



Summary of the Conference „Gaming and Foreign Policy“

Event Date: June 13th, 2023, 12:00 – 18:30

Event Venue: ALEX Offener Kanal Berlin

Stream available via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEG7ZgheckY> (in German)

On June 13th, 2023, the Foundation for Digital Games Culture invited all interested to the conference “Gaming and Foreign Policy” at the studio of ALEX Offener Kanal Berlin. The conference took place as part of the pilot project “Auswärtsspiel”, funded by the Federal Foreign Office.

During this event, experts from foreign policy, the gaming industry, academia as well as civil society identified and discussed the points of contact between video games and public diplomacy. A [catalogue of guiding questions](#) served as the basis for the vibrant exchange during the conference. The document was developed by an interdisciplinary panel of experts as part of project “Auswärtsspiel” and published in March 2023.

After Çiğdem Uzunoğlu, Managing Director of the Foundation for Digital Games Culture, opened the conference and Dr. Peter Ptassek, Commissioner for Strategic Communication at the Federal Foreign Office, as well as Felix Falk, Managing Director of game – The German Games Industry Association, addressed the audience, the event began with a keynote on the power of narratives in the field of Public Diplomacy by Dr. Hendrik Ohnesorge, Managing Director of the Center for Global Studies at the University of Bonn. Therein, he argued how intensely narratives influence the persuasiveness of a political argument and consequently, how international relations are shaped by concurring, contrasting, or entangled political narratives.

Following this impulse, Lena Falkenhagen, author of multiple novels and games, gave a talk on the power of responsibility in context of serious digital games. Most of all, she illustrated how games can sensitize players for action dilemmas and are therefore powerful tools regarding choice, agency and responsibility – also in a (foreign) policy context.

During the following panel “Gaming for Public Diplomacy & World Peace”, Dr. Peter Ptassek, Çiğdem Uzunoğlu, Dr. Felix Zimmermann, program manager for games culture, civic education and extremism at the Federal Agency for Civic Education discussed with Ata Sergey Nowak, co-founder and CEO of Torpor Games the potential that video games hold to mediate foreign policy narratives, themes and practices. Moderated by Daniel Budiman, the panellists grounded their discussion on the [catalogue of 10 guiding questions](#) and traced the mediative power of games for public diplomacy. Yet they also raised critical questions and stressed the need to anchor discourses about (foreign) policy more firmly within and lead them in dialogue with the gaming communities.

After the lunch break, the conference program continued with a “gaming session”. This is a format where two experts lead their discussion in reference to a video game that is simultaneously played. Referencing the RPG-game “Greedfall” (Spiders & Focus Interactive, 2019) and its story about a young diplomat that must navigate different parties and their interests, Lena Falkenhagen and Mirko Kruppa, Head of Division Citizen’s Dialogue and Public Diplomacy at the Federal Foreign Office, discussed the game’s main narratives, aesthetics and immersive moments of choice and responsibility. Moderated by Sofia Kats, the experts illustrated how the game world, even though set in a fantasy world, evokes motives and topics which players can interpret in context of their real-world experience of diplomacy or processes of decision making for foreign policy.

This gaming session was followed by a panel discussion on “Diversity in Games & Feminist Foreign Policy”. Focusing, among other aspects, on the three R’s of feminist foreign policy – namely representation, resources and rights – the panel tackled questions, prejudices and remaining blank spots e.g. in regard to representation of marginalized groups in foreign policy making yet also the gaming industry as well as game diegeses. The discussion was led by Lars Janssen, Vice President Worldwide Studios & Talent at PLAION, Miriam Mukalazi, PhD researcher at the university of Cologne and Franziska Zeiner, co-founder and CEO at Fein Games, moderated by Çiğdem Uzunoğlu.



Following the panel, another gaming session took place. As the title “politics of power and postcolonialism in games” suggests, the panellists Dr. Maria Ketzmerick, academic councillor at the Department of African Sociology at the University of Bayreuth, and Riad Djemili, co-founder of Maschinen-Mensch, applied the catalogue of guiding questions to the game “Curious Expedition 2” (Maschinen-Mensch & Thunderful Games, 2021). Thereby, they traced foreign policy motives and topics within the game setting from a postcolonial perspective. Especially the narratives of exploration and the representation of contact with indigenous collectives formed the centre of this gaming session, again moderated by Sofia Kats.

The gaming session “Dystopian Game Worlds and Climate Foreign Policy”, then, took place as the last item on the conference agenda. Referencing the game “The Wandering Village” (Stray Fawn & Whisper Games, 2022), the expert speakers Prof. Thomas Bremer, professor of game design at the University of Applied Sciences Berlin, and Tim Bosch, project manager “Dialogue Process on a Strategy for Foreign Climate Policy” at the Center for Climate and Foreign Policy, traced motives of climate change and dystopian narratives in the game setting. Moderated by Christian Huberts, project manager at the Foundation for Digital Games Culture, the session focused, among other aspects, on the significance of collaboration and empathy.

Closing the conference program, Daniel Budiman and Dr. Tabea Widmann, project lead of “Auswärtsspiel” at the Foundation for Digital Games Culture, reflected on the day’s discussions. They also formulated further desiderata for the contact sphere of games and foreign policy. As the conference illustrated, both spheres – actors of foreign policy decision making and the political sphere as well as the gaming industry and its communities – welcome dialogue and show curiosity to broaden the common interface. Yet it became also that there is further need for even more inclusive formats that shift exchange closer to the gaming communities themselves. The modding competition in context of the pilot project “Auswärtsspiel” that will take place in Berlin from November 9th to 13th 2023 can serve as a first impulse to create such a space. It invites all interested to develop their own mods in context of foreign political topics. For further information on the competition and the project “Auswärtsspiel”, see the [project homepage](#).

