The Evolution of Liberalism in the *XCOM* Franchise Reboot

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ABSTRACT

Going beyond tropes of other science fiction, the *XCOM* franchise reboot provides a noteworthy case study of IR in games due to its emphasis on an especially international liberal politic. This proceeds across core entries from the need for global cooperation in the face of global threat, to the failure of this cooperation and resultant totalitarianism, and finally to its victory and successive internal vigilance.

Keywords

XCOM, liberalism, international relations, political philosophy

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Through analyzing the *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007) series, Craig Hayden (2017) argues that video games are a fruitful medium for investigation by international relations (IR) scholars. Likewise, Felix Ciută (2016, 200) suggests they may operate as "a mirror in which IR can see itself." In agreement, this extended abstract inspects the three core titles of the *XCOM* (Firaxis Games 2012) franchise reboot via close reading, primarily for their presentation of liberal IR theory. Spin-offs developed by other studios are not considered due to their lack of relevance to this traced thread, as well as their overall minor impact on the franchise. Furthermore, while postcolonial game studies provides a solid basis for the study of international phenomena, this study limits itself to an IR lens to trace liberal thought as it appears in the games specifically.

The three titles in question are *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* (Firaxis Games 2012), *XCOM 2* (Firaxis Games 2016), and *XCOM: Chimera Squad* (Firaxis Games 2020). Set in a near-future science fiction world facing alien invasion, they are of the turn-based tactics genre, which is mechanically like broader strategy games but instead focusing on smaller groups of units. Players control four to six soldiers each mission that eventually can be upgraded to incorporate robotic and psionic elements. In between missions, the first two entries also present base management features that expand and refine the pool of strategic options available; the third entry removed this feature for a more streamlined experience.

While liberalism is likely to be understood by most under the category of social liberalism in domestic politics, it holds a different meaning within the scope of IR. According to John Mearsheimer, liberalism holds an "optimistic view of international politics," pursuing goals such as "avoid[ing] war and concentrat[ing] instead on building cooperative relationships" (2001, 15; 9). This contrasts with another leading

school of thought in IR, realism, adherents of which he describes as "pessimists . . . [who] see no easy way to escape the harsh world of security competition and war" (17). (It is worth mentioning that Mearsheimer is himself a realist.) While a strategy game franchise would otherwise appear to endorse realism with its mechanical emphasis on conflict, the *XCOM* games stand out through a narrative of explicitly internationalist cooperation. One must note, however, the increasingly relevant expectation of international cooperation in defense—realized or not—via bodies such as NATO or the United Nations. Mearsheimer points to US President Clinton's 1993 address to the latter, which highlights the organization's founding in such terms (48-49).

Yet there does remain conflict. *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* features the initial alien invasion, to which sixteen major world powers unite as the Council and activate the defense force known as the XCOM project. The player is tasked with overseeing XCOM's operations. Science fiction settings have long made use of political unification as narrative element (Hayden 2017, 189). Similarly, they have also invoked alien invaders as stand-in for colonial and imperialist anxieties (Sankar 2024, 264). *XCOM*, however, subverts this trope, replacing it with more generalized global threats like climate change. Their technological superiority, including technological *composition* in the case of the robotic Cyberdiscs, mirrors the industrial overwhelming our planet. A parallel reading may see the invasion as critiquing *any* invasion and the need for international response as self-defense.

XCOM 2 unfortunately reveals the collapse of the Council and its surrender to the alien invasion, leading to the formation of a totalitarian "new world order" under the name of ADVENT. Anxieties of the first entry are realized here as failure of the liberal international order. Nonetheless, XCOM continues here as a resistance movement. The climate metaphor appears again as several missions require the player to rescue refugees from indiscriminate bombardment. By the game's end, XCOM overcomes ADVENT and liberates humanity, affirming the success of sustained resistance.

With global conflicts pacified and internationalist goals achieved, *XCOM: Chimera Squad* refocuses to more localized threats. This entry takes place in City 31, an experimental settlement where humans, aliens, and hybrids coexist. Terroristic and separatist organizations challenge this tenuous peace. XCOM becomes a security force that responds in defense of a social liberal politic resembling a realization of the American melting pot (Becker 2022). One cannot avoid noticing the game's release year (2020) and link it temporally to the well-discussed "threat to democracy" (Klarman, 2019). The liberal school of IR sees democracy as foundational to its thought and would lead to global peace (Mearsheimer 2001, 16). This context promotes a reading of *Chimera Squad's* inward turn from a higher ground in the name of stability, perhaps as a call to keep one's house in check.

Analysis of the *XCOM* reboot franchise offers an opportunity to examine popular consciousness regarding security and cooperation at the international level, anxieties about failure at these tasks, and smaller yet related issues at the domestic level. The titles do not shy away from the difficulties of these topics, akin to Hayden's celebration of *Mass Effect* against more utopic—and thus flattening—science fiction (2017, 189). As Ciută observes, "the question 'what does it say *about IR* that what IR usually says . . . is simultaneously being said in non-academic settings such as video games?' is far from trivial" (2016, 213-214). That games engage IR on this front is likely to be unsurprising to game scholars, yet the insights they yield into public attitude

remain invaluable, particularly given how detached these issues may appear to the average citizen. This study merely continues that line of demonstration in how games engage with political systems.

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