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Special Issue

# **Nation(alism), Identity and Video Gaming**

edited by

Lisa Kienzl and Kathrin Trattner

## Issue 11 (2019)

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## Round Table Discussion on *Nation(alism), Identity and Video Gaming* with with Megan Condis, Marijam

**Didžgalvytė, Georg Hobmeier and Souvik Mukherjee**

Kathrin Trattner and Lisa Kienzl

### Abstract

Questions of nation and identity not only concern multiple aspects of video games, their production, and their consumption, but also require further and manifold discussion from different perspectives. In an effort to bring together voices from different fields that engage with video games and gaming practices from various perspectives, this virtual round table discussion attempts to open up the conversation beyond the realms of academia. Kathrin Trattner and Lisa Kienzl talked to Megan Condis, Marijam Didžgalvytė, Georg Hobmeier and Souvik Mukherjee about how concepts such as nation(alism) and identity impact video game representations, the gaming industry, and online gaming cultures in numerous ways.

**Keywords:** Nation, Nationalism, Identity, Round Table, Discussion, Megan Condis, Marijam Didžgalvytė, Georg Hobmeier, Souvik Mukherjee, gameenvironments

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### Introduction

In the course of compiling this special issue, we were tasked with the following question: What is our perspective as researchers regarding our field of investigation? We believe that video games are embedded in multiple contexts – historical, economical, sociocultural, medial, and political. Our approach is heavily influenced by Cultural Studies, which, particularly in relation to media, means that “meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes



or practices” (Hall 1997, 3). Video games analysis, in this sense, requires a closer look beyond the games themselves as a text. Consequently, we are also interested in the manifold use of concepts such as nation, nationalism and identity in the gaming communities, the specific production conditions of video games and, not least, the societal and media debates involved.

However, to take on a viewpoint that is derived from Cultural Studies also means to constantly scrutinize our role as researchers in these discussions. As Rothenberger, Auer and Pratt (2017, 176) argue, this reflection “of normative influences is required to better understand the mechanisms and functionality of the scientific field”.

Understanding video games as a vital part of everyday culture, we wanted to go a step further and look beyond the realms of academia in order to find seminal answers to our questions by including multiple perspectives from people who engage with video games in various ways. After all, questions of nation, nationalism, identity and video gaming do not concern researchers alone. These issues influence the work of game designers, have a big impact on gaming communities, and even affect political commentary and activism. Moreover, we also argue that it is important to go beyond a Western-centric perspective in this discussion and look at how these issues are reflected in the context of discussions of postcolonialism. In our opinion, underlining this plurality of voices emphasizes the benefits of a serious and enriching discussion. For this purpose, we came up with the idea of a virtual round table discussion: A moderated discussion with four participants representing these different perspectives – giving us insights into the realms of different academic fields, political commentary and activism, and game design. We sent numerous questions to our participants attempting to synergize all the different viewpoints and areas of focus.

## Participants

Megan Condis is an assistant professor at the Department of Communication Studies at Texas Tech University. In her research, she investigates the connections between technologies and racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities. Her book, *Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks, and the Gendered Battle for Online Culture* (Condis 2018), published by the University of Iowa Press, examines “how gender politics are being filtered through and produced by the logic of video games” (Condis 2018, 3). In 2019, she published an article in The New York Times on how video games and gaming culture function as a recruitment ground for white nationalist ideologies (Condis 2019). She is also a member of the Editorial Board for the *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*.

Marijam Didžgalvytė is a London-based freelance content creator and guest lecturer dissecting the intersection between video games and IRL politics. Her work has been published by the Guardian, VICE, GamesIndustry.biz, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and many others. Marijam currently serves as the Chair of Communications Committee for Game Workers Unite International – an organization assisting in unionizing the global video games industry, she also co-founded GWU UK – the first legal trade union that has come out of the movement. Didžgalvytė’s expertise lies in researching the radical political history and cultural output of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and applying them to the development of politics in the gaming sphere. In 2019, Marijam was nominated for GamesIndustry.biz’s 100 Women in Games as well as *Campaigner of The Year* at MCV UK Awards.

Georg Hobmeier, is a media artist and game designer whose work lingers in the borderlands of political communication, digital media and games. After a decade of developing art that was interfacing dance, theatre, and technology, he turned his

attention to the development of games and interactive storytelling. His debut work, the mod *Frontiers* (2012), received extensive media coverage and earned him the Outstanding Artist Award of the Austrian ministry of culture in 2012. In 2014, he founded *Causa Creations*, a studio dedicated to social awareness and fundraising games. Recent projects include *The Fallen* (2017), *Path Out* (2017), *Nowhere Prophet* (2019) and the game theatre project *Vienna – All Tomorrows*.

Souvik Mukherjee is an assistant professor in English Literature at Presidency University, Kolkata. He completed his PhD at Nottingham Trent University on video games and storytelling. Souvik’s research interests include video games and literary theory, identity and temporality in video games as well as the South-East Asian gaming industry. In 2017, he published *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*. Therein he explores long-neglected issues of how video games tend to construct notions of spatiality, society, and political systems that are still deeply ingrained in colonialism. A particular focus of his book is moving beyond an examination of European and American gaming cultures and addressing issues relating to a global audience. Beyond game studies, Souvik is also interested in Digital Humanities and early modern (Renaissance) literature.

**Nation(alism), Identity, and Video gaming: A Multiperspective Discussion**

**Kathrin Trattner:** Your track records show us that you all engage with video games and gaming in different ways and contexts. Despite a shared interest in societal and political discourses mediated through games and gaming practices, your approaches to certain issues differ greatly, depending on your respective field of competence.



To start in medias res, how would you assess the impact of concepts such as nation, nation building, nationalism or identity on video games in general? Which influence do these concepts have on the gaming industry?

**Megan Condis:** One of the things that I work on in my research is the way that video games as a cultural object have become integrated into existing identity categories and are used as props to uphold and perform certain identities (for example: whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality). Although virtual worlds are often optimistically imagined as spaces of *free play* where gamers can try on different ways of being and explore different facets of their identities (an idea that, many once assumed, would naturally lead to the disillusion of oppressive hierarchies and the embrace of liminality and fluidity of identity in these spaces), I would argue that discourses around gaming and what it means to be a gamer are steeped in existing schemas related to race, gender, and sexuality. Being a gamer might not mean being physically embodied as a white male, but it often means being willing to submit to rhetorical regimes that privilege the performance of whiteness and maleness and imagine other kinds of performances as aberrant and possibly even destructive to the cohesiveness of the larger community. This makes gamer culture ripe for exploitation by anti-feminists, homophobes and transphobes, and white supremacists, who hope to use gaming culture as a vehicle to expose a brand new crop of disaffected young white men to their toxic, hateful ideology.

**Lisa Kienzl:** In fact, the reification of existing identity categories and the exclusion mechanisms involved can be observed in several contexts of video games and gaming culture. You mention that concepts such as the notion of the *nation* and the often concurrent ideas of gendered, racialized, sexual, and religious identities can reinforce clearly visible demarcations in the formation of the gamers' self-identity.

However, how did this mental picture of the self, that still has an impact on gaming cultures, originate? How long will this impact remain in full force and effect? In this regard, what are your thoughts concerning the video gaming industry, Marijam?

**Marijam Didžgalvytė:** The poverty of mechanics in video games has resulted in a few basic scenarios being repeated ad infinitum in the medium. The historically limited community of people capable and willing to create games, has also limited the output, hyper-masculine tropes have until fairly recently stayed unchallenged. In such a context, we have seen themes of military action, nation building and Western hegemony becoming normal in this global industry. Such offer worked and brought about large and stable profits in the first forty years of the industry, but the companies have eventually caught up with the fact that it's abandoning a huge population that may not be interested in such themes. The diversification of video games in the past ten years came about due to the lowering of the cost of making games, but also because the capitalist class had to expand its audience. In the height of the military game boom, circa early 2000s, when even the United States Department of Defense was using this burgeoning industry for its own needs, we have seen Western hegemony being extremely capable in imposing its myth on to a new cultural phenomena.

**Kathrin Trattner:** This is an interesting point. How would you, Georg, as a politically engaged game designer, value the close relation between the military, war, and video gaming?

**Georg Hobmeier:** It is crucial to remember that computers and digital games in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were a byproduct of the cold war. We should keep this in mind, when assessing the history of games. All too often, the bills of those who invented

computers and later on games on computers were paid directly or indirectly through the military. Therefore, it also should not surprise us, that games have a troublesome history regarding the reproduction of hegemonic imagery and symbols. There was an infusion of counter cultural thinking in tech too, but the way these concepts have been handled in the last four decades was mostly problematic. In recent years, we saw a different thinking trickle into the gaming industry. Mainstream disputes around identity, colonialism a.o. related themes are now handled in a much more diverse way, but we also saw the rise of very conservative and reactionary forces grow in numerous backlashes. What we can say for sure, is that we are now past the naive and unquestioning reproduction. Now we are facing the actual debate as it seems.

**Lisa Kienzl:** Marijam and Georg, you have both observed various changes in the gaming industry and culture in the past years. However, excluding discussions appear to linger in various contexts. Souvik, what are your thoughts on these issues?

**Souvik Mukherjee:** I would like to view the initial question from multiple perspectives. On the one hand, nation, nationalism and identity are very different things. Benedict Anderson has given us the concept of nations as imagined communities but indeed, there is a vast spectrum within which the term is viewed still. Empire-building RTS (real-time strategy) games such as *Age of Empires* series (1998-2018), *Civilization* series (1991-2016) and *Rise of Nations* (2003) are all about steering a particular nation to power and glory, usually at the cost of enslaving, dispossessing, colonizing and destroying others. Strangely, such games continue to be ever-popular despite discourses on postcolonialism and anti-imperialism being common currency in our socio-cultural milieu. Then there are games such as *Call of Duty* series (2003-2019) where, again, the defense of a nation in times of war and peace is the prime *call of duty* for the player. Jingoism is a thing that is quite common in video games

today, although there are some recent titles (especially among the indies) that challenge such a common perception.

I am not sure that I am qualified to comment on the industry in general, but I will speak briefly on the Indian scenario, which I have been studying for over a decade now (see Mukherjee 2015). There is a move now towards *Indian-ness* in games here and for multiple reasons. First, there is the whole issue of promoting Indian culture and some developers draw on Indian (mostly Hindu) mythology as in games such as *Raji* or a mix of Indian cultural tropes as in *Antariksha Sanchar* (both games are in development); a fictional ancient Indian city is depicted in *Unrest*. One should here add the caveat that in a country with 22 regional languages and many more dialects (180 mother-tongues according to the 1991 Census), the diversity is tremendous and any one idea of *Indian-ness* might not suffice. The second reason, though, is of course one that plays on the patriotic – the first Indian FPS games were either *Bhagat Singh* (2002) or *Yoddha* (1999), both made in the late nineties. The former is about the Indian freedom fighter, Bhagat Singh, who assassinated British colonial officials and was sentenced to death; the latter was about Pakistan and India’s conflict in the Kargil region in July 1999. Whether these are indicative of the Indian gaming industry, in general, is a moot question. Indian video games are very diverse, ranging from Badminton simulators to *Somewhere* (n.d.), a postcolonial game on subalternity. I would say that nation and nation-building might be a concern somewhere in the Indian gaming industry but not one that essentially underpins it.

**Kathrin Trattner:** Indeed, the impact of concepts such as nation, nationalism and identity on video games and their production can take on very different forms. This becomes particularly salient when looking beyond European and US-American contexts, as you, Souvik, have demonstrated. When we talked about gamers earlier,

some of you pointed out that increasing discussions on issues of identity within gaming culture have also led to concurrent backlashes as a reaction to these new debates. In these reactions, excluding notions of identity, of what it means to be a gamer, play a crucial role. Taking a closer look at questions of nation and nationalism in this regard, another interesting point is that although, as pointed out in our introduction, video gaming is a global phenomenon, these demarcations of identity are still of great concern. This brings us to our next question, namely: Even though gaming offers the opportunity of trans-regional and trans-national activity, the concept of nationality remains most important in the gaming community, e.g. as a part of online gaming or esports. What are your thoughts on that?

**Marijam Didžgalvytė:** That is a truly disturbing and upsetting aspect of the ever-growing esports community – the fact that there exists this imposed categorization of players according to their country of origin. The monetary success of events such as the World Cup inevitably creates a push for electronic sports to adopt a similar model and form teams according to their nationality. The creation of nationalist sympathies is in fact purely artificial in the competitive activities online; In analogue sports one could argue that teammates have grown up in close proximity to each other, they had cultural affiliations and that is what brought them together. In esports though, borders do not exist - physical proximity only matters as to how far the servers can reach, not where one's passport gets checked. How sad is it that we are now building fictitious competitions based on nationality in an online realm, which is by definition international. The large sums of money behind mainstream sports events such as the Olympics and other World Championships create a ready-made model as to how esports could be presented. However, the hope is that esports can eventually find





for example, it never really mattered where people came from and teams always seemed to be rather international. The main question was: Would those global teams be able to defeat the Chinese ones? I am not so informed about other esports, but I had the feeling that the spirit of competition was much fiercer with traditional sports.

**Kathrin Trattner:** Evidently, there are versatile and bidirectional patterns of interaction between video games, gaming culture and questions of nation, nationalism and identity. Hence, societal discussions not only find their ways into games, influence their production conditions, and impact how gamers identify. Rather, games and gaming culture serve as fundamental political stages that promote such debates. Nowadays, more and more societal discussions broach the issue of emerging nationalism and populism. How important is it to have a critical look at video games in this context and how should this issue be approached?

**Souvik Mukherjee:** In India, *PUBG* or *Player Unknown Battlegrounds* (2017) is a popular video game, played across the country mainly on mobile phones. Recently, the game has been discussed widely in connection with the recent military build-up and related events in India and Pakistan. Similarly, the use of video games by U.S. Army (named *America's Army* [2002/2009/2013]) or the response to this in games such as *Under Ash* (2002) is another example where the interests of nationalism spill over into games. There are indeed many video games that address political issues and some of them are about national boundaries while others are about crossing these boundaries. The VR games made by developers in Hong Kong to simulate the pro-democracy protests or the *Yellow Umbrella* (2014) video game, named after the Yellow Umbrella protests in 2014, are cases in point. Games such as *Bury Me, My Love* (2017) that talk about the refugee crisis after the Syrian War and about the crossing of national boundaries are also particularly poignant additions to the discussions of

nationalism. Access to territory and facilities becomes key issues – in a game such as *Papers, Please!* (2013) the whole scenario of granting entry (or not) to people and determining their identity as nationals comes to the fore.

Video games have indeed been in the thick of discussions on nationalism for a long time now. What video games do very well is to provide a space of possibility where multiple scenarios can be played and replayed. They make it possible to experience situations in the shoes of the Other, thus providing a more complex idea of identity. Such a complexity is always a challenge to monolithic ideas of nationhood.

Ultimately, even in games such as *Age of Empires* series (1998-2018), the instability of entities such as empire and the fluidity of national boundaries becomes evident to any player. I believe that video games have a very important place in the social sciences and students of history and international relations would benefit from a sincere engagement with video games.

I remember this game, *Peacemaker* (2007), on the Israel-Palestine conflict. The game was started as a student university project and as a reviewer on the Google PlayStore comments, “as an Israeli, I learned about the other side and managed to understand how it looks from the Arab side” (Rubin 2019). I believe Game Studies scholars should seriously engage in outreach activities to connect discussions on video games to wider debates in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Interdisciplinary conferences and publications are a way forward. Using games in our day-to-day pedagogy (just like the *Peacemaker* game) is another. Of course, the increasing reach of video games using the mobile phone and easily accessible indie games that focus on such deep issues could prove helpful. I have my fingers crossed.

**Lisa Kienzl:** Viewing video games as potential vehicles for scrutinizing and destabilizing monolithic concepts of nation and identity is an interesting perspective, thank you, Souvik. Megan, what are your thoughts on how societal discussions of nation, nationalism and identity relate to video gaming?

**Megan Condis:** I believe it is vital that we both look at how video games as interactive narratives are imagining nationalism and populism on the level of story and at how video games as platforms are being used organize and radicalize young men in service of nationalist and populist political agendas. The latter, I think, is especially important because it involves asking not just what kinds of narratives game designers are creating but also how political narratives are (or are not) imagined to function within the broader ecosystem of gaming culture (on social media, on gaming-related forums, on Discord and Twitch, etc.). In fact, I would argue that one of the most effective means of political indoctrination that takes place in video game culture has been the attempt to rhetorically position community concerns relating to issues of diversity and inclusion as inherently *political* (and therefore as divisive and dangerous) while explicitly racist or white supremacist speech comes to be labeled as *trolling, just jokes or heated gaming moments*.

**Kathrin Trattner:** There are many examples that confirm your observations on how online platforms relating to video games and gaming culture are providing a continuous breeding ground for the targeted recruitment to white nationalism. Think of the close ties between Breitbart, Gamergate, and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (Johnson 2016, Sherr and Carson 2017) or more recently, the link between mass shootings and online gamer communities (Wu 2019). Marijam, from your perspective, what is the role of politics in video game culture?

**Marijam Didžgalvytė:** Counter to many people's and even players' beliefs, video gaming is in fact a space where politics do happen, it is not a neutral, apolitical enclave like some industry commentators would like one to believe. Far-right actors such as Steve Bannon or Milo Yiannopoulos have recognised that this often-alienated population can be utilised for certain political gains with relative ease. They were the architects of Gamergate and the eventual election of Donald Trump. Hence it is my belief that gaming communities certainly hold a huge cultural and political influence. If the voices counter to the ones with nationalist and populist tendencies do not begin to populate this medium and propagate critical thought, we may see a further development of far-right infrastructures in the gaming milieu. Having diverse and empathetic voices in Twitch and other streaming services, a network of individuals questioning what is the relationship between engaging in the curation of the seductiveness of a gaming culture and a praxis that actually delivers material results - these are all the fights that are sure going to come up in the games industry in the years to come. The hope is that academia, companies that are interested in investing in the long-term, and their workers well-being, will understand that this generation of culture consumers have a much higher moral standard as to how their products are being created, and will envision a world beyond exploitation.

**Lisa Kienzl:** Is there a need to recognize video games and gaming culture as sites of political discussions? Georg, any thoughts on that?

**Georg Hobmeier:** We are still in the middle of a process to educate players and developers on how games might not be so innocent after all. Therefore, this remains a very critical part of the work. At the same time, I always wonder, how this education can take place? Will developers educate each other? What about those that are not interested in making progressive games and don't like to engage with progressive

politics? At many conferences there seems to be a general understanding that we are a progressive community, but I have my doubts that this is being adopted by every single entity as the *new natural order*. Behind the many keynote speeches that advertise a diverse medium, there is still a ferocious debate between developers themselves and of course with the increasingly toxic and sectarian gamer communities.

**Kathrin Trattner:** Overall, it appears that things are, indeed, changing: The industry is diversifying and with it the representations in games are too. On the other hand, these changes have also led to increasing backlashes from gamer communities and game producers that appear to feel an increasing need to reinsure themselves of their own identity in excluding, toxic, and even violent ways. Questions of nation, nationalism and different aspects of identity collide in these discussions in various ways. One could say these questions, to a certain extent, are a potential minefield. Could you point out a few issues, addressing the entanglement of national, nationalism identity and video gaming, that from your point of view are especially important, fascinating or that should be tackled in academic research, the gaming industry and the wide-range societal discussions involved?

**Megan Condis:** In the next few years, I would love to see more work being done on how the act of participating in play itself, as charming and fun and, therefore, intellectually disarming as it can be, functions as a potential vector for the transmission of political ideology. As the recent controversy regarding Blizzard's censorship of political speech sympathetic to the protests in Hong Kong in a seeming attempt to court favor with the Chinese government amply demonstrates, video games are starting to be seen as a powerful venue for the spread of political speech. It is vital that we start to consider how governments and other political entities might

use games and gaming culture for political communication and that we insist on thinking through how the gaming industry's decisions with regards to questions of freedom of expression, inclusion, and community organization are always already political in nature.

**Souvik Mukherjee:** There are indeed many issues. What strikes me as very relevant now would be topics such as colonialism/postcolonialism, refugee-crises, immigration, transnational movement, neoliberalism, democracy and of course, patriotism, jingoism and political ideologies such as fascism. Then again, as demonstrated in the examples above, these are already being addressed. I would also add environmental issues and climate change to these as what happens on that front will hugely impact ideas of nationhood in the near future.

**Marijam Didžgalvytė:** If one looks at the scope and funding given to the research towards fine art & politics, one quickly discovers that the same attention is not awarded to the largest cultural enclave there is – gaming. Behind this mainstream medium, there are vast online networks driving ahead serious political agendas, a power that people fetishizing film and fine art have fallen substantially behind. It is through the introduction of the incentives of class conflict, profit gains and the disillusionment of the *lone artist* that one can achieve a generation of games workers and consumers that are able to think outside the narrative of capitalism. For that to blossom, gaming academia must think about the materialist conditions that have paid the way towards the gaming themes' hegemony of the 90s, the rise of women in tech in the 1950s, their fallout through targeting in the 1960s, the win of the artist genius and the accidental mechanics of Id software in the 1990s, rise of far-right rhetoric in the early 2000s, funded by the U.S. Department of Defense, and the history



ahead of that. Beyond that, readings by Adorno, Gramsci, Marx, Hall and Tronti should be absolutely essential for the industry moving forward.

**Georg Hobmeier:** Personally, I think the elephant in the room is the portrait of war in games and how that relates to issues such as nationalism and identity. In some particular genres, the *Call of Duty* series (2003-2019) in particular, we still have an incredibly naive reproduction of a rather propagandistic image of war. There were a few attempts of deconstructing that, but the mainstream still marches on to the same drum as in previous decades. The industry is very defensive here, because it has been accused of inducing violence in general and was not allowed to open itself up to a broader debate here. Maybe this needs to happen in various stages: academic analysis, reflection within the creating industry itself and then a reflected debate with the public. I have little hope for the last one: It is too easy and cheap for the press to cash in on anti-videogames sentiments. Within the medium itself, the self-declared *hardcore gamers* are also not open towards reflection on debate. As long as we only communicate defensively with a vitriolic tone, not much will change and move forward.

**Lisa Kienzl:** We thank you all for your engagement in this quite unusual attempt to bring together different voices in this field. We hope that you enjoyed our interdisciplinary dialog with considerable interesting perspectives and views.

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