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Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America, *by Phillip Penix-Tadsen. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016. (Book Review)*

NAIMA SHAHEEN (BIELEFELD UNIVERSITY)

The main objective of Phillip Penix-Tadsen's *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* is to provide the "first synthetic theorization of the relationship between video games and culture" (1). His theoretical and critical attention is drawn towards video games and the ways in which they are shaped by culture and how, in turn, video games shape culture. Penix-Tadsen is an associate professor in Spanish and Latin American studies at the University of Delaware. His interest in Latin American culture and video games is combined in *Cultural Code*, in which he particularly focuses on Latin American culture and its relationship to games. To establish his theory, the author benefits from the Uruguayan game theorist Gonzo Frasca's term "ludology" in reference to video games. Penix-Tadsen expands upon Frasca's definition and further develops it into "cultural ludology," a concept which he further utilizes throughout the volume. Cultural ludology serves here as a tool to examine how culture is incorporated in the development of video games and how cultural practices change the perception and content of video games. Exploring the visual-narrative and algorithmic nature of video games, the term sheds light on the interplay between culture and video games as well as explaining how video games can visually represent a culture.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section *How Culture Uses Games* focuses on Latin American gaming practices from the early years of video games' popularity to the present. The author elaborates on the use of video games in culture in this section, such as for commercial, recreational, serious and persuasive reasons. Penix-Tadsen therefore concentrates on video games in South and Central America (for example Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba) and the Caribbean Isles. He further includes areas in the United States which are highly influenced by

Latin American culture due to a large percentage of the Latin American population (such as in Los Angeles or Miami) in order to demonstrate how video games can be used for political purposes. To cite examples, he analyzes "persuasive games" such as *La Migra* (Rafael Fajardo 2001) and *Crosser* (Fajardo 2000). Both these games deal with the issue of "illegal immigration" but from different perspectives. In these games, the player is either the "illegal immigrant" whose goal is to cross the border without being caught (*Crosser*) or the border patrol whose responsibility is to prevent "illegal immigrants" from crossing the border (*La Migra*) (90f.).

The book's second half *How Games Use Culture* examines the representation of culture in popular video games set in Latin America, and it explores how sound elements, visual iconography and other factors are used to add meaning to video games. He suggests reading video games as a sign system in order to understand the so-called "third meaning" or "obtuse meaning" (144), which cannot be reduced to a signifying system of language (a reference to the formal linguistic theory by Ferdinand de Saussure). Penix-Tadsen analyzes various games such as *Tomb Raider*, *Uncharted*, and *Red Dead Redemption* in order to examine the extent to which a game can represent Latin American culture through the representation of the Latin American space. Furthermore, he analyzes *Grand Theft Auto V* to demonstrate how multiculturalism is represented in a video game (see chapter 5). Penix-Tadsen claims that these game environments support players in creating a cognitive map. The player, he asserts, not only perceives the game's environment as spatial context but finds themselves its inhabitant. The space within the video game becomes "an environmental context for the active creation of culturally contextualized meaning"

(178). As such, sounds, iconography, and the representation of culture become essential parts of such a game-space. Penix-Tadsen closes his book by expressing a continuing desire to explore various cultures, their codes, and their relation to video games, which are set in or focus on Latin America.

Penix-Tadsen's study contributes to our understanding of the dynamics between video games and culture. Especially in the second section, the usefulness of his approach with regard to the analysis of video games and culture are demonstrated. His intellectual framework is influenced by various scholars of the field of Latin American studies and his lines of argumentations are carefully mapped out and easy to comprehend. Overall, the volume offers a thorough investigation of Latin American culture and video games. With this, Penix-Tadsen raises awareness toward the sparsely researched exchange of Latin America and the video game industry. Penix-Tadsen is one of the first to elaborate on this topic and the first one to display the importance of understanding how Latin America is represented in video games and which functions video games have within Latin America. This creates a general awareness of the importance of video games with regard to various other purposes beyond the ludological aspect. His study also raises the question as to why there is so little knowledge about such a large and complex space and relatively prominent setting for video games. Given the increasing number of works which have focused on video game culture in/about the United States in the past years, Latin America, as a part of the Americas and a significant market for the video games produced by global gaming companies, deserves more scholarly attention, too. Penix-Tadsen's *Cultural Code* encourages the exploration and research on these matters and provides a basis for this new academic conversation.

Author's biography

Naima Shaheen is completing a master's degree in British and American Studies at Bielefeld University. Her major research interest lies in analyzing the representation of human psychology in digital games, especially concerning the question how mental diseases of playable characters are reflected in horror games. She is further interested in how new narrative possibilities provided by video games change the reception and understanding of mental illness and of narratives in general.