

## Review: Game Studies and Decoloniality

PENIX-TADSEN, Phillip (Ed.). *Video games and the Global South*. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2019.

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In *Video Games and the Global South*, 30 contributors “reimagine the place of gaming in the world” (p. 6) and show how diverse video game cultures are. Each contributor explores the relationship between video games and culture in different parts of Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific, countering a Western-centric history of video games. Edited by Phillip Penix-Tadsen, the volume largely draws on postcolonial studies and on Mignolo’s (2011) and Iqani’s (2016) definition of the Global South. Whereas Mignolo describes the Global South as “the places on the planet that endured the experience of coloniality - that suffered, and still suffer, the consequences of the colonial wound” (2011, p. 185), Iqani stresses that this term “‘speaks back’ by bringing together into one analytical project some of the cross-cutting flows and tensions relevant to contexts in Asia, Africa and Latin America without homogenizing their disparate and unique characteristics” (2016, p. 4). As Penix-Tadsen notes, exploring the Global South from these two perspectives allows for the examination of video game cultures in societies that differ on many levels but that also share other characteristics. It ultimately allows for a productive dialogue and reveals unexpected connections.

The book contains eighteen essays and is divided into three sections: “Serious Games and the Politics of Play,” “Gaming Communities and Subcultures,” and “Circulation of Games and Game Culture.” While the book contains a little more chapters on Latin America than on other regions, it still covers a wide range of topics, from the history of the video game industry in India (Mukherjee), to esports in China (Pun, Yin, and Fung), to narratives in Cameroonian and Nigerian games (Bayeck). It incorporates micro- and macro-level analyses and stresses the need to pay attention

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to national history and local contexts of production, circulation, and reception, and to global and transnational dynamics.

Right from the beginning, Penix-Tadsen highlights through five snapshots the book's desire to explore "some of the ways games impact on the daily lives of individuals across the globe, including and especially those that have long been considered 'peripheral' to the global centers of technological production and consumption" (p. 6). In one of them, a group of South Sudanese refugees play video games in a market in Al-Salam in 2014; in another one, an esports player celebrates his victory against the world champion of *Tekken 7* (BANDAI NAMCO STUDIOS, 2017) in Manila, Philippines. These snapshots powerfully anchored video games in space and time, refusing to theorize them as a "transcendental free-floating signifier" (HJORTH & CHAN, 2009, p. 5), and are reflective of the book's desire to examine video games *in culture*.

*Video Games and the Global South* successfully shows the legacies of the colonial era on games and online spaces, and presents some forms of resistance. In "Eurocentric Values at Play," for example, Loban and Apperley analyze the depiction of Indigenous and non-Western peoples in strategy games. The chapter introduces Loban's project of "modding the colonial" (p. 87) in *Europa Universalis IV* (EUIV; PARADOX DEVELOPMENT STUDIO, 2013) and his work with the Torres Strait Islanders, including his own family members. The authors ultimately show that while modding can be a pedagogical tool to expose players to histories and cultures that are too often erased, it is limited by the Eurocentric mechanics of many games, notably the concept of nation-state on which EUIV heavily relies. Along the same lines, Skotnes-Brown argues in "Colonized Play" that video games provide ex-colonial nations with spaces where they can continue to conquer in postcolonial times. His analysis stresses the colonial legacies in the South African gaming community of *Dota 2* (VALVE CORPORATION, 2013) and highlights that online spaces are used to express racist attitudes that have largely been suppressed in public. These two chapters nicely complement the work of other authors whose research draws more on subaltern studies and investigates visual subjectification.

Messias, Amaral, and Oliveira's chapter "Playing Beyond Precariousness" explores how global technologies are appropriated by Brazilian players of the *Pro Evolution Soccer* series (KONAMI, 2001) to foreground the interests of their communities. The authors are especially interested in the Bomba Patch mods and how

it has allowed for the incorporation of local cultural elements into blockbuster games and for the emergence of affective communities. I also especially liked the chapter “Digital Masks and Lucha Libre,” in which Calleros Villarreal analyzes the *lucha libre* mask, i.e., the mask worn by Mexican professional wrestlers. Building on the concept of representational fetish, Calleros Villarreal examines the ambivalence of this iconography and the role it plays in the construction of the Mexican subject in video games. While the *lucha libre* mask has been used to simplify complex cultural contexts, notably in Japanese fighting games, it has more recently been used by Mexican game designers to transform *luchadores* into digital heroes and internationalize their products. Finally, in “Arab Gamers,” Alfaraj presents the results of interviews with 81 Arab-identifying gamers on the state of Arab representations in video games. Her study reports that most Arab gamers felt underrepresented or misrepresented, and that gamers of more privileged gender or sexual orientation were more conservative regarding the kind of representation they considered acceptable in video games. These results open the way for a dialogue between the work of Alfaraj and the work of Shaw (2014) on marginalized players, and raise interesting questions about identification and enjoyment of games in which one feels misrepresented.

Furthermore, *Video Games and the Global South* features a number of noteworthy essays on the relationship between video games and art. Taylor’s “Serious Gaming” examines the work of US Nicaraguan artist Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga, known for its critique of social inequality, discrimination, and neoliberalism. Of special interest to me was Taylor’s analysis of *A Geography of Being: una geografía de ser*, an interactive installation that portrays the experience of an undocumented immigrant in the United States and uses sound to disrupt the game world. A similar interest in art games is noticeable in Altomonte’s “Playing *Killbox*,” which analyzes the work of Joseph DeLappe on drone warfare. As Altomonte points out, *Killbox* (BIOME COLLECTIVE, 2016) uses minimalist design to emphasize game mechanics and the dehumanizing aspects of drone technology, aiming to educate the user about drone-initiated violence. Finally, Luján Oulton’s “The Nuances of Video Game Curation” complements these two chapters, highlighting that “video games have come to blur the limits of interactive art and create an aesthetic of their own” (p. 246). The chapter draws on the author’s experience as the curator of the Argentinian exhibition *Game on! El arte en juego (Art in Play)* over the past decade and guides the reader through the five editions of this exhibition. The chapter stresses the exhibition’s desire to think

glocally—to create a dialogue between national and international works—and nicely ends with a few takeaways introduced as “lessons from the Global South” (p. 252). While the description of the exhibitions is rather detailed, a few photos might have allowed the reader to better appreciate the atmosphere of the exhibitions.

Lastly, two chapters focusing more specifically on the circulation of games and game cultures caught my attention. In “Digital Gaming’s South-South Connection,” Apperley uses comparative ethnography to examine the reasons why the customers of two cybercafes, one in Melbourne and one in Caracas, play the South Korean game *GunBound: World Champion* (SOFTNYX, 2002). Apperley shows that *GunBound* is played in Melbourne by international students who want to reconnect themselves with other players from the Asia-Pacific region, and is played in Caracas by Venezuelan players who want to connect themselves with other Spanish-speaking players from Latin America without experiencing lag. Video games like *GunBound* are sites of intercultural communication, says Apperley, “facilitating social relations across uneven network infrastructures” (p. 207). On the other hand, Pallitt, Venter, and Koloko’s “Whose ‘Game Culture’ Is It, Anyway?” explores the gaming practices of children across Cape Town, showing that the rules of spaces - playing in a library or in an after-school site for example - impact on gaming practices as much as the rules of a game. The authors highlight that many of the gaming experiences of South African children from low-income families are paranodal and can be seen as “pavement gaming”: they occur outside of networks, go unregistered, and challenge nodocentric formulations of participatory culture. Even though this chapter is a little more jargon-heavy, it still offers a very useful framework to approach play as “infrastructured” in various ways and opens new avenues for studying the material dimensions of play.

Overall, *Video Games and the Global South* has the merit of gathering the work of scholars from around the globe, many of which are emerging scholars. The book shows that video games are the result of a negotiation between two spaces: the space inside the screen - the rules and the physicality of games - and the space outside the screen, that surrounds play (as noted by Frasca in the preface). Several chapters refer to one another, which helps the reader to appreciate their contribution to each section of the volume; Penix-Tadsen’s editorial work especially shines in these instances. While the chapters generally form a harmonious whole, a few chapters clash in tone and content. Some chapters are rather descriptive, while others could have engaged more with the existing game scholarship—though the latter might be a reminder that

research still has centres and is not equally accessible across the globe. A few chapters are also a little short, and I found myself wanting more. This might be due to the approach privileged by the editor: having shorter essays to give space to the work of numerous scholars, but it is still somewhat surprising considering the length of the introduction.

That being said, Penix-Tadsen's edited volume is a welcome addition to the burgeoning literature on game studies and decoloniality. It successfully works towards untangling culture and knowledge from a Western episteme and is reflective of a desire to confront the "colonial matrix of power" (MIGNOLO, 2011, p. 183). The book will prove invaluable to anyone interested in game studies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and the digital social sciences. As game studies continue to flourish, this work will provide an inspirational framework for decentering the discipline.

## References

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