

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Children's games and global politics: Masculinity, militarism, and the warrior hero

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed growing attention to popular culture's role in the reproduction, negotiation, and contestation of global political life. This article extends this work by focusing on games targeted at young children as a neglected, yet rich site in which global politics is constituted. Drawing specifically on the *Heroes of History* card game in the Top Trumps franchise, I offer three original contributions. First, I demonstrate how children's games contribute to the everyday (re)production of international relations through the contingent storying of global politics. *Heroes of History's* narrative, visual organisation, and gameplay mechanics, I argue, construct world politics as an unchanging realm of conflict through their shared reproduction of a valorised, masculinised figure of the warrior hero. This construction, moreover, does important political work in insulating young players from the realities and generative structures of violence. Second, the polysemy of children's games means they also provide opportunity for counter-hegemonic 'readings' of the world even in seemingly straightforward examples of the genre such as this. Third, engaging with such games as meaningful objects of analysis opens important new space for dialogue across International Relations literatures on children, popular culture, gender, the everyday, and heroism in world politics.

Keywords: games; heroism; international politics; masculinity; Top Trumps; warriors

Introduction

International Relations (IR), as an academic discipline, has only recently begun to reckon with the political importance of children's experiences, understandings, narratives, and artefacts. One reason for this neglect is the state-centricity of the discipline's traditional theoretical moorings, and the lack of space afforded therein to political actors who do not readily fit within its established ontological frameworks.¹ IR's traditionally statist ontology both draws on and reproduces a narrow (or 'high') conception of politics that emphasises the stereotypically adult domains of statecraft, diplomacy, and war.² As a result, where children are present in the stories our field tells about global politics, they tend to be delimited to a narrow range of subject positions:³ victims of humanitarian

¹ Alison M. S. Watson, 'Children and international relations: A new site of knowledge?', *Review of International Studies*, 3:2 (2006), pp. 237–50 (pp. 254–5).

² Anitta Kynsilehto, 'Book review essay: Problematizing relations between children and politics', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 42:3 (2007), pp. 363–6 (p. 363).

³ Lee Jarvis and Nick Robinson, 'Oh help! Oh no! The international politics of *The Gruffalo*: Children's picturebooks and world politics', *Review of International Studies*, 50:1 (2024), pp. 58–78 (pp. 61–2).

emergencies,⁴ for instance, or militarised child soldiers coerced into combat.⁵ This compressive move matters, in part, because it de-emphasises the agency and experiences of children, distracting attention from the things that may matter to children as global political subjects.

In this article, I contribute to a series of recent efforts at addressing this neglect through centring children's experiences, artefacts, and encounters. I do so specifically through an original analysis of the children's card game *Heroes of History: Leaders of the Ancient World*⁶, one iteration of the extremely successful and enduringly popular Top Trumps franchise. Three arguments are made.

First, *Heroes of History* demonstrates how games targeted even at very young children contribute to the everyday (re)production of IR in specific, contingent, and therefore contestable ways. This particular game, I argue, stories the dynamics and drivers of world politics around a very particular and inherently masculinised figure of the warrior hero typified by the heavily muscled, heavily armed, battle-ready bodies of the samurai, Vikings, gladiators, and Huns who populate its cards. The warrior hero motif – evident in the game's narrative content, visual organisation, and gameplay mechanics – constructs the world as a timeless realm of courage, conflict, and danger, valorising violent combat and thereby contributing to the everyday celebration of militarism. This valorisation matters, in part, because it forecloses questions around the legitimacy, realities, and generative structural conditions of political violence.

Second, the polysemy of children's games and the creativeness of play as a social practice mean games such as this also provide opportunity for counter-hegemonic 'readings' of the world even where they are seemingly dominated by one organising motif or construction.⁷ This is evident, in this instance, in *Heroes of History*'s inclusion of characters, attributes, and tropes drawing on archetypes of heroism seemingly quite distinct from the masculinised warrior hero who dominates the game. Although the disruptive potential of these alternatives is diminished by the game's principal motif, their inclusion, I argue, still facilitates valuable opportunity for reflection on the contingent and relational nature of warrior heroism in the game and beyond, including in relation to its potential 'decoding' by young players.

Third, the article also demonstrates how engaging such games as meaningful objects of analysis opens productive new opportunity for dialogue between a range of IR sub-fields and literatures, including contemporary work on children, popular culture, gender, the everyday, and heroism in world politics. Most immediately, the article seeks to develop scholarship on the ludic construction of international politics⁸. This literature has been important in demonstrating how games – as assemblages of rules, images, and narratives – depict or 'code' world politics in specific and contestable ways.⁹ By interrogating *Heroes of History* – a disarmingly simple card game marketed at very young players – this article extends the focus of that work which is overwhelmingly dominated by a concern with the nuances of very complex games aimed at much older players. By focusing on games as artefacts of world politics, moreover, the article also extends recent work on children and childhood in IR. Although important contemporary literature has begun to address the discipline's historical neglect of children's lives and things – including through analysis of picture books

⁴E.g. Helen Brocklehurst, 'The state of play: Securities of childhood–insecurities of children', *Critical Studies on Security*, 3:1 (2015), pp. 29–46; Helen Berents, 'Politics, policy-making and the presence of images of suffering children', *International Affairs*, 96:3 (2020), pp. 593–608.

⁵E.g. Jennifer Hyndman, 'The question of "the political" in critical geopolitics: Querying the "child soldier" in the "war on terror"', *Political Geography*, 29:5 (2010), pp. 247–55; Katrina Lee-Koo, 'Horror and hope: (Re)presenting militarised children in global North–South relations', *Third World Quarterly*, 32:4 (2011), pp. 725–42; Mai Anh Nguyen, 'Little people do little things': The motivation and recruitment of Viet Cong child soldiers', *Critical Studies on Security*, 10:1 (2022), pp. 30–42.

⁶Winning Moves UK Ltd, *Top Trumps: Heroes of History - Leaders of the Ancient World* (London: 1999). All subsequent references to *Heroes of History* and its characters refer to this game and its component pieces.

⁷See also Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/decoding', in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (eds), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), pp. 117–27 (pp. 123–7).

⁸Thomas Ambrosio and Jonathan Ross, 'Performing the Cold War through the "the best board game on the planet": The ludic geopolitics of *Twilight Struggle*', *Geopolitics*, 28:2 (2023), pp. 846–78 (p. 872).

⁹Jason Dittmer, 'Playing geopolitics: Utopian simulations and subversions of international relations', *GeoJournal*, 80 (2015), pp. 909–23 (p. 910).

and films – games, and by extension play, remain almost entirely absent in this work. This matters, not least, because of the longevity and significance of games as a site of play within childhood experiences and learning.¹⁰

Heroes of History provides a useful exemplar through which to develop these arguments for two primary reasons. First is the game's explicitly pedagogical ambitions, with its encouraging of potential players to 'Test your knowledge of history'.¹¹ Such ambitions are in keeping with the franchise's wider aspirations, as current publisher, Winning Moves, establishes on its website:

We believe that games are more than just entertainment. They are a way to bring people together, create memories, and inspire creativity and learning. That's why we are dedicated to designing and producing games that are not only fun to play but also have educational and social value.¹²

In common with better-studied artefacts such as school textbooks,¹³ these pedagogical aspirations furnish the game with an epistemic authority as it both draws on and reproduces wider sociopolitical discourses around the causes and legitimacy of violence. Particularly relevant here is the game's organisation around ostensibly factual biographical narrative and statistical indicators.¹⁴ Thus, as research on 'everyday' and 'vernacular' global politics has shown in relation to different artefacts and experiences, seemingly banal objects such as children's games do important constitutive work in shaping how the drivers and dynamics of global politics are understood, negotiated, and contested.¹⁵

A second reason for using this game as a point of entry into the world-making power of children's games is the international prominence and success of the Top Trumps franchise in which *Heroes of History* sits. Although reach and significance are not coterminous, the availability and extensive consumption of artefacts such as television shows, Hollywood films, and video games clearly contribute to their persuasiveness as carriers and creators of 'commonsense cultural resources',¹⁶ hence the frequency of rhetorical references to metrics such as audience numbers or sales figures within work on popular culture and world politics.¹⁷ In this vein, Top Trumps' importance may be adduced, amongst other things, from: its longevity, with over 40 years having passed

¹⁰E.g. Peter Gray, 'What exactly is play, and why is it such a powerful vehicle for learning?', *Topics in Language Disorders*, 37:3 (2017), pp. 217–28. There is an extensive literature on the biological and other functions of play. For a useful overview and an exploration of play's connection to creativity, see Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin, *Play, Playfulness, Creativity, and Innovation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pulling my attention to this work.

¹¹This combination of education and gaming is compounded through associated initiatives such as the opportunity for schools to register for 'Top Trumps clubs' in order to enjoy free packs for 'kids ... to learn heaps of amazing facts and stats through Top Trumps', Winning Moves (n.d. b) 'Top Trumps School Club', available at: <https://toptrumps.com/pages/schools-club>.

¹²Winning Moves (n.d. a) 'About us', available at: <https://toptrumps.com/pages/about-us>.

¹³E.g. Tobias Ide, 'Terrorism in the textbook: A comparative analysis of terrorism discourses in Germany, India, Kenya and the United States based on school textbooks', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 30:1 (2017), pp. 44–66; Kieran Ford, 'This violence good, that violence bad: Normative and state-centric discourses in British school textbooks', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12:4 (2019), pp. 693–714.

¹⁴See also Lorenzo Fioramonti, *How Numbers Rule the World: The Use and Abuse of Statistics in Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2014).

¹⁵See, e.g., Nils Bubandt, 'Vernacular security: The politics of feeling safe in global, national and local worlds', *Security Dialogue*, 36:3 (2005), pp. 275–96; Adam Crawford and Steven Hutchinson, 'Mapping the contours of 'everyday security': Time, space and emotion', *British Journal of Criminology*, 56:6 (2016), pp. 1184–202; Lee Jarvis, 'Toward a vernacular security studies: Origins, interlocutors, contributions, and challenges', *International Studies Review*, 21:1 (2019), pp. 107–26; Jonna Nyman, 'The everyday life of security: Capturing space, practice, and affect', *International Political Sociology*, 15:3 (2021), pp. 313–37.

¹⁶Christina Rowley and Jutta Weldes, 'The evolution of international security studies and the everyday: Suggestions from the Buffyverse', *Security Dialogue*, 43:6 (2012), pp. 513–30 (p. 514).

¹⁷E.g. Jutta Weldes, 'Going cultural: Star Trek, state action, and popular culture', *Millennium*, 28:1 (1999), pp. 117–34 (pp. 119–20); Nick Robinson, 'Beyond the shadow of 9/11? Videogames 20 years after 9/11', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 14:4 (2021), pp. 455–8 (p. 455).

since the game's first publication; its social standing through its history of collaboration with charities and learned societies;¹⁸ its popularity as a template for learning resources across different age groups;¹⁹ its dexterity, with the manufacturing and marketing of bespoke sets for specific countries and of digital translations for electronic devices; its familiarity, given the brand's usage as a rhetorical shorthand for statistical comparison; and its ability to generate significant online fan commentary and discussion.²⁰

The remainder of the article proceeds in three sections. I begin by situating my discussion within contemporary IR literature on (i) games, gaming, and global politics; and (ii) children and global politics. The latter's centring of children – a variable and socially constructed category²¹ – within IR helps to address the former's emphasis on the complexities of sophisticated and highly detailed games targeted at older players. The former literature's focus on gaming, in turn, provides tools with which to expand the latter's emphasis on children's experiences and stories. The second section then introduces recent research on heroism and international politics from which the article's conceptual framework is drawn.²² Here, I engage with this scholarship's emphasis on the contingent and typically gendered character of 'heroism', and on the sociopolitical work done by constructions of heroism in different (con)texts. The third section contains the article's analysis of how this game produces and negotiates the masculine warrior hero and the implications thereof. In the article's conclusion, I explore opportunities for expanding my argument in future scholarship.

Children, games, and global politics

The discipline of IR has not been attentive to children, their experiences, or their things. Walters' recent suggestion that children 'have largely been absent from IR scholarship, despite the centrality of childhood and our understandings of it to global politics'²³ demonstrates how little has changed in the 20 years or so that have passed since prominent authors such as Alison Watson were able to observe that 'the exclusion of children, and the examination of their role, from mainstream IR discourse is an oversight that is long overdue for correction'.²⁴ As Beier summarises of the sub-field of security studies – but with wider resonance than this – children and childhood continue to suffer an 'almost complete lack of attention',²⁵ despite their centrality to so many of our core research problems and questions.

The 'almost' in Beier's summary of the foreclosing of ontological and epistemological space afforded to children within global politics is noteworthy because there are, of course, significant exceptions to this neglect. Dedicated monographs²⁶ and special issues²⁷ have attempted to problematise and address this traditional thematic exclusion, making a forceful case for greater engagement with children. Sub-disciplines such as critical geopolitics and critical security studies have begun to grapple with the unarguably political experiences, engagements, and identities of

¹⁸E.g. Zoological Society of London, 'ZSL Shop: Top Trumps London Zoo, available at: {<https://shop.zsl.org/products/top-trumps-london-zoo>}.

¹⁹E.g. Tristan MacLean et al., 'Using trump cards in school engagement and outreach', Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, available at: {<https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/BBSRC-130715-Using-trump-card-games-in-school-engagement-and-outreach.pdf>}.

²⁰E.g. BoardGameGeek, 'Top Trumps (1968)', available at: {<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/7262/top-trumps>}.

²¹Matthew C. Benwell and Peter Hopkins, 'Introducing children's and young people's critical geopolitics', in Matthew C. Benwell and Peter Hopkins (eds), *Children, Young People and Critical Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1–28 (p. 2).

²²E.g. Veronica Kitchen and Jennifer G. Mathers (eds), *Heroism and Global Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

²³Rosie Walters, 'The girl powering of global politics', *International Politics*, 61:2 (2024), pp. 361–78 (p. 361).

²⁴Watson, 'Children and international relations', p. 250.

²⁵J. Marshall Beier, 'Children, childhoods, and security studies: An introduction', *Critical Studies on Security*, 3:1 (2015), pp. 1–13 (p. 11).

²⁶E.g. Helen Brocklehurst, *Who's Afraid of Children? Children, Conflict and International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

²⁷E.g. Beier, 'Children, childhoods, and security studies.'

young people.²⁸ Work associated with ‘ludic – or playful – geopolitics’²⁹ emphasises the constitutive importance of children’s toys in making the world meaningful.³⁰ Such scholarship demonstrates, amongst other things, how ‘toys of different eras have prepared children for specific kinds of warfare, fought in particular ways fused with specific political ideologies about the meaning of war and society itself during those times.’³¹ Children’s literature – in the form of novels such as those featuring Harry Potter,³² short stories such of Paddington Bear’s adventures,³³ picture books like *The Gruffalo*,³⁴ graphic novels such as *TinTin*,³⁵ superhero comics,³⁶ and traditional fairy tales³⁷ – has also recently begun to attract serious analysis. As, indeed, have animated and other films whose markets include children of various ages,³⁸ with the Marvel superhero franchise receiving particular notice.³⁹ Often drawing inspiration from adjacent fields such as childhood studies, cultural studies, and gender studies, this work has helped to broaden and deepen the discipline of IR by expanding its gaze and pulling attention to its historical organisation around specific and contingent practices of inclusion and exclusion.⁴⁰

Notwithstanding the conceptual and empirical contributions of work such as this, the growing appetite for centring children and their artefacts in IR has yet to extend to any sustained analysis with the focus of this article: children’s *games*. This absence is unfortunate because the importance to children of games and the play they facilitate is well established in other fields. Literature on child development emphasises the role of play in ‘social and cultural learning, and emotional, cognitive and physical development’,⁴¹ and its equipping of children with knowledge and skills for engaging in (global) sociopolitical practices. Related work on play as a cultural phenomenon highlights the significance of play’s complexities in which participants are simultaneously capable of both recognising and suspending their awareness of a game’s fictional or imaginary properties.⁴² Critical here is the openness of games to different forms of play which helps to equip children with agency for understanding the social, the political, and the international: a theme that is vital

²⁸E.g. Helen Berents, ‘Children, violence, and social exclusion: Negotiation of everyday insecurity in a Colombian barrio’, *Critical Studies on Security*, 3:1 (2015), pp. 90–104.

²⁹Sean Carter, Philip Kirby, and Tara Woodyer, ‘Ludic – or playful – geopolitics’, in Matthew C. Benwell and Peter Hopkins (eds), *Children, Young People and Critical Geopolitics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 61–73 (p. 61).

³⁰Tara Woodyer and Sean Carter, ‘Domesticating the geopolitical: Rethinking popular geopolitics through play’, *Geopolitics*, 25:5 (2020), pp. 1050–74.

³¹David Machin and Theo van Leeuwen, ‘Toys as discourse: Children’s war toys and the war on terror’, *Critical Discourse Studies*, 6:1 (2009), pp. 51–63 (p. 52).

³²Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann (eds), *Harry Potter and International Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

³³Kyle Grayson, ‘How to read Paddington Bear: Liberalism and the foreign subject in *A Bear Called Paddington*’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 15:3 (2013), pp. 378–93.

³⁴Jarvis and Robinson, ‘Oh help! Oh no! The international politics of *The Gruffalo*’.

³⁵Felix Rösch, ‘“Hooray! Hooray! The end of the world has been postponed!” Politics of peace in the *Adventures of Tintin?*’, *Politics*, 34:3 (2014), pp. 225–36.

³⁶Dean Cooper-Cunningham, ‘Drawing fear of difference: Race, gender, and national identity in Ms. Marvel comics’, *Millennium*, 48:2 (2020), pp. 165–97.

³⁷Kathryn Starnes, *Fairy Tales and International Relations: A Folklorist Reading of IR Textbooks* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

³⁸E.g. Marc G. Doucet, ‘Child’s play: The political imaginary of international relations and contemporary popular children’s films’, *Global Society*, 19:3 (2005), pp. 289–306; Michelle J. Smith and Elizabeth Parsons, ‘Animating child activism: Environmentalism and class politics in Ghibli’s *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and Fox’s *Fern Gully* (1992)’, *Continuum*, 26:1 (2012), pp. 25–37.

³⁹E.g. Dina AlAwadhi and Jasson Dittmer, ‘The figure of the refugee in superhero cinema’, *Geopolitics*, 27:2 (2022), pp. 604–28; Michael McKoy, ‘Great power and great responsibility: Exploring the politics of the superhero genre’, *New Political Science*, 46:1 (2024), pp. 101–6.

⁴⁰See Annick T. R. Wibben, ‘Opening security: Recovering critical scholarship as political’, *Critical Studies on Security*, 4:2 (2016), pp. 137–53 (p. 139–42).

⁴¹Tara Woodyer, ‘Ludic geographies: Not merely child’s play’, *Geography Compass*, 6:6 (2012), pp. 313–26 (p. 314).

⁴²Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1949), pp. 7–9.

within recent efforts to increase the visibility of children in the discipline of IR.⁴³ At the same time, games also contain agency *of their own*, acting as something of a ‘proving ground’ for the global political ideas, assumptions, and values embedded within their mechanics and narratives.⁴⁴ In this sense, children’s games both represent and realise – or help to bring into being – the world and its realities,⁴⁵ drawing phenomena like war ‘closer’ to our everyday lives.⁴⁶

The discipline of IR’s hesitance in grappling with children and their experiences finds parallel in its relatively recent engagement with the (global, political) value of games as a form of popular culture. Much existing work in this area takes an explicitly pedagogical focus, concentrating on games’ didactic potential for students’ understanding of global politics, whether through in-person or digital play.⁴⁷ Such work is complemented by a growing literature on the burgeoning cultural industry of video games, which highlights the medium’s significance in the construction,⁴⁸ problematisation,⁴⁹ and reproduction of global politics,⁵⁰ while pulling attention to the industry’s aesthetic and economic power.⁵¹ Video games, in this work, are often seen to have productive *and* critical potential;⁵² as De Zamaróczy notes: ‘we can use computer games as a mirror to critically reflect on the nature of contemporary global politics [but also because they] have important constitutive effects on understandings of global politics, effects that deserve to be examined empirically.’⁵³

Although video games unquestionably dominate this sub-field,⁵⁴ recent years have seen publication of a small number of studies engaging with board and card games, and therefore methodologically closer to this article’s focus.⁵⁵ As with work concentrating on digital play, however, this scholarship remains limited through its tendency to emphasise the detail and nuance of elaborate and sophisticated games that are typically targeted at and played by older consumers. Such emphasis may be adduced from the age ratings of some of these games: the much-studied *Call of*

⁴³E.g. Brocklehurst, *Who’s Afraid of Children?*; Amanda Beattie and Gemma Bird, ‘Recognizing everyday youth agency: Advocating for a reflexive practice in everyday international relations’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:4 (2022), p. ksac060.

⁴⁴Dittmer, *Playing geopolitics*, p. 913. My thanks to the anonymous reviewers for pushing me on the argument in this paragraph. It is also important to note here that different audience-based research would be needed to explore causal connections between the game’s narratives and mechanics and the learning of specific children.

⁴⁵Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, pp. 13–14.

⁴⁶Joanna Bourke, *Wounding the World: How Military Violence and War-Play Invade Our Lives* (London: Virago, 2014). For a recent insightful treatment of play as it relates to the field of IR, see Aggie Hirst, *Politics of Play: Wargaming with the US Military* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

⁴⁷E.g. Victor Asal, ‘Playing games with international relations’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 6:3 (2005), pp. 359–73; Sarah M. Wheeler, ‘Role-playing games and simulations for international issues courses’, *Journal of Political Science Education*, 2:3 (2006), pp. 331–47; Emre Hatipoglu, Meltem Müftüler-Baç, and Teri Murphy, ‘Simulation games in teaching international relations: Insights from a multi-day, multi-stage, multi-issue simulation on Cyprus’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 15:4 (2014), pp. 394–406; Mary McCarthy, ‘The role of games and simulations to teach abstract concepts of anarchy, cooperation, and conflict in world politics’, *Journal of Political Science Education*, 10:4 (2014), pp. 400–13; Victor Asal, Inga Miller, and Charmaine N. Willis, ‘System, state, or individual: Gaming levels of analysis in international relations’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 21:1 (2020), pp. 97–107; Gregory Winger, Stephanie Ellis, and Daniel Glover, ‘Bridging the digital gap: Teaching cyber strategy and policy through a crisis simulation’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 25:2 (2024), pp. 145–63.

⁴⁸Brandon Valeriano and Philip Habel, ‘Who are the enemies? The visual framing of enemies in digital games’, *International Studies Review*, 18:3 (2016), pp. 462–86; Craig Hayden, ‘The procedural rhetorics of *Mass Effect*: Video games as argumentation in international relations’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 18:2 (2017), pp. 175–93.

⁴⁹Nick Robinson, ‘Have you won the war on terror? Military videogames and the state of American exceptionalism’, *Millennium*, 43:2 (2015), pp. 450–70.

⁵⁰E.g. Nick Robinson, ‘Videogames, persuasion and the war on terror: Escaping or embedding the military–entertainment complex?’, *Political Studies*, 60:3 (2012), pp. 504–22.

⁵¹Felix Ciutã, ‘*Call of Duty*: Playing video games with IR’, *Millennium*, 44:2 (2016), pp. 197–215.

⁵²Lee Jarvis and Nick Robinson, ‘War, time, and military videogames: Heterogeneities and critical potential’, *Critical Military Studies*, 7:2 (2021), pp. 192–211.

⁵³Nicolas de Zamaróczy, ‘Are we what we play? Global politics in historical strategy computer games’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 18:2 (2017), pp. 155–74 (p. 155).

⁵⁴See also Aggie Hirst, ‘Play in(g) international theory’, *Review of International Studies*, 45:5 (2019), pp. 891–914 (p. 892).

⁵⁵E.g. Mark B. Salter, ‘Gaming world politics: Meaning of play and world structure’, *International Political Sociology*, 5:4 (2011), pp. 453–6; Ambrosio and Ross, ‘Performing the Cold War’.

Duty franchise,⁵⁶ for instance, has an 18+ age rating, while the board games *Diplomacy* and *Risk* have suggested age ratings of 12+ and 10+, respectively. The focus is evident, moreover, in the explicit commentary on global processes or events within those games that tend to attract most analysis,⁵⁷ and in their marketing around claims to historical or other verisimilitude.⁵⁸ Although such authenticities offer important evidence of games' constitutive importance for their players' (global) political imaginaries,⁵⁹ the focus in existing literature on complex and detailed ludic artefacts means that this work risks overlooking the political and social work of ostensibly far simpler (and, because of their elegance, perhaps more powerful) games such as *Heroes of History*.

Games – like all texts and all artefacts – always simplify 'reality' in some way: doing so is a condition of their playability. *Heroes of History*, specifically, derives its own simplicity from the well-known Top Trumps model, combining strategy and chance within a very accessible set of rules, gameplay mechanics, and material pieces. As detailed further below, each of the game's 30 cards functions as a piece in the game and as a brief biographical introduction to – and pedagogical resource on – an identified 'hero', such as Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, or Genghis Khan. Such simplicity is important – for the purposes of this article – because it demonstrates how discourses of global politics are embedded in even very humble sites of everyday (playful) interaction.⁶⁰ Taking a game like this seriously, therefore, extends the analytical attention afforded to nuance and complexity within often very sophisticated artefacts in work on games in IR.

This particular game's ludic simplicity also presents useful methodological opportunity because it enables simultaneous exploration of the work done by both *narratus* (story) and *ludus* (gameplay)⁶¹ in its construction of international politics.⁶² The game's descriptive biographies and visualisations of its 'heroes' facilitate its reading as 'a geopolitical text'⁶³ that seeks – quite purposefully – to inform its players about world politics. At the same time, *Heroes of History's* depiction of the world is a product of its ludic properties as a game that allows its players to play with ostensible drivers of global politics such as army size and the ferocity of specific figures.⁶⁴ *Heroes of History*, here, is relatively unusual in that its descriptive (and explicitly political) narrative – on the nature of heroism – has limited bearing on its gameplay mechanics. The game can be played and won whilst ignoring the biographical and visual representations of the heroes. And yet, as I will show, its biographical snapshots and cartoon illustrations play a vital role in explaining and justifying the selection of the game's heroes.

Heroism, masculinity, and militarism in international relations

To extend the aforementioned scholarship on children, games, and world politics, the remainder of this article explores how *Heroes of History* constructs IR as a very specific space of militarised, masculinised heroism. This construction is important, in part, because – despite its prominence in the factual and fictional stories we tell about global politics – the 'hero' trope has been largely neglected in the discipline of IR until very recent efforts to unpack its emergence and sociopolitical functions.⁶⁵ Like so many of our most powerful terms, heroism 'is a concept that is widely

⁵⁶E.g. Ciută, 'Call of Duty'; Daniel Bos, 'Answering the call of duty: Everyday encounters with the popular geopolitics of military-themed videogames', *Political Geography*, 63 (2018), pp. 54–64.

⁵⁷Marcus Schulzke, 'Military videogames and the future of ideological warfare', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19:3 (2017), pp. 609–26 (p. 610).

⁵⁸Mark B. Salter, 'The geographical imaginations of video games: *Diplomacy*, *Civilization*, *America's Army* and *Grand Theft Auto IV*', *Geopolitics*, 16:2 (2011), pp. 359–88 (p. 369).

⁵⁹Salter, 'The geographical imaginations of video games'.

⁶⁰See also Nyman, 'The everyday life of security'.

⁶¹Ambrosio and Ross, 'Performing the Cold War', p. 847.

⁶²For a recent overview of IR work on narrative, see Naeem Inayatullah and Elizabeth Dauphine (eds), *Narrative Global Politics: Theory, History and the Personal in International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

⁶³Bos, 'Answering the call of duty', p. 56.

⁶⁴See also Ambrosio and Ross, 'Performing the Cold War', p. 847.

⁶⁵Especially Kitchen and Mathers, *Heroism and Global Politics*.

used but rarely defined ... filled with complexities and contradictions.⁶⁶ It is a concept with origins that stretch back to classical mythology,⁶⁷ and one that has become increasingly associated with specific psychological characteristics such as agency, courage, resilience, and selflessness.⁶⁸ Such traits are, of course, readily apparent in the superheroes such as Captain America who populate contemporary cinema and other screens.⁶⁹

Notwithstanding the prominence of these connotations, caution is needed when attempting to discuss heroism around a fixed menu of psychological or behavioural characteristics. In the first instance, heroism is a social construction that is always inflected by historical, political, and cultural sensibilities, and, as such, one that is intensely variable across time and space.⁷⁰ Heroism, therefore, should be seen as 'publicly situated'⁷¹ in that it draws on and reproduces contingent social ideals while relying upon recognition by relevant audiences for its existence.⁷² Second, even within relatively bounded contexts, heroism tends to function as a heterogeneous and evolving phenomenon that draws upon different constructions with their own assumptions and inflections.⁷³ This is particularly pronounced at times of social dislocation, where changing social mores may mean that 'the same heroic life or heroic action may be interpreted differently over time as the identity of the political community the hero is said to represent is negotiated and shifts.'⁷⁴

The heterogeneity of heroism as a political category means it is helpful to discuss it around archetypes or ideal-typical interpretive models.⁷⁵ The most prominent and durable of these is undoubtedly that of the 'warrior hero':⁷⁶ 'the standard [perhaps] by which we judge other forms of heroism.'⁷⁷ Although, again, socially contingent and fluid, the figure of the warrior hero has international and historical significance, having 'been reproduced across a multitude of cultures and histories, and includes, but is not exhaustive of, the Spartan, the gladiator, the Viking, the shinobi, the samurai, the Massai warrior, or the Aztec Jaguar and eagle warriors.'⁷⁸ Notwithstanding important differences here, family resemblances clearly exist across incarnations of this archetype, summarised by Woodward as follows:

The warrior hero is physically fit and powerful. He is mentally strong and unemotional. He is capable of both solitary, individual pursuit of his goals, and self-denying contribution towards the work of the team. He's also a bit of a hero with a knack for picking up girls and is resolutely heterosexual. He is brave, adventurous, and prepared to take risks.⁷⁹

⁶⁶Veronica Kitchen and Jennifer G. Mathers, 'Introduction', in Kitchen and Mathers, *Heroism and Global Politics*, pp. 1–20 (p. 2).

⁶⁷Ari Kohen, *Heroism: Classical Philosophy and the Concept of the Hero* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

⁶⁸George R. Goethals and Scott T. Allison, 'Making heroes: The construction of courage, competence, and virtue', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 46 (2012), pp. 183–235; Kitchen and Mathers, 'Introduction', p. 5.

⁶⁹Julian Schmid, '(Captain) America in crisis: Popular digital culture and the negotiation of Americanness', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33:5 (2020), pp. 690–712 (p. 695).

⁷⁰Kitchen and Mathers, 'Introduction', p. 4.

⁷¹Kevin Partridge, 'Everyday heroics: Motivating masculine protection in the private security industry', in Kitchen and Mathers, *Heroism and Global Politics*, pp. 60–80 (p. 63).

⁷²Partridge, 'Everyday heroics', p. 63.

⁷³Nataliya Danilova and Ekaterina Kolpinskaya, 'The politics of heroes through the prism of popular heroism', *British Politics*, 15:2 (2020), pp. 178–200.

⁷⁴Veronica Kitchen, 'Heroism and the construction of political community', in Kitchen and Mathers, *Heroism and Global Politics*, pp. 21–35 (p. 27).

⁷⁵See also Kristian Frisk, 'What makes a hero? Theorising the social structuring of heroism', *Sociology*, 53:1 (2019), pp. 87–103 (p. 89).

⁷⁶Kitchen and Mathers, 'Introduction', pp. 8–9.

⁷⁷Jennifer G. Mathers, 'Medals and American military masculinity after 9/11', in Kitchen and Mathers, *Heroism and Global Politics*, pp. 36–59 (p. 39).

⁷⁸Nicole Wegner, 'Helpful heroes and the political utility of militarized masculinities', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 23:1 (2021), pp. 5–26 (p. 9).

⁷⁹Rachel Woodward, 'Warrior heroes and little green men: Soldiers, military training, and the construction of rural masculinities', *Rural Sociology*, 65:4 (2000), pp. 640–57 (pp. 643–4).

Woodard's summary brings into focus the archetype's imbrication with a particular and 'idealised' conception of masculinity:⁸⁰ one that draws upon long-standing associations between manliness, strength, and combat preparedness.⁸¹ In so doing, the archetype helps to consolidate a very particular set of social ideals associated with militarism,⁸² understood as 'the prevalence of warlike values in society'.⁸³ Thus, not only does the valorisation of the warrior hero establish expectations for – or a yardstick against which to measure – the lives of 'real' men. It helps to prepare society for future war⁸⁴ and contributes, in the process, to a wider celebration of military personnel and values across media, cultural, and communicative sites including poppies, public houses, video games, and (my focus in this article) games.⁸⁵ This normalisation of war fighting/fighters⁸⁶ has an often unnoticed or 'sneaky'⁸⁷ existence, surreptitiously 'intruding' upon everyday life.⁸⁸ Its prominence in children's artefacts and play⁸⁹ – such as the game on which I focus later in this article – is of particular concern to many analysts.

To be clear, the 'warrior hero' archetype is neither the only model of contemporary masculinity⁹⁰ nor the only contributor to contemporary militarism. It is a relational and fluid ideal-type that relies upon (constructed) similarities and differences, including to feminised figures such as the 'innocent' victims of war, as well as to other forms of masculinity which draw upon different discursive and performative resources.⁹¹ At the same time, its historical endurance and contemporary prominence ensure the figure's continuing importance in contemporary understandings of masculinity⁹² and violence,⁹³ including in seemingly banal and innocent spaces. Heroes, as Mathers argues, matter because they 'embody the abstract values, traits, and behaviours that are most prized in specific times and places'.⁹⁴ Taking them seriously, therefore, offers resources through which to explore wider sociopolitical imaginaries and the privileging therein of (gendered, racialised,

⁸⁰ Mathers, 'Medals and American military masculinity after 9/11', p. 39.

⁸¹ Wegner, 'Helpful heroes', p. 8.

⁸² Woodward, 'Warrior heroes and little green men', p. 644.

⁸³ Nick Robinson, 'Militarism and opposition in the living room: The case of military videogames', *Critical Studies on Security*, 4:3 (2016), pp. 255–75 (p. 255). For discussion of the conceptual contestability of militarism, see Bryan Mabee and Srđjan Vucetic, 'Varieties of militarism: Towards a typology', *Security Dialogue*, 49:1–2 (2018), pp. 96–108.

⁸⁴ Jennifer G. Mathers and Veronica Kitchen, 'Conclusions: Why does global politics need heroes?', in Kitchen and Mathers, *Heroism and Global Politics*, pp. 213–25 (p. 222).

⁸⁵ E.g. Victoria M. Basham, 'Gender, race, militarism and remembrance: The everyday geopolitics of the poppy', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 23:6 (2016), pp. 883–96; Nick Robinson and Marcus Schulzke, 'Visualizing war? Towards a visual analysis of videogames and social media', *Perspectives on Politics*, 14:4 (2016), pp. 995–1010; Hannah Partis-Jennings, 'A pint to remember: The pub as community militarism', *Critical Military Studies*, 8:2 (2022), pp. 119–38.

⁸⁶ Anna Stavrianakis and Maria Stern, 'Militarism and security: Dialogue, possibilities and limits', *Security Dialogue*, 49:1–2 (2018), pp. 3–18 (p. 4).

⁸⁷ Nicole Wegner, 'Militarization in Canada: Myth-breaking and image-making through recruitment campaigns', *Critical Military Studies*, 6:1 (2020), pp. 67–85 (p. 68).

⁸⁸ Kathrin Hörschmann, 'Crossing points: Contesting militarism in the spaces of children's everyday lives in Britain and Germany', in Matthew C. Benwell and Peter Hopkins (eds), *Children, Young People and Critical Geopolitics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 29–44 (p. 31).

⁸⁹ J. Marshall Beier and Jana Tabak, 'Children, childhoods, and everyday militarisms', *Childhood*, 27:3 (2020), pp. 281–93 (p. 284).

⁹⁰ Laura Sjoberg, 'Review of militarizing men: Gender, conscription, and war in post-Soviet Russia. By Maya Eichler', *Politics & Gender*, 9:4 (2013), pp. 498–500 (p. 498–9).

⁹¹ Lee Jarvis and Andrew Whiting, '(En)gendering the dead terrorist: (De)constructing masculinity in terrorist media obituaries', *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:4 (2023), pp. sqad085 (pp. 3–4).

⁹² Orna Sasson-Levy, 'Military, masculinity, and citizenship: Tensions and contradictions in the experience of blue-collar soldiers', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 10:3 (2003), pp. 319–45 (p. 323).

⁹³ Joanna Tidy, 'The gender politics of "ground truth" in the military dissent movement: The power and limits of authenticity claims regarding war', *International Political Sociology*, 10:2 (2016), pp. 99–114.

⁹⁴ Mathers, 'Medals and American military masculinity after 9/11', p. 57.

classed) persons and their deeds.⁹⁵ As ideographs – succinct metonyms for a society’s idealised sense of self⁹⁶ – moreover, heroic figurations also cohere political communities. As Kitchen, drawing on the work of Skey argues, ‘shared references give individual members of a prospective community a common framework for orienting themselves to the world [serving as] stand-ins for the values a community is supposed to embody or emulate.’⁹⁷

Heroes of History

The *Heroes of History* card game is representative of the broader Top Trumps genre. Packaged in a small plastic case with a transparent cover, the game comprises 30 character cards and 2 additional cards containing brief gameplay instructions and an advertisement for other titles. The cards are the size of traditional playing cards, and identifiably of the Top Trumps range, boasting a character name atop a large, illustrated portrait and a short narrative paragraph sketching the particular hero’s biography, achievements, and legacy at the base. Each illustrated picture is overlain with statistics pertaining to five categories of heroism: Reign (presumed to be length in years), Year Born, Size of Army, Hero Rating (out of 10), and Fear Rating (out of 10). These statistics serve the gameplay mechanics, which proceed via a series of hands won by the card with the highest value in a nominated category. The winner of a hand collects all cards played in a round and is advantaged by selecting the category for the next. The game is won when one player successfully holds all 30 cards.

Many of the heroes depicted in the pack will be readily familiar to players through their names, if not the specifics of their deeds: think Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, or Vlad the Impaler. With the exception of Achilles, the characters all exist in the historical record, their ‘real’ ontological existence detailed for players through their brief biographical storying and the numerical specificities upon which the game depends.⁹⁸ Of the 30 heroes chosen for inclusion, only 3 are women: Artemisia I of Caria, Boudica, and Cleopatra. Despite the Eurocentric bias generated by the 16 European ‘heroes’, the game offers some effort at global representation, with ancient Egypt, Persia, India, and China amongst the regions depicted. Collectively, the characters span a historical time period of almost 4,000 years between the birth of Sargon of Akkad (2309 BC) and Hattori Hanzō (AD 1542). The extensiveness of this time span – and the equivalencing of heroes across it – contributes to the game’s characterisation of global politics as an unchanging, atemporal space driven by enduring logics of conflict and violence. It is this ‘emphasis on the continuities of the human condition, particularly at the international level’⁹⁹ – characteristic, of course, of political realism – that underpins my approach to the game as a stylised construction of the enduring reality of international politics.¹⁰⁰

The warrior hero

In keeping with other Top Trumps games, victory in *Heroes of History* comes from outscoring one’s opponent(s) on a numerical category selected by the player leading a turn. The cards’ five categories highlight the game’s writing of heroism around the figure of the warrior hero through

⁹⁵Parallel might be made here to the genre of the obituary, which does similar work and has belatedly begun to receive attention in fields like IR. See Joanna Tidy, ‘The part humour plays in the production of military violence’, *Global Society*, 35:1 (2021), pp. 134–48; Lee Jarvis and Andrew Whiting, ‘Everyday security and the newspaper obituary: Reproducing and contesting terrorism discourse’, *Security Dialogue*, 55:1 (2024), pp. 22–41.

⁹⁶See Carol K. Winkler, *In the Name of Terrorism: Presidents on Political Violence in the Post–World War II Era* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 11–16.

⁹⁷Kitchen, ‘Heroism and the construction of political community’, p. 24.

⁹⁸The pack contains two unknown statistics, depicted by a question mark, concerning the army size of Ahmose I and Eric Bloodaxe.

⁹⁹Barry Buzan, ‘The timeless wisdom of realism’, in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 47–65 (p. 50).

¹⁰⁰See also Brocklehurst, *Who’s Afraid of Children?*

their underscoring of authority under the length of ‘Reign’, of martial power under ‘Size of Army’, and of ferocity under ‘Fear Rating’. Army size in the game ranges considerably from the forces commanded by some of history’s largest empires – Chandragupta Maurya’s 640,000 or Qin Shi Huang’s 600,000 – to the far smaller numbers led by Hattori Hanzō (150) or Achilles (2,500). Those heroes with the greatest ‘fear factor’ are remembered for their violence in battle such as Genghis Khan or Attila the Hun (Fear Rating 10) or waged upon their enemies for retributive purposes, as with Vlad the Impaler (Fear Rating 10). More cerebral heroes are rather less advantageous to players on this ‘Fear Rating’ category, with ‘Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher’ Marcus Aurelius, for instance, registering a lowly 1.

The ludic construction of warrior heroism in the gameplay mechanics is complemented by a readiness for combat evident in the cartoon illustrations visualising the game’s heroes. Weaponry contributes heavily to this militarised framing,¹⁰¹ with swords, daggers, and similarly bladed weapons wielded by Hattori Hanzō, Pyrrhus of Epirus, Achilles, and others. Differences in weaponry situate (or caricature) the characters’ historical location. Boudica’s rudimentary shield and spear, for instance, are in keeping with her reign in ancient Britain; Artemisia I of Caria and Attila the Hun carry bows and arrows; and the two Viking warriors – Ragnar Lodbrok and (appropriately) Eric Bloodaxe – wield axes of significant size. Other assorted war-fighting paraphernalia is prominent too, from the horse upon which Attila the Hun sits, to the helmets and body armour worn by Ashurbanipal, Vercingetorix, Genghis Khan, and others.

The battle readiness of the game’s heroes is evident corporally, with facial grimaces (e.g. Genghis Khan), battle cries (e.g. Attila the Hun), and the stance of warriors posed, weapons drawn, in confrontation with an unseen threat (e.g. Leonidas I). The imbrication of warrior heroism with masculinity is unmissable here in the heavily muscled bodies of many characters, none of whom suffers visible injury or hurt. Achilles’ bicep, for instance, bulges as his right arm holds his blade aloft; Chandragupta Maurya and Spartacus sport stomachs carved into enviably precise abdominal muscles. Further evidence of masculinity is evident in the facial hair sported by 19 of the 30 heroes, an attribute associated with stereotypically masculine traits of force and violence.¹⁰² And the individualism characteristic of heroism and its agency¹⁰³ is apparent too in the visual isolation of the game’s characters against a constant, generic backdrop of white clouds upon a pale blue sky. No context or other character – friend or foe – serves visually to interrupt the game’s ‘great man’ visual telling of heroic world history.¹⁰⁴

The ludic and visual construction of heroic masculinity on the *Heroes of History* cards finds further complement in the biographical narratives accompanying the characters. Positions of martial responsibility, for instance, highlight military leadership, from the ‘Berber general’ that was Tariq Ibn Ziyad, to the depiction of Hannibal Barca as ‘one of the greatest military leaders in history’. Such leadership is evidenced too through narrative references to the command of subordinates – such as the ‘army of up to 250,000 men’ led by Vercingetorix – which reinforce the quantified constructions of heroic power in the gameplay mechanics. Other biographies emphasise the characters’ agency in conflict, with figures such as Spartacus remembered as ‘leader of the greatest slave revolt in Roman history’, and Boudica for her importance in leading ‘a rebellion against the Roman occupation of Britain’.

The *Heroes of History* cards augment this construction of warrior heroism, finally, through the writing of their characters around appropriately masculinised predicates. Courage – a staple of heroic narratives¹⁰⁵ – is personified in figures such as Lodbrok, a ‘fearless’ Viking hero, and Achilles,

¹⁰¹See also Robinson, ‘Militarism and opposition in the living room’.

¹⁰²Rebekah Herrick, Jeanette Morehouse Mendez, and Ben Pryor, ‘Razor’s edge: The politics of facial hair’, *Social Science Quarterly*, 96:5 (2015), pp. 1301–13 (p. 1311). One character, Ahmose I, sports a false beard beneath the Nemes headpiece heavily associated with ancient Egyptian pharaohs.

¹⁰³Kitchen and Mathers, ‘Introduction’, p. 9; Mathers, ‘Medals and American military masculinity after 9/11’, p. 39.

¹⁰⁴See Edwin G. Boring, ‘Great men and scientific progress’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 94:4 (1950), pp. 339–51; Frisk, ‘What makes a hero?’

¹⁰⁵Mathers, ‘Medals and American military masculinity after 9/11’, pp. 38–9.

‘said to be fearless and invincible’. Strength of spirit or body too is found, amongst others, in the figures of Basil II, ‘a strong ruler with an iron will’; Hanzō, who had ‘superhuman skills’ in combat; or Achilles, famously ‘undefeated in hand-to-hand combat’. Military achievements such as victorious battles confirm the heroism of their protagonists, as in the case of Alaric I – responsible for ‘one of the most famous city sieges in antiquity’ – as indeed do references to the characters’ continuing prominence in legend, folklore, and beyond, such as Ziad’s enduring fame for giving ‘one of the most famous strategic orders in military history’.

The work of warrior heroism

The previous section traced a prominent construction of masculinised, militarised, heroism within *Heroes of History*. Organised around the aggressive, combative figure of the heavily armed and physically powerful agent, the hero here is a warrior willing, where necessary, to wage violence on (typically) his enemies. These constructions of heroism shed light on wider social conversations – around gender, on race, in relation to human agency or warfare, and so forth – thereby enabling insight into the normative privileging of characteristics and actions in particular historical and geographical contexts. At the same time, the game and its depictions of heroism may itself be approached as constitutive of world politics: as a text that helps ‘to construct the reality of international politics’¹⁰⁶ through its organisation around central motifs such as conflict and empire.¹⁰⁷

In the first instance, in common with other heroic narratives,¹⁰⁸ the warrior hero narrative dominating this particular game contributes to the valorisation of violent combat. Many of the characters included in the game are there *because of* their accomplishments in either the conduct or outcomes of battle. The game’s ludic component encourages players to rank characters by their ferocity or army size, and its narrative aspect perpetuates heroism’s association with competence in or appetite for conflict. The game’s gallery of determined faces, battle poses, and unrealistic musculature, as we have seen, compounds this construction through storying readiness for and success in warfare as worthy of remembrance, even celebration. And the valorisation of violence through the warrior therefore evidences how ‘militarism circulates through minute and oft times mundane aspects of everyday milieus’¹⁰⁹ including – as in this case – experiences of and during childhood. In so doing, the game perpetuates the normalisation of warfare as something laudable, preparing players for future experiences thereof (direct or vicarious¹¹⁰) precisely by bringing war *into* the homes and play of children.¹¹¹ For the player seeking victory, the game’s most desirable characters are (with a small number of exceptions considered below) its most accomplished fighters.

This valorisation of warrior heroism means that the game shares important intertextual relations with better analysed conveyers of militarised masculinity such as the GI Joe dolls and equivalents that boomed in popularity in the post-9/11 period.¹¹² Card games – like toys – are, in this

¹⁰⁶Weldes, ‘Going cultural’, p. 119.

¹⁰⁷Rowley and Weldes, ‘The evolution of international security studies’, p. 514. This emphasis on the game’s discursive work is not – to be clear – a causal claim about the game’s impact on specific children. Rather, it is an argument about the game’s reproduction of a set of prominent ideas about world politics (see Priya Dixit, ‘Relating to difference: Aliens and alienness in Doctor Who and international relations’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 13:3 (2012), pp. 289–306.

¹⁰⁸See Mathers and Kitchen, ‘Conclusions’, p. 220.

¹⁰⁹Beier and Tabak, ‘Children, childhoods, and everyday militarisms’, p. 282. Also Basham, ‘Gender, race, militarism and remembrance’, p. 884.

¹¹⁰For exploration of the very specific experiences of militarism amongst military children, see Sylvia C. Frain and Betty Frain, ‘“We serve too!”: Everyday militarism of children of US service members’, *Childhood*, 27:3 (2020), pp. 310–24.

¹¹¹In Dittmer’s words: ‘Play encodes the future into our corporeal selves, shaping not only our responses but our field of sensibilities. Equally, such play is done in anticipation of the future need for such responses and sensibilities’ (‘Playing geopolitics’, p. 912).

¹¹²Henry A. Giroux, ‘War on terror: The militarising of public space and culture in the United States’, *Third Text*, 18:4 (2004), pp. 211–21 (p. 218); see also Machin and Van Leeuwen, ‘Toys as discourse’. As one reviewer helpfully noted, the game also likely shares intertextual relations with prior constructions of these figures in myth, legend, popular culture, and beyond.

sense, ‘woven into a complex social fabric wherein they derive intelligibility and confirmation from related tropes and performatives’ such that ‘the weight of militarized practices is not borne by any of them alone.’¹¹³ This normative celebration of violence as ‘heroic’ situates *Heroes of History* as conveyor of, and contributor to, ‘everyday militarisms, which are wide-ranging and shape civilian spaces and social relations in ways that may be subtle and inconspicuous’;¹¹⁴ another example in the tendency of war games and toys to trivialise conflict as a more accessible and palatable realm of adventure and derring-do.¹¹⁵ It also offers further (underexplored) evidence of children’s capital – and, by extension, agency – as consumers of conflict and violence.¹¹⁶

This normative work of *Heroes of History* is accompanied by the explanatory power it promises as a pedagogical artefact helping players to understand violent conflict and its drivers. By storying war and its outcomes through the actions of warrior heroes, the game performs two important ideological moves. First, it draws on and normalises a long-standing and essentialist conception of masculinity as inherently combative and aggressive, interpreting violence through stereotypically masculine properties and traits.¹¹⁷ Second, in so doing, the game continues the ‘classic war story as a first-person narration’¹¹⁸ by storying conflict and its outcomes through the profile and activity of identifiable protagonists. The game’s ludic and narrative construction alike, therefore, focus attention on the agency and capabilities of structurally privileged actors, individualising these visually, biographically, and in the gameplay mechanics. Sharing with other children’s artefacts a ‘simplified and cartoon-like management and presentation of the past,’¹¹⁹ the game limits space for meaningful reflection on the wider contexts or structures through which conflict is rendered possible, organised, made manifest, and legitimated: empires are, simply, grown (e.g. Genghis Khan); armies are ‘marched’ (e.g. Hannibal Barca); and slavery is resisted by heroic dissenters (e.g. Spartacus). Because of this, the institutional, ideational, and material structures – social, political, martial, violent – on which collective violence depends are effectively absent from the game. War is made and won through the atomised actions of (primarily) men.

This emphasis on the actions of heroic men sustains the absence of meaningful engagement with any wider cast of characters responsible for enabling these heroes and their deeds. Indeed, and to preface themes that follow, only four of the hero cards reference any form of non-antagonistic or non-kinship relationship. One, Hattori Hanzō, is recognised for ‘saving the life of Tokugawa Ieyasu’ and facilitating the latter’s rise to the leadership of a united Japan. The other examples relate to the game’s three female characters: Boudica, whose actions are here motivated by the Roman attack on her daughters and seizure of her husband’s property; Artemisia I of Caria, who is ‘known for fighting alongside Xerxes I, King of Persia’, and Cleopatra, who had ‘ill-fated connections with both Julius Caesar and later, Mark Antony’. These exceptions only underline the extent to which heroism – in the figure of the warrior organising *Heroes of History* – is overwhelmingly an individualistic enterprise relying on the atomised violences of its masculine incarnations.

A second important omission is meaningful engagement with the bloodiness and horror of the violences addressed, not least in relation to the victims of warrior heroism and the militarised masculinity it represents. Where such violences are apparent, their horror tends to be camouflaged or softened through rhetorical moves familiar in other forms of security discourse. One example is the aggregation of harm via quantifications which sanitise combat through numerical abstraction in

¹¹³Beier and Tabak, ‘Children, childhoods, and everyday militarisms’, p. 285.

¹¹⁴Beier and Tabak, ‘Children, childhoods, and everyday militarisms’, p. 282.

¹¹⁵See Mark Moss, *The Media and the Models of Masculinity* (Plymouth: Lexington, 1990), pp. 126–56.

¹¹⁶See Brocklehurst, ‘The state of play’, p. 38.

¹¹⁷See also Erin Hatton, ‘Legal “locker room talk”: Essentialist discourses of masculinity in law’, *Men and Masculinities*, 25:3 (2022), pp. 419–37 (pp. 426–7).

¹¹⁸Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. xii.

¹¹⁹Brocklehurst, *Who’s Afraid of Children?*, p. 159.

both the gameplay mechanics and narrative biographies.¹²⁰ Here, no space is provided for engagement with personal experiences of battle – of those led or attacked by the game’s heroes. As Gregory argues: ‘simply counting the bodies of those killed in war may not actually help us understand the death and destruction caused by war [because death counts] end up erasing the violence inflicted on each of the bodies of those affected by war, and numbing our emotional responses to the deaths of others.’¹²¹

My argument, to be clear, is not that these oclusions are unique to this game. Indeed, *Heroes of History*’s rhetorical, visual, and gameplay grammars are consistent with many other children’s artefacts, as well as with prominent games aimed at older players. Gieselman, for instance, highlights how ‘war is presented in a clean, almost sterile way’¹²² in the different, but related context of videogames. My suggestion, instead, is that this game’s construction of global politics around the figure of the masculinised warrior hero positions it as something of a ‘paradigmatic case’ of the wider storying of such dynamics across popular, pedagogical, and other cultural artefacts.¹²³ Its importance here, therefore, is in highlighting the reach of such stories into a seemingly trivial space in which children are invited to engage with the ‘adult, serious world and untangl[e] the underlying logics and fantasies sustaining it’.¹²⁴

Negotiating the warrior hero

The writing of heroism through masculinised tropes of toughness, strength, and aggression, as we have seen, contributes to this game’s everyday reproduction of militarism and the world it sustains. In this final section, I seek now to nuance this argument a little by highlighting three ways in which the game negotiates its primary narrative by helping to unpack and perhaps to problematise the figure of the hero who dominates. These relate to: invocations of alternative models of heroism that take us away from characteristics associated with the warrior hero; negative depictions of its characters and their actions; and, representations of the game’s three female heroes. I hope to show that although these moves push the game beyond the narrow warrior hero explored to this point, their critical potential is ultimately dampened by a celebration of masculine heroism consistent with the game’s primary figure.

Constructions of masculine identity – such as the warrior hero – frequently operate through ‘archetypes’ or templates that consolidate and condense complex subject positions into accessible and abbreviated shorthands.¹²⁵ It is, therefore, notable that the characters depicted in *Heroes of History* do not all fit the warrior archetype in a straightforward or simplistic way. A number of cards depict heroism in relation to political leadership, for instance, rather than proclivity for battle, introducing their characters through their standing as monarchs (Ahmose I; Ashurbanipal) or founders of something important (Huang; Sargon of Akkad). This emphasis on leadership rather than fighting prowess finds complement via reference to ‘dynasties’ led (Ahomse I) or through emphasis on geopolitical rather than military legacies, including in relation to state formation –

¹²⁰See also Carol Cohn, ‘Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12:4 (1987), pp. 687–718.

¹²¹Cited in Jessica Auchter, ‘Paying attention to dead bodies: The future of security studies?’, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 1:1 (2015), pp. 36–50 (p. 43).

¹²²Cited in Salter, ‘The geographical imaginations of video games’, pp. 371–2.

¹²³Flyvbjerg, discussed in David Howarth, ‘Applying discourse theory: The method of articulation’, in Jacob Torfing and David Howarth (eds), *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Policy and Governance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 316–49 (p. 311).

¹²⁴Uygar Baspehlivan and Alister Wedderburn, ‘Disciplinary seriousness in international relations: Towards a counterpolitics of the silly object’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4:2 (2024), p. ksae035 (p. 7). As Lene Hansen, ‘Reading comics for the field of International Relations: Theory, method and the Bosnian War’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:3 (2017), pp. 581–608 (p. 591) notes in setting out her method for selecting comic books as artefacts of international politics: ‘The choice of IR question can be driven by a range of theoretical and empirical research concerns, and these concerns should, in turn, be considered when specific comics are selected for analysis.’

¹²⁵Mark Howard Mo, *The Media and the Models of Masculinity* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012), p. 3.

‘Creator of the world’s first territorial state’ (Sargon) – or even conflict resolution, as with Ramesses II, who authored that which is typically deemed ‘the first international peace treaty’.

Personality traits less intimately connected to the warrior figure are evident too in the game. Wisdom, for instance, is prominent in Ashurbanipal’s ‘thirst for knowledge’, or in the positioning of Sun Tzu as ‘one of the greatest thinkers of the ancient Far East’. Celebration of the social and cultural labour of such men further emphasises their cerebral rather than physical attributes, including Huang, who ‘standardised ... writing, language, measurement and weight systems’, and Ashurbanipal, celebrated for establishing ‘one of the first libraries in the history of the world’. The masculinised warrior hero is also, moreover, tempered visually in places through illustrations of less physically formidable men such as the emperors Julius Caesar, Qin Shi Huang, and Marcus Aurelius, all decidedly less muscled than their bellicose counterparts and unencumbered pictorially by visible weaponry.

In examples such as these, we see incorporation of accomplishments, personality traits, and bodies that fit awkwardly with the figure of the warrior hero. Through their inclusion, the game offers opportunity for reflecting on the contingency of this archetype – pointing, as it does, to alternatives and to its limitations for making sense of some of the figures celebrated in *Heroes of History*. This critical capacity, however, is, I argue, under-realised or dampened because writings of non-warrior heroism in relation to, say, wisdom or leadership themselves draw upon established templates of masculinity, even while they depart from the figure of the warrior.¹²⁶ Constructions of wisdom, for instance, celebrate the triumph of (masculine) reason over (feminine) emotion in applauding the intellectual virtuosity of the game’s heroes. In so doing, they continue the long-standing association between masculinity, genius, and creativity.¹²⁷ Constructions of heroism in terms of leadership, relatedly, applaud equally masculine coded attributes of agency, organisation, and an ability to ‘get things done’.¹²⁸ The game’s adverting to multiple conceptions of masculinity here is not, to be clear, in itself surprising. Artefacts of popular culture are frequently polysemous, typically open to or invoking plural understandings of their object.¹²⁹ The relationality of gendered identities, moreover, means multiple masculinities often coexist even in relatively bounded contexts marked by privileged or ‘hegemonic’ forms.¹³⁰ We also know from the scholarship on heroism and world politics that the figure of ‘the hero’ can be and often is articulated in variable ways, notwithstanding the ‘stickiness’ of gendered and other assumptions about this category.¹³¹ At the same time, it is important to note that while the game offers a more heterogenous negotiation of heroism than the hegemonic figure of the warrior hero, this does not amount to a more thorough critique of the way in which the figure of the hero is gendered masculine within or beyond the game.¹³²

A second potential disturbance of the archetypal warrior hero is found in the game’s references to its characters’ less laudable actions or traits.¹³³ These include mention of the ruthlessness of ‘heroes’ such as Attila the Hun who ‘took full power, having killed his brother’, or to the barbarity of men such as Ashurbanipal – ‘remembered for cruelty to his enemies [and] his famous hunting of lions’ – the ‘cruel warrior’ that was Genghis Khan, and Basil II, who is ‘remembered for

¹²⁶ See Jarvis and Whiting, ‘(En)gendering the dead terrorist’.

¹²⁷ Diana L. Miller, ‘Gender and the artist archetype: Understanding gender inequality in artistic careers’, *Sociology Compass*, 10:2 (2016), pp. 119–31.

¹²⁸ Johannes Steyrer, ‘Charisma and the archetypes of leadership’, *Organization Studies*, 19:5 (1998), pp. 807–28.

¹²⁹ E.g. Grayson, ‘How to read Paddington Bear’, p. 390; Jarvis and Robinson, ‘Oh help! Oh no! The international politics of *The Gruffalo*’, p. 59.

¹³⁰ See R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, ‘Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept’, *Gender & Society*, 19:6 (2005), pp. 829–59; R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

¹³¹ Partridge, ‘Everyday heroics’, pp. 64–5.

¹³² The game does reference a small sample of failures or defeats in the context of military loss – ‘From his name the term “Pyrrhic victory” was created, describing a victory achieved at too high a cost” (Pyrrhus of Epirus) – or even humiliation’: ‘[He] was eventually captured, imprisoned and then paraded in a Roman triumph – as a public ceremony – before being executed’ (Vercingetorix).

¹³³ My thanks to Andrew Whiting for his helpful comments on this section of the discussion.

mercilessly blinding 15,000 defeated Bulgarians'. Such cruelties are coloured via qualitative references such as to the 'shocking [Viking] raids' led by Eric Bloodaxe, or the enduring legacy of Attila the Hun's terror, as well as through quantifications of harm such as the '40 million deaths' for whom Genghis Khan was responsible. As with the invocation of alternative ideal-types, however, these constructions disturb the normative celebration of their heroes only through invocation of similarly masculinised tropes. History, once again, is driven by the actions of powerful, individualised men. And the actions of those men, once again, are written around stereotypically (hyper-)masculine traits, including mercilessness, aggression, and agency.

What then, finally, of *Heroes of History's* three female characters: Artemisia I of Caria, Cleopatra, and Boudica? As a counterpart to the game's (typically) muscle-bound male figures, these characters are all visually coded female in the illustrations on the game's cards, with long hair, full lips, and high cheekbones prominent in their portraits. References to intimate and familial relationships – husbands, children, romantic partners – as we have seen, also distinguish their narrative biographies from those accompanying the game's male warriors in which such relationships are conspicuously absent. And yet, at the same time, this appeal to alternative heroisms is, once again, constrained in important ways, first through the game's ludic structuration around categories appropriate to the warrior hero figure such as 'Size of Army', 'Hero Rating', and 'Fear Rating'. This structuration means that its female heroes are – with their male counterparts – evaluated and ranked via this dominant archetype. Boudica, for instance, achieves a maximum value of 10 for 'Fear Rating', while Artemisia I of Caria scores 9 for 'Hero Rating'.¹³⁴ This construction is compounded, moreover, visually through the weapons two of the three women carry (Cleopatra here presents the exception as she stands holding her cloak) and through biographical references to their capacity for physical combat (Artemisia I) or their military successes (Boudica). In this sense, the game's female characters again serve more as reassertion than critique of heroism's imbrication with 'masculine coded behaviours'¹³⁵ – with its emphasis on their combativeness and ferocity. Combat once more is valorised as heroic. And characters – male and female – are heroic because of their masculinised toughness and strength.

Conclusion

There exists an enduring, complex, and multidirectional relationship between games and global politics.¹³⁶ Games are vital to academic and wider understandings of IR, providing us with rich metaphorical resources through which to make sense of global dynamics from the 'great games', 'nested games', and 'zero-sum games' of states, to the 'bargaining chips', 'poker faces', and 'stalemates' of international conflict and diplomacy.¹³⁷ Contemporary transformations in the technologies and theatres of war – not least drone strikes and the live televised broadcasting of violence – moreover, have augmented enduring interpretations of global politics 'as a game',¹³⁸ while the continuing popularity of game theoretic analyses and their derivatives in fields such as IR both highlights and reinforces the conceptual proximity between the two realms.¹³⁹

¹³⁴The inclusion of 'Reign' – measured, presumably, in years, speaks also to leadership competence and the masculinised figure of the ruler considered earlier in this article.

¹³⁵Mathers, 'Medals and American military masculinity after 9/11', p. 57.

¹³⁶See also Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Apostolos Spanos, *Games of History: Games and Gaming as Historical Sources* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

¹³⁷E.g. Ingrid A. Medby, 'Language-games, geography, and making sense of the Arctic', *Geoforum*, 107 (2019), pp. 124–33.

¹³⁸James der Derian, 'War as game', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 10:1 (2003), pp. 37–48; Jack Lule, 'War and its metaphors: News language and the prelude to war in Iraq, 2003', *Journalism Studies*, 5:2 (2004), pp. 179–90 (p. 185).

¹³⁹Peter G. Bennett, 'Modelling decisions in international relations: Game theory and beyond', *Mershon International Studies Review*, 39:1 (1995), pp. 19–52; Steven J. Brams, 'Game theory: Pitfalls and opportunities in applying it to international relations', *International Studies Perspectives*, 1:3 (2000), pp. 221–32.

Games also, of course, feature prominently in the ‘stuff’ of global politics as traditionally understood. As tabletop exercises and interactive simulations, games are routinely employed by military and civilian organisations to model, predict, and prepare for ‘real world’ interactions such as war.¹⁴⁰ Games serve as proxies or metonyms for global political competition, as with the elite chess matches that accompanied the Cold War rivalry,¹⁴¹ one prominent incarnation of sport as ‘war minus the shooting’ in George Orwell’s memorable phrasing.¹⁴² And – at an everyday level – many of the world’s most popular games take the interactions of (global) political dynamics as their focus whether explicitly, as in historical simulations,¹⁴³ or implicitly, as in games like chess or the board game *Risk*.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, this article’s serendipitous origins include my own experience of playing and discussing the game with my children, an outcome of ‘wondering as a research attitude’¹⁴⁵ in Lobo-Guerrero’s framing that begins by ‘pos[ing] questions on why something has been presented or analysed in a particular way’.

My focus in this discussion has been on the production and negotiation of heroism within this particular game as an everyday and seemingly trivial site of global politics. Three primary arguments were offered. First, *Heroes of History* helps to illustrate how children’s games contribute to the everyday reproduction of very specific understandings of international relations through its storying of the world as a masculinised realm of conflict and courage whose dynamics are driven primarily by the actions of heroic ‘great men.’ This particular construction draws on the long-standing and powerful association between heroism and masculinity coded through traits such as physical strength and combativeness, and is evident in the game’s narrative, visual, and game-play properties. The game’s warrior hero motif serves to story violence, its causes, and its outcomes in terms that are individual rather than structural, and sanitised rather than visceral. If not entirely bloodless – as we have seen, references are made to cruelties, murder, and other atrocities – the generative conditions of violence are de-emphasised and downplayed and the horror of battle is ‘blunted’¹⁴⁶ through the game’s celebration of the warrior hero.

Second, the game contains some nuancing of this dominant figuration – through inclusion of other templates of heroism, condemnation of its characters, and incorporation of 3 female heroes in the pack of 30. This openness to alternative readings highlights the polysemy of children’s games – and the creativity of play that they engender – even if the disruptive potential of this particular game is diminished by its tendency to leave long-standing assumptions about masculinity largely untroubled within the alternatives to its principal motif it presents.

Third, using a game such as this as an analytical starting point also provides new opportunity for dialogue between a range of IR sub-fields and literatures, including contemporary work on children, popular culture, gender, the everyday, and heroism in world politics. The article’s most immediate synthetic contribution has been to bring IR works on children and games into conversation with one another in order to address respective gaps in each. For its analytical contribution in interrogating *Heroes of History* specifically, I have also drawn on very contemporary work around heroism, the everyday, and gender. In doing this, I have demonstrated the importance of ostensibly simplistic, even jejune, ludic artefacts within global politics.

Future work in this area could complement the analysis developed in this article in a number of directions. There is, in the first instance, considerable scope for exploring audience engagement with games like *Heroes of History* and their affective, political, and other impacts during the course

¹⁴⁰Reid B. C. Pauly, ‘Would US leaders push the button? Wargames and the sources of nuclear restraint’, *International Security*, 43:2 (2018), pp. 151–92.

¹⁴¹Ambrosio and Ross, ‘Performing the Cold War’, p. 862.

¹⁴²See Peter J. Beck, ‘“War minus the shooting”: George Orwell on international sport and the Olympics’, *Sport in History*, 33:1 (2013), pp. 72–94.

¹⁴³E.g. De Zamaróczy, ‘Are we what we play?’

¹⁴⁴Salter, ‘Gaming world politics.’

¹⁴⁵Luis Lobo-Guerrero, ‘Wondering as a research attitude’, in Mark B. Salter and Can E. Mutlu (eds), *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies: An Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 25–28 (p. 25).

¹⁴⁶Basham, ‘Gender, race, militarism and remembrance’, p. 885.

of play and beyond. Do children, for instance, become attached to specific characters in games? Do games such as this stimulate curiosity towards particular heroes? Is there evidence of ambiguity, indeterminacy, or subversion in the way games are played, such that their rules are ignored or negotiated?¹⁴⁷ Research such as this would, amongst other things, contribute to recent developments in popular geopolitics emphasising the agency of consumers of cultural artefacts.¹⁴⁸ For, as Carter et al. note, ‘we need to be careful to avoid totalising claims based upon discursive analysis without thinking about how children actually engage with such narratives and play with the toys [or games] that help to constitute them.’¹⁴⁹

It is also worth noting that games such as *Heroes of History* are simultaneously (amongst other things) conveyers of meaning about the past,¹⁵⁰ sites of leisure activity, and commodities that are bought and sold. As such, there is additional scope for expanding the conceptual reach of work such as this through greater engagement with contemporary literatures on global politics and memory,¹⁵¹ on the everyday,¹⁵² on the vernacular,¹⁵³ and on popular culture.¹⁵⁴ Such scholarship would add insight to my own reading of this specific game as a reproduction and negotiation of warrior hero masculinity, and would expand the insight of the literatures on childhood, games, and heroism with which I have here worked. Although such concerns are beyond the scope of this article, I hope this discussion helps to stimulate far greater attention to children’s games within the discipline of IR and across its diverse sub-fields.

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¹⁴⁷ See Tara Woodyer and Sean Carter, ‘Domesticating the Geopolitical: Rethinking popular geopolitics through play’, *Geopolitics*, 25:5 (2020), pp. 1050–74 (p.1052).

¹⁴⁸ Jason Dittmer and Nicholas Gray, ‘Popular geopolitics 2.0: Towards new methodologies of the everyday’, *Geography Compass*, 4:11 (2010), pp. 1664–77.

¹⁴⁹ Carter et al., ‘Ludic – or playful – geopolitics’, pp. 64–5.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Ambrosio and Jonatha Ross, ‘The War on Terror beyond the barrel of a gun: The procedural rhetorics of the boardgame *Labyrinth*’, *Media, War & Conflict*, 16:4 (2023), pp. 495–515 (p. 500).

¹⁵¹ E.g. Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁵² Matt Davies and Michael Niemann, ‘The everyday spaces of global politics: Work, leisure, family’, *New Political Science*, 24:4 (2002), pp. 557–77.

¹⁵³ Stuart Croft and Nick Vaughan-Williams, ‘Fit for purpose? Fitting ontological security studies “into” the discipline of international relations: Towards a vernacular turn’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 12–30.

¹⁵⁴ E.g. Rhys Crilly, ‘Where we at? New directions for research on popular culture and world politics’, *International Studies Review*, 23:1 (2021), pp. 164–80.