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Afterword: Regional Game Studies and Historical Representation

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Video games are perhaps the most prevalent medium for cultural and historical representation in 2018, with well over 2 billion players worldwide playing games on their smartphones, tablets, social networks, personal computers, and consoles.[1] Given the popularity of games throughout the world and the global nature of game development and game culture, it is ever more important that we, as scholars and analysts of culture, pay attention to the ways games represent culture and history for a mass consumer audience.[2] It is important to understand the obstacles and affordances that define video games' potential for historical depiction, realism, accuracy and scope. Since games can provide rich, interactive opportunities for conveying knowledge about real-world history and culture, we must seek to better understand the advantages and disadvantages of games for bringing distant cultures and remote historical eras to contemporary players across the globe.

Game studies is responding with ever more attention to regional perspectives on games and game culture, as well as critical research by scholars like Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg, whose work has helped expand discussions of intersectional identity and gaming beyond representation in order to address the ways gender, sexual identity, race, class, nationality and other factors affect the experience and meaning of games from production to reception.[3] And indeed, questions of player identity and involvement don't end there, with prosumer audiences and modding communities building upon the spaces and worlds provided by games' original publishers with innovative content tailored to diverse audiences and tastes. Significant recent work on postcolonialism and gaming, especially research by Souvik Mukherjee, has helped to shed light on the ways game design can reflect imperialist ideology, as

well as how players and game developers can "play back" against Empire through a variety of gaming-related practices.[4] Scholars of games and culture like those mentioned here are navigating uncharted territory in the relationship between video games, history and culture, discussions that are ever more significant to understanding our world.

This special issue of *forum for inter-american studies*, "Encounters in the 'Game-Over Era': The Americas in Videogames," offers key contributions to regional game studies, postcolonial game criticism and cultural analysis related to in-game representation. Editor Mahshid Mayar has brought together scholars approaching games and history from a variety of critical perspectives, offering a multidisciplinary focus on medial, rhetorical, literary and historical analyses of the relationship between video games and colonialism. In her introduction, Mayar lays the groundwork for the types of explorations featured in this special issue: the impact of postcolonial studies on game analysis, imperialist dimensions of game design, questions of accuracy and diversity of in-game historical and cultural representations, the representation of empire in video games about the Americas, the role of cultural heritage in player identity and the relationships between games and other types of media. Each in its own way, the four articles, one interview and two book reviews included in this special issue on the Americas in video games, help to move our discussions of games, history and colonialism forward in significant ways.

Eugen Pfister's essay "'In a world without gold, we might have been heroes!' Cultural Imaginations of Piracy in Video Games" provides a well-researched overview of the pirate genre in video games, tracing the intermedial relationship between games, film, literature and the visual arts in an examination

of the ways pirate topoi and narrative elements are transformed and modified in their transferal between different types of media. Beginning with a review of 18th- and 19th-century literary representations of piracy, Pfister proceeds to trace the transformations in these depictions in 20th- and 21st-century film and video games. The article provides an excellent framework for approaching an intermedial genre adapted in game form, presenting a thoroughly-researched history of pirate video games. Pfister's analysis traces the genre's history to Scot Adams' 1978 textual game *Pirate Adventure* and reviews familiar titles from "narrative" game series like *Monkey Island* and *Assassin's Creed*, which borrow heavily from the symbolism of pirate narratives and films, as well as simulations like Sid Meier's 1987 game *Pirates!* or the *Tropico* series, which focus more on facets of robbery, trade and commerce related to the pirate milieu. Perhaps most importantly, Pfister focuses notable attention to these games' reflections of dominant U.S.- and Eurocentric cultural perspectives, including a lack of depth in their stereotypical depictions of native populations and a focus on the viewpoint of the foreign explorer-conqueror. In light of this important groundwork, it would be extremely interesting to consider how games produced in the global south, by developers in former colonies working in languages other than English have dealt with piracy in their games.

In the article "Columbian Nightmare: Narrative, History, and Nationalism in *BioShock Infinite*," Stefan Schubert reads *Bioshock*, developed by Massachusetts-based studio Irrational Games, as a "narratively liminal text" in an analysis that focuses on the ways the storyworld alternately enables and limits player agency. Schubert's essay looks at what happens when we move beyond facile assumptions about the relationship between video games and imperialism, nationalism and dogmatic views of history, and examines the way complex narratives in games like *Bioshock* deal specifically with colonialism and its legacies. As Schubert's analysis demonstrates, the game's developers immerse the player in a gamescape that is presented deliberately and procedurally: the game's layered narrative first presents the player with a utopian vision of the fictional world of Columbia,

only to undermine and expose the "cracks and fissures" in this surface to ultimately reveal "a city built on the oppression and subjugation of poorer citizens and ethnic minorities." Games like *Bioshock: Infinite* exemplify the way a well-designed gameplay experience can provide players with critical insights that relate to their real lives, in this case by highlighting the constructedness of history and narrative in a quest that guides the player to see past the false discourse of Columbia's dominant ideology and to perceive the stark inequalities underlying this utopian projection. This points to a further avenue for research on player response: when games like *BioShock* point their players in the direction of greater truths, do players seek out these truths, and if so, what resources are available to them?

Several similar issues are raised by Daniel Giere in the article "Let's Play the Boston Tea Party – Exemplary Analysis of Historical Events in Digital Games," which analyzes elements of historical (in)accuracy in the depiction of the Boston Tea Party in the Ubisoft game *Assassin's Creed III*, developed in Montreal. Giere pays careful attention to the uses of time and space that impact any discussions of "historical accuracy" in relation to video games—in general, Giere's analysis suggests, it is less important to determine whether a game is accurate or inaccurate than to understand games' specific mechanisms and systems for conveying historical and narrative content. Through a detailed comparative analysis between the game's (more violent) depiction of the historical event and the current historiographical understanding of the actual event itself, Giere ultimately suggests that the historical inaccuracy of the game may be a kind of "teachable" aspect and an entry point for problem-oriented learning. This type of perspective—relating in-game learning to other forms of historical narrative, historiography and history education—is essential for understanding how games don't just teach players the "wrong" history, but can function in concert with other materials and media to improve players' understanding of history, when approached critically as an important and relevant form of historical representation.

Mahshid Mayar's interview with Stephen

Joyce, "The Post-Apocalyptic and the Ludic," sheds light on Joyce's recent work, which focuses on the profusion of post-apocalyptic entertainment over the past quarter century, with particular attention to the genre's relationship to transmedia storytelling and media franchising. Joyce's work examines the attraction of games like *BioShock*, *Fallout* and *The Last of Us* and multi-platform fictional worlds like *The Walking Dead* within a "trans-media ecosystem," helping to understand games' relationship to other media and platforms. Joyce attributes the surge in popularity of the post-apocalyptic genre to a generalized fear about the pace of technological and industrial change, combined with the dawn of the nuclear era following World War II. Perhaps most provocative is Joyce's idea of the post-apocalyptic as a chance to rewrite the social contract: if we could imagine a different world, how might it be better, not just worse? How can we use post-apocalyptic and/or fictionalized history in games to reimagine history and geopolitics? To respond to some of these questions, Joyce provides much-needed attention to examples from outside of the English-speaking world, like the Ukrainian-Russian collaboration *Metro: Last Light*, which provide important context for understanding how a U.S.-dominated genre is interpreted in less-frequently-examined countries and languages. Ultimately, Joyce's research offers an important exploration of how postcolonialism is informing the design of mainstream games like *Bioshock*, *The Last of Us* and *Assassin's Creed*, but also points to the importance of looking beyond mainstream "postcolonial" game series produced in the United States to better comprehend how this critical trajectory is impacting gaming as a global phenomenon.

The original and promising scholarship included in this special issue points to several significant areas for development and growth in regional game studies. Likewise, the reviews of Adam Chapman's *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* and my own book *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* help illustrate how current scholarship is grappling with many of the issues addressed in the current issue's articles: how history is transformed when conveyed in video games, the obstacles and affordances to representing real-world events in ludic game spaces, and the impact of cultural perspective and identity on video games' production and reception.

There is a need for further analysis of the impact of the specific national, cultural and geographical contexts in which games are created, circulated and consumed—how does the location in which a game is developed affect its content and meaning? Likewise, scholars that focus attention to the ways the dynamics of gender, class, race and sexual identity impact games from production to reception, as well as those who make use of primary and secondary sources in languages other than English, are providing key insights that enrich and diversify our understanding of how games create unique experiences for different audiences worldwide. Cultural and historical representation in video games remains an important concern for postcolonial and decolonial game scholarship, and works such as Pfister's historico-critical review of piracy games points to the possibility of critically examining other types of topoi and conventional settings in games. Overall, the contributions to this special issue demonstrate the importance of in-game depictions of history and culture, while simultaneously signaling the need to understand the context of a game's development, and how location, culture and nationality inform the types of assumptions, narrative elements and symbolism included in video games played by an ever-increasing number of individuals across the globe. I applaud the efforts undertaken by Mahshid Mayar and her collaborators on this special issue, as their work points to a bright and ever-more complex future in regional game studies.

Notes

1. See Newzoo, *2018 Global Games Market Report*, light version, pp. 17-22.

2. See Bjarke Liboriussen and Paul Martin, "Regional Game Studies."

3. See Ruberg, Bonnie, and Adrienne Shaw, eds., *Queer game studies*, Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*

4. Mukherjee, Souvik, *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*,

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Author's Biography

Phillip Penix-Tadsen is a specialist in contemporary Latin American cultural studies. He earned a Ph.D. from Columbia University and is Associate Professor of Spanish and Latin American Studies at the University of Delaware, where he also teaches courses in game studies. He is the author of *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* (MIT Press, 2016), which offers a synthetic theorization of the relationship between video games and culture, based on analysis of both in-game cultural representation and the real-life economic, political and societal effects of games. He is currently working on an edited anthology titled *Video Games and the Global South.*