 811 7404 455DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38035/jlph.v5i4>
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Video Games as Foreign Policy Tools: A Comparative Between Japan and Poland

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Abstract: This study examines the role of video games as instruments of foreign policy by comparing Japan and Poland. Utilizing a qualitative comparative analysis, it explores how each country has strategically integrated video games into cultural diplomacy and soft power initiatives. Japan's "Cool Japan" initiative exemplifies long-term state-supported cultural promotion, highlighted by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's appearance as Mario at the 2016 Rio Olympics. Poland, on the other hand, leverages its globally successful The Witcher franchise to enhance its cultural footprint, as demonstrated by Prime Minister Donald Tusk gifting The Witcher 2 to President Barack Obama. By analyzing these cases, this research identifies key policy frameworks, institutional support mechanisms, and socio-political contexts that shape the use of video games as tools for national branding and international relations. The findings suggest that government-backed gaming initiatives can significantly influence global perceptions and offer valuable lessons for other nations seeking to utilize their gaming industries for diplomatic and economic gains.

Keyword: Video Games, Foreign Policy, Soft Power, Japan, Poland.

INTRODUCTION

Pop culture has evolved into a significant force for shaping public perception and strengthening international relations. It includes diverse forms of media and entertainment, such as films, TV shows, soap operas, comic books, music, celebrities, fan communities, and more (Henn & Gonzatti, 2021). Danesi (2015) understands that pop culture works as mirrors filling symbolic needs, constituting themselves through characteristics like nostalgia, celebrity, shows, and laughter. With the growth of digital technologies, video games have joined this repertoire. Countries have begun to recognise the potential of video games to reach diverse audiences and convey cultural narratives compellingly.

Among the numerous elements of pop culture, video games have emerged as a significant medium due to their widespread popularity and immersive nature. Video games are no longer just a source of entertainment but also serve as a platform for training or education gamification, an industry that can generate revenue and social communication (Mithika, 2022). Video games can also reflect a nation's culture and values, making video games a tool for public diplomacy to share culture with the world (Babb, 2013). The growth of the creative industry, also video games industry, is related to cultural regeneration, including through public policy (Comunian & Mould, 2014).

It is helpful to first understand the roles and dynamics of video games from social political perspective especially public policy. Video games are inherently political across three axes: production, content, and consumption (Lima, 2017). Lima (2017) also argues that the game's production decisions, content, and player experiences reflect and contribute to political conversations about social issues such as gender and representation in video games. From policy perspective, as video games contents also can contains social issues, video games can also become a medium for policy advocacy toward public. Video games show that reality and fiction are in constant collision. They collide in fascinating and unforeseen ways, with impacts on one another (Kautzky, 2020).

Video games, as tools for implementing public policy, can also be regarded as a political medium. Lima (2017) contends that video games inherently possess political dimensions, observable in their production, content, and consumption. As a form of new media, video games share the potential of traditional media to influence international politics, particularly as instruments of soft power (Urueva & Uchaeu, 2023). For instance, in 2021, the Stevens Initiative facilitated unique opportunities for young people in the United States and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to engage in virtual exchange programs. Among the 19 initiatives, one program focused on creative dialogue and collaboration through shared interests in video games and game design (Aspen Institute, 2021). These programs aim to cultivate active global citizenship by equipping participants with essential skills and leveraging video games as tools for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding.

Japan and Poland exemplify how countries can effectively integrate video games into their foreign policy strategies. Japan, with its renowned video game industry, has strategically utilized iconic characters such as Mario from the Mario Bros. franchise to promote national events, including the Olympics (Gilbert, 2016). Similarly, Poland has leveraged the global success of The Witcher series, famously gifting the game to prominent figures such as former U.S. President Barack Obama during diplomatic visits (Goulter, 2011). These examples underscore the active participation of influential leaders like Shinzo Abe, Donald Tusk, and Barack Obama, reflecting the significance of strong policy actors in such initiatives (Widayat et al., 2023). These cases illustrate how video games can act as cultural bridges, enhancing a nation's image abroad. By harnessing the global appeal of popular video games, nations can amplify their soft power, foster international goodwill, and showcase their cultural heritage on the world stage.

The central research problem of this study is to understand how video games can be effectively used as foreign policy tools to promote national identity and foster international relations. Specifically, it addresses the following questions: What are the key policies in Japan and Poland that support the development and promotion of their video game industries? Also, what context influences the decision of Shinzo Abe and Donald Tusk in their respective actions?

This research not only contributes to the academic understanding of foreign policy but also offers practical insights for policymakers in utilizing video games as policy tools. The interaction and participation of public in shaping political sphere has experienced significant growth, the forces of change have driven it to penetrate numerous fields, from an object of entertainment to even a product of popular culture, including video games (Battista, 2023). By drawing on the experiences of Japan and Poland, it aims to provide an understanding on how

utilizing video games as more than entertainment product, but also as policy tools or political medium.

To answer those questions, this paper examines the key policies in Japan and Poland that support video games by using Comparative Analysis of their policies that is able in developing the cultural products, including video games, of the two countries. Also, analyzing the cases of Japan and Poland by using Contextual Analysis centered on social, political, cultural, including soft power context. This article concludes with an explanation that answers the research questions of this study.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative case study approach to analyze how video games are utilized as tools of foreign policy by examining two case studies: Japan and Poland. The case study method allows for an in-depth exploration of specific instances where video games have been strategically integrated into diplomatic and cultural initiatives. By focusing on these two countries, the study seeks to uncover the policy mechanisms, institutional support, and socio-political contexts that shape the role of video games in international relations.

A case study approach is particularly relevant for this research as it enables a detailed examination of contemporary phenomena within real-world contexts. Case study research focuses on gaining a deep understanding of specific cases (Clark et al., 2022) and is widely recognized as a qualitative approach within the social sciences. This research methodology is based on data collection and observation (Walliman, 2005) and aims to test a situation to prove or establish how a particular condition can occur. Video games are not only entertainment products, but also cultural artifacts embedded in political and social frameworks. This study investigates how Japan and Poland have leveraged their gaming industries to project soft power, enhance national branding, and engage in diplomatic outreach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Japan

The case from Japan for this study looks at how Mario Bros. can become a video game representing Japan, especially in promoting the Tokyo Olympics 2020. In 2016, Shinzo Abe (former Prime Minister of Japan) showed up in Mario Bros costume during the closing ceremony of the Brazil Olympics 2016 as a statement and to show that the next host of the Olympic Games would be Japan in 2020 (Gilbert, 2016). The former prime minister donned the costume of Super Mario, a popular video game character from Japanese video games.

The Mario Bros franchise, a flagship title for Nintendo, enjoys widespread global popularity. Mario's debut in the 1981 arcade game Donkey Kong, followed by his eponymous 1983 title, established a strong association with Nintendo, culminating in Nintendo's dominance of the American console market by 1988 (Tech-n-gamer, n.d.; Stezano, 2024). This association was further solidified through the automatic inclusion of Super Mario Bros with subsequent NES releases, ultimately establishing Mario as the face of Nintendo throughout the 1990s (Stezano, 2024).

Across diverse platforms, Mario has appeared in or made cameo appearances in over 300 games since 1981, encompassing numerous spin-offs and re-releases (Hay, 2023). His iconic status even extended to his role as a prominent figure in promoting the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, as exemplified by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's appearance in a Super Mario costume at the 2016 Rio Olympics closing ceremony (Wade, 2022). The enduring success of the Mario Bros franchise, underpinned by institutional support, showcases the potential of strategically leveraging video games as instruments of Japanese foreign policy, bolstering the "Cool Japan" brand and illustrating the global reach achievable through sustained institutional support of cultural products (Hay, 2023; Wade, 2022; Stezano, 2024).

Japan's significant influence in the global creative economy and popular culture is undeniable. Even in the late 1980s, Japanese television programming achieved considerable popularity throughout Asia, demonstrating that its colonial history did not preclude the acceptance of its cultural exports in East and Southeast Asia (Iwabuchi, 2015). This success exemplifies Japan's broader export of popular culture, encompassing television dramas, films, music (including J-rock), anime, manga, and video games, with iconic franchises like Doraemon, Dragon Ball, and Captain Tsubasa achieving international recognition (Iwabuchi, 2015).

The global penetration of Japanese gaming consoles (PlayStation and Nintendo) and fashion trends (such as Harajuku style) further underscores this cultural dominance. The Mario Bros. franchise, a notable example, had already established a vast global following before former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's high-profile cosplay appearance at the 2016 Rio Olympics closing ceremony (Wade, 2022). Data from Kaggle indicates that 96 Mario Bros. titles were released between 1983 and 2016, achieving combined sales exceeding 508 million copies by May 2024 (Fatima, 2024). This remarkable success underscores Japan's enduring and pervasive influence on global popular culture.

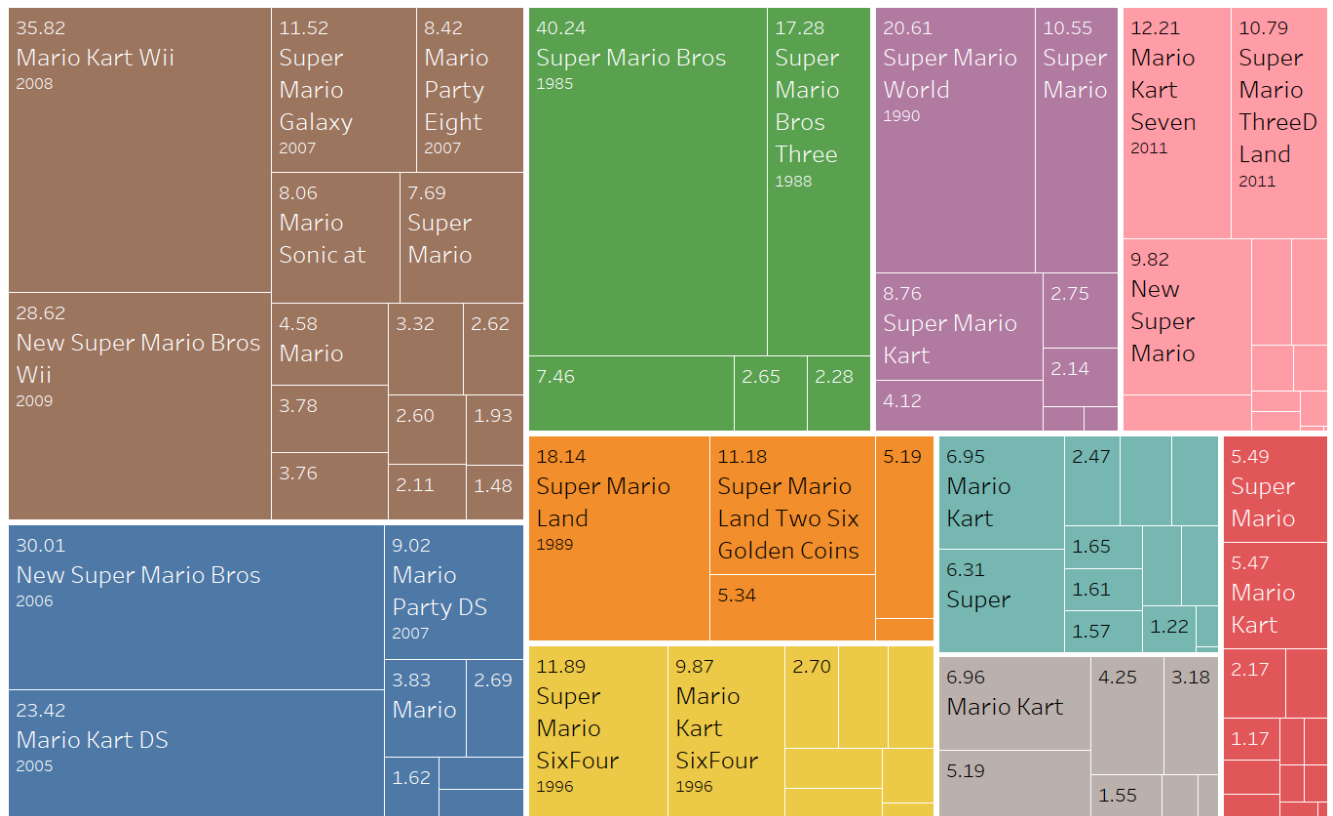


Figure 1 Treemaps of Mario's video games sales (million copies)

Figure 1 above shows the number of sales of each video game in different square sizes, and many surpass the million-copy sales mark. Mario’s game with the most sales is Super Mario Bros, released in 1985, with 40.25 million copies sold. It was followed by Mario Kart Wii, released in 2008, with 35.82 million copies, and New Super Mario Bros., released in 2006, with 30.01 million copies. The popularity of Mario Bros illustrates the franchise's ability to evolve and remain relevant across generations. The franchise's success can be attributed to its engaging gameplay, relatable characters, and innovative design. Mario has transcended gaming to become a cultural icon, appealing to both nostalgic older players and new generations. This broad appeal has cemented Mario’s place in popular culture, making Mario Bros a video game that has social and cultural influence.

The act of Shinzo Abe by posing as Mario from Mario Bros. franchise is related with social, political, and cultural contexts. The social context of the action by Shinzo Abe can be seen that Mario as a character appeals strongly to younger audiences, and by using this familiar icon, Abe aimed to connect with a demographic that may be less engaged with politics but likely familiar with video games. This approach also resonates with global audiences who recognize Mario regardless of cultural background.

Meanwhile by donning a Mario costume during the Olympic promotion, Shinzo Abe leveraged a globally recognized character to foster goodwill and interest in Japan. Mario is a symbol of fun and creativity, highlighting Japan's contributions to global entertainment and its technological prowess. It is a cultural symbol from Japan's cultural prowess. The use of a beloved character showcases Japan's soft power—using culture to influence and build international relationships. The Olympics represent a significant opportunity for Japan to present itself positively on the world stage, and the playful choice of Mario evokes a sense of friendly from the country.

Shinzo Abe's use of Mario to promote the Tokyo Olympics can be seen as a reflection of the success of the "Cool Japan" policy. This initiative aimed to enhance Japan's cultural exports and promote Japanese pop culture—such as anime, manga, and video games—on the global stage. The initiative of Cool Japan is definitely playing a big role in the growth of Japanese pop culture scene, including video games industry. Japan's gaming industry benefits from a strong institutional framework with its public-private collaboration (CJPF, 2024) that supports its creative and cultural industries. The Cool Japan Initiative, launched by the Japanese government, is a prime example of a policy designed to promote Japan's pop culture globally (Alfarisy et al., 2021), including video games.

This synergy between government policy and corporate innovation, such as Nintendo, which developed Mario Bros, has helped Mario Bros maintain cultural relevance and appeal for decades. Institutional support plays a pivotal role in successfully leveraging pop culture as a tool for foreign policy strategy and global soft power. Japan's Cool Japan Initiative integrates government backing with private-sector creativity and provides financial and promotional support to export pop-culture elements like video games, anime, and fashion. The Regional Cool Japan Promotion Council discusses (Cabinet Office, n.d.-b) successful cases of overseas expansion by regional players as well as the challenges they face. It also promotes the successful cases of cultural products overseas as part of the overall promotion of the Cool Japan Strategy.

Poland

Poland's strategic use of video games as a tool of soft power is illustrated by the 2011 gifting of *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* and related novels to President Barack Obama by then-Prime Minister Donald Tusk (Goulter, 2011). This gesture, interpreted by CD Projekt Red CEO Adam Kicinski as a signal of governmental support for the Polish video game industry, served to highlight the sector's potential (Goulter, 2011).

The *Witcher* series, adapted from Andrzej Sapkowski's novels, debuted in 2007 with the initial *Witcher* title, followed by *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* in 2011 (CD Projekt Red, n.d.). The franchise has since expanded to include six titles by 2024 (CD Projekt Red, n.d.), showcasing its sustained success and critical acclaim. This example demonstrates how institutionally supported cultural products, specifically video games, can project a nation's image and influence on the global stage.

In contrast to the case of Japan, *The Witcher*, developed by the Polish company CD Projekt Red, represents a newer yet equally potent example of foreign policy strategy through video games. While Poland does not have the decades-long gaming legacy of Japan, *The Witcher* has emerged as a critical cultural export. Supported by government initiatives such as financial support (Walasek, 2019) that recognise the value of cultural industries in diplomacy,

The Witcher’s success has reinforced Poland’s growing reputation in both gaming and cultural exports.

Poland, while not yet achieving the global reach of Japan's pop culture influence, has established a significant presence on the international cultural stage. The nation boasts a strong creative industry, with notable contributions across various sectors: from the renowned science fiction writing of Stanisław Lem, to the acclaimed films of directors Andrzej Wajda and Krzysztof Kieślowski, and the globally popular video games The Witcher and Cyberpunk 2077.

This increasing international recognition solidifies Poland's status as a major player in the global cultural landscape. The strategic utilization of Polish intellectual property within diplomatic relations is highlighted by the 2011 gifting of The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings and accompanying novels to President Barack Obama by Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk—an action that showcased Polish cultural products on a prominent international stage (Goulter, 2011).

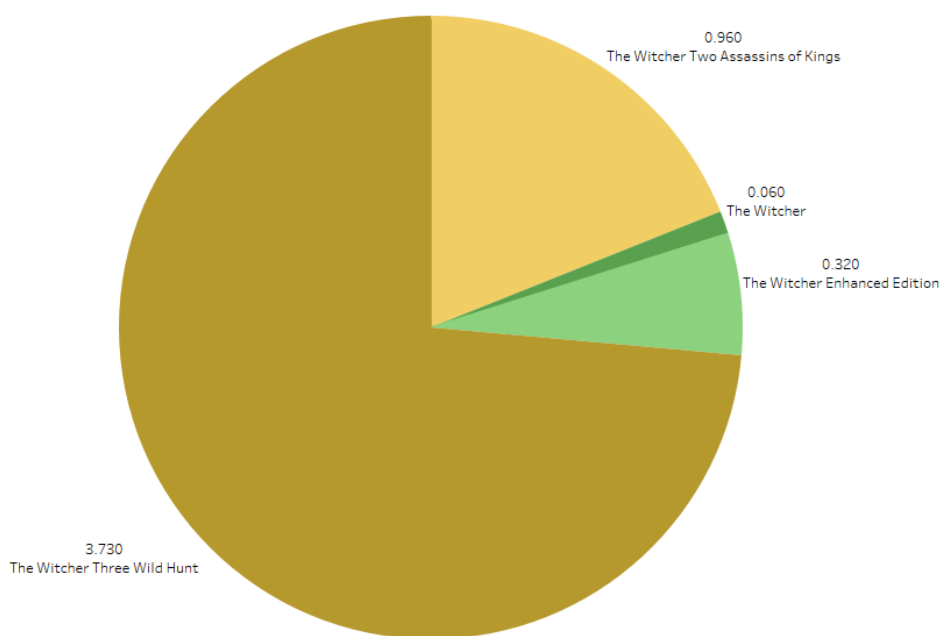


Figure 2 The total sales of The Witcher video games franchise (million copies)

The Witcher is a famous video game series. Based on the dataset released on Kaggle (Fatima, 2024) shown in Figure 2, the total sales of The Witcher and The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings as of May 2024 were 1.34 million copies. The Witcher was released in 2007, and in the next year, the enhanced edition of The Witcher was also released. The second series was released in 2011, and both became fans’ favourites in terms of RPG video games. Meanwhile, The Witcher III—Wild Hunt's total sales until May 2024 were 3.73 million copies, as shown in Figure 2, surpassing The Witcher and The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings. Furthermore, Netflix adapted The Witcher into a serial, further demonstrating the popularity of intellectual property.

The popularity of The Witcher franchise from the sales data above demonstrates not only a natural progression of the series in terms of sales but also improvement of the video game elements. Donald Tusk's gesture of presenting The Witcher video games to Barack Obama also can be seen with social, political, and cultural contexts. In terms of social context, The Witcher video games represent a modern and innovative Poland, moving away from historical stereotypes. By gifting a popular video game, Tusk positioned Poland as a forward-thinking country in the digital and entertainment landscapes, aligning with global trends in technology and culture.

Donald Tusk's gesture of presenting The Witcher video games to Barack Obama symbolizes an attempt at cultural diplomacy. By sharing a product that represents contemporary Polish achievements in gaming and storytelling, Tusk aimed to showcase Poland's creative industries and promote its cultural identity on the global stage. Also, by associating Poland with a successful video game franchise that has captivated international audiences, the country enhances its soft power—using culture to influence and promote a favorable national image.

Presenting a popular video game to a prominent leader also by a leader signals political message especially on recognition of contemporary cultural trends and youthful interests, potentially appealing to younger voters and constituents in both countries. The gifting of a culturally significant item resonated with the idea of strengthening U.S.-Poland relations. By presenting a product of Polish origin to a prominent figure like Obama, Tusk emphasized the importance of cultural ties alongside political alliances.

Comparing Policies in Japan and Poland

The intersection of video games and foreign policy has emerged as a powerful tool for cultural diplomacy and soft power projection in various countries. As global pop culture becomes increasingly shaped by interactive media, countries recognize the value of video games not only as entertainment but also as instruments for showcasing national identity, fostering international relations, and influencing perceptions abroad.

Japan and Poland represent diverse approaches to integrating video games into their foreign policy agendas. Japan's playful and symbolic representation of national pride is evident in former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's appearance as Mario at the 2016 Rio Olympics. Similar with Poland as it used The Witcher series as a cultural gift to then-President Obama.

The two examples demonstrate varying degrees of success and different methods of engaging global audiences. By comparing the policy factors that make both countries face growth in Video Games sector this analysis reveals the nuanced ways in which each country's gaming industry contributes to its foreign policy objectives and even dives further into factors that influence their decisions.

Table 1 Comparison Table between Japan and Poland

No	Policy	Japan	Poland
1	Cultural Awareness	Cool Japan initiatives that promote Japanese Culture through cultural exports such as anime and video games.	Programs to promote Polish culture through literature, design, visual arts, music, and film including the game industry.
2	Institutional Support	Cabinet Office and multiple cabinet's ministries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Development and Technology • Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP) • Ministry of Culture and National Heritage • European Union
3	Partnership Platform	The Public-Private Partnership platform was enacted in 2015 for overseas promotion, matching forums and seminars.	Multi-level partnership of Poland and European Union.
4	Financial Support	Cool Japan Fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Resolutions • Act on financial support for the production of cultural video games.

Cultural elements are important when discussing soft power in foreign policy. That is why countries such as Japan and Poland have policies to support their cultural elements such as symbolism, values, or figures into their digital contents including video games content. Japan

has Cool Japan initiatives from their government aims to spread Japanese values and popular culture to the world, and to contribute to Japan's domestic economy. The strategy focuses on developing the cultural industry, such as movies, drama series, animation series, and manga. It is a prime example of a policy designed to promote Japan's pop culture globally (Alfarisy et al., 2021). The Cool Japan initiative serves as a textbook example of soft power, where culture, ideology, and diplomacy influence international relations. Since the 1980s, long before Cool Japan turned into an official government run project, Japan had been spreading its influence around the global (Princen, 2024).

The Cool Japan initiative, a multifaceted endeavor to leverage popular culture for national economic and diplomatic benefit, involves the collaboration of numerous state actors. Key participants include the Cabinet Office, and several ministries such as Economy, Trade and Industry; Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries; Internal Affairs and Communications; Foreign Affairs; and the Japan Tourism Agency. This coordinated approach, encompassing culinary promotion, tourism, content development, and business support, underscores the initiative's holistic strategy (Cabinet Office, n.d.-c).

To further streamline and enhance these efforts, the Cool Japan Public-Private Partnership Platform was established in 2015 (Cabinet Office, n.d.-a). This platform represents a significant collaboration between public and private sectors, uniting twelve ministries, five public institutions, and forty-five private companies to synergistically leverage resources and expertise. The platform's activities—overseas promotional events, seminars, and networking forums—are designed to boost the global visibility and appeal of Japanese cultural products, services, and creative content, strengthening the overall impact and effectiveness of the Cool Japan initiative. This coordinated approach, combining governmental policy with private sector innovation and expertise, reflects a strategic approach to promoting Japan's cultural soft power on the world stage. The success of this model may provide valuable insights for other nations seeking to leverage their cultural assets for economic and diplomatic advancement.

It is also granted funds for the gaming industry in Japan. Officially launched in 2013 with an initial ¥50 billion investment over two decades, aimed to strategically promote and fund initiatives showcasing Japanese culture internationally (Princen, 2024). This initiative targeted multiple objectives, including increasing tourism, attracting foreign investment, and expanding global market access for Japanese products. Anime and manga, which already enjoyed considerable international popularity, were central focuses, alongside support for other key cultural industries such as fashion, cuisine, and technology, including video games. This substantial, long-term investment underscores the Japanese government's commitment to leveraging its cultural assets for economic and diplomatic gain.

Meanwhile, Poland also has similar framework of policies in supporting its video games industry. The Government of Poland also encourages the business actors in gaming industry to promote national culture. Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage develops programs in the digitalization sector, especially to promote Polish culture through literature, design, visual arts, music, and film including the game industry. Therefore, several game companies in Poland have received financial support for developing the Polish game industry by integrating cultural elements with concrete results in the games industry such as *The Witcher*, *CyberPunk*, and others (Sulistiyandari, 2024).

Beside the support from Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, few other agencies and ministries also responsible with Poland's gaming industry such as Ministry of Development and Technology, also the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP) are responsible for supporting the international promotion of Poland's video game industry (Marszałkowski et al., 2023). Not only on national level from ministries and agencies, but the European Union also plays a significant role in developing video games industry across the continent including in Poland. In 'November 2022 resolution on e-sports and video games', Parliament called on the Commission and the Council to acknowledge the value of the video game ecosystem in the

EU by coming up with a long-term European video game strategy on many issues such as funding, investment boosting, consumer protection (Laaninen & Wessman, 2023). It can be seen that the video games industry across Europe including Poland is the result of multi-level actors' collaboration from national ministries level, state actor, and regional organizations such as EU.

In Poland, financial support for the video game industry extends beyond European Parliament resolutions to encompass direct governmental initiatives. The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, through the "Act on financial support for the production of cultural video games," provides financial incentives to developers, specifically focusing on tax exemptions for games that promote Polish or European cultural heritage. This legislative action seeks to foster a more favorable environment for Polish video game development, stimulating both domestic production and international collaboration (Gebel, 2018).

The Contextual Analysis of Japan and Poland

This study also employs contextual analysis to provide a nuanced understanding of how video games function as tools of foreign policy, comparing and contrasting the approaches of Japan and Poland. A purely comparative analysis of policies risks overlooking crucial contextual factors shaping the development and strategic deployment of video games especially in international events like Olympics or official state visits. By incorporating social, political, and cultural contexts, this research aims to illuminate the underlying motivations and situations. This approach moves beyond a simple comparison of policies to explain why specific approaches were adopted, revealing the interplay of domestic priorities, international relations, and cultural values in shaping the use of video games as instruments of foreign policy. The growth of the video game industry has created a fertile ground for using video games as a tool for foreign policy. Both Japan and Poland leveraged the already existing popularity and widespread engagement with video games in their respective countries. This popularity isn't just a matter of entertainment; it's a cultural phenomenon with significant reach and influence on different demographics.

The massive success of the Mario Bros. franchise, spanning decades and numerous platforms, showcases the long-standing cultural integration of video games within Japanese society. This provides a built-in audience receptive to the government's use of Mario as a symbol of national identity and pride. While Poland doesn't have the same historical depth in video game development as Japan, the immense global success of The Witcher series demonstrates a rapid ascent to international recognition. This success underscores the potential of video games to rapidly project national culture onto the world stage.

In a political context, the strategic use of video games by the prime ministers of both countries in prominent events highlights the powerful symbolic potential of these games within a political framework. Shinzo Abe's appearance in a Mario costume during the closing ceremony of the 2016 Rio Olympics served as a highly visible and symbolic announcement of Japan hosting the next Olympics. It was a clever way to connect with a global audience through a familiar and beloved character, enhancing Japan's image as a modern and technologically advanced nation. This act wasn't accidental; it was a carefully orchestrated political move aligning national pride with a universally recognized cultural icon. Donald Tusk's gifting of The Witcher 2 to President Barack Obama further showcases how cultural artifacts can be leveraged within international diplomacy. This gesture was designed to project Poland's growing influence in the creative industry while forging a connection with a major global leader and strengthening international relations.

Finally, in terms of cultural context shows that both Japan and Poland demonstrate how video games can effectively act as tools of "soft power," influencing international perception and strengthening national image without direct coercion. Japan's pop-culture dominance, cemented through iconic franchises and cultural exports, showcases the long-term impact of

local innovation and marketing strategies (Picard, n.d). Video games in Japan are not only a form of entertainment but a cultural product deeply intertwined with the country's identity. This success is not incidental but results from deliberate government policies that support creative industries.

Japan's strategy for promoting its pop culture, including video games (the "Cool Japan" initiative), illustrates the intentional integration of cultural products into foreign policy. The government's support of the gaming industry and the use of iconic characters like Mario highlight the deliberate effort to leverage a globally recognized cultural product for national goals. Poland used *The Witcher's* growing popularity to showcase its creative industry and cultural richness to the international community. The game's success, built upon Polish mythology and lore, promotes a positive national image and fosters global interest in Polish culture.

The contextual analysis reveals that the use of video games as instruments of foreign policy by Japan and Poland is deeply interwoven with their social, political, and cultural landscapes. The governments' strategic choices reflect careful consideration of cultural significance, global reach, and political messaging. The success of these strategies demonstrates the effectiveness of video games as tools to strengthen national identity, foster international relations, and enhance a nation's soft power.

CONCLUSION

Video games represent a form of new media that serves multiple purposes, from entertainment to marketing tools and more (Akbar & Kusumasari, 2021). Their influence steadily grows, impacting various aspects, from personal lives to international affairs. Just like individuals are using video games for personal use, policymakers, decision-makers, and state actors are also using video games as tools to achieve national interests.

This study has explored the role of video games as tools for foreign policy through the cases of Japan's Mario Bros. and Poland's *The Witcher*, examining how these cultural products have been integrated into their respective foreign policy strategies. The public policy approach of this research by using comparative analysis and policy learning has found that it is important to have institutional support, policy models, and strategic partnership. This research reveals distinct yet convergent approaches highlighting the crucial role of national policy in fostering the gaming industry's growth and leveraging its cultural influence globally.

Japan's approach is characterized by a long-term, multi-faceted strategy embodied in the "Cool Japan" initiative. This initiative integrates government funding (Cool Japan Fund), public-private partnerships (Public-Private Partnership Platform), and institutional support (Cabinet Office and multiple ministries) to promote Japanese culture, including video games, as a significant part of its soft power strategy. Poland, while possessing a shorter history of significant gaming industry development, exhibits a more targeted approach. Key policies include financial support through acts such as the "Act on financial support for the production of cultural video games" and collaborative efforts with the EU and other multi-level partnerships. Both countries, however, demonstrate a common thread: active government involvement in supporting the video game industry's financial success and cultural promotion.

Shinzo Abe's use of the Mario Bros. costume in the Rio Olympics closing ceremony and Donald Tusk's gifting of *The Witcher 2* to President Obama represent distinct but equally strategic applications of video games within foreign policy. Abe's action stemmed from a larger context of promoting Japan's "Cool Japan" initiative, leveraging Mario's global recognition to subtly project a modern, innovative image of Japan and generating excitement surrounding the upcoming Tokyo Olympics. The timing and symbolic nature of his actions were highly calculated political decisions rooted in long-term national strategies. Tusk's decision, though not as heavily publicized in the long-term national strategy, displayed a keen understanding of Poland's rising cultural influence in the gaming world. The gifting of *The Witcher 2* aimed to

showcase Poland's creative potential and enhance its international image through this significant cultural export, thereby demonstrating strategic soft power. The decisions of both leaders were driven by the understanding that video games, when strategically deployed, can be powerful tools for projecting national identity, building international relationships, and enhancing a country's global image.

The case study shows that Japan and Poland have effectively utilised video games as part of their broader soft power foreign policy, allowing them to promote their national culture, values, and identities to a global audience in ways that transcend traditional diplomatic efforts. With its globally recognised franchise Mario Bros., Japan has successfully embedded subtle elements of Japanese identity into a universally appealing game, aligning with the country's long-term Cool Japan initiative. Similarly, Poland's *The Witcher* taps into deep cultural narratives rooted in Polish folklore, offering an authentic representation of Polish culture that has captured the imagination of a global audience. Through strategic partnerships and cross-media adaptations like the Netflix series, *The Witcher* has become a flagship cultural export, amplifying Poland's cultural influence internationally. In conclusion, Japan and Poland have demonstrated how video games can serve as influential tools of pop-culture foreign policy, helping countries project their cultural narratives and values internationally.

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