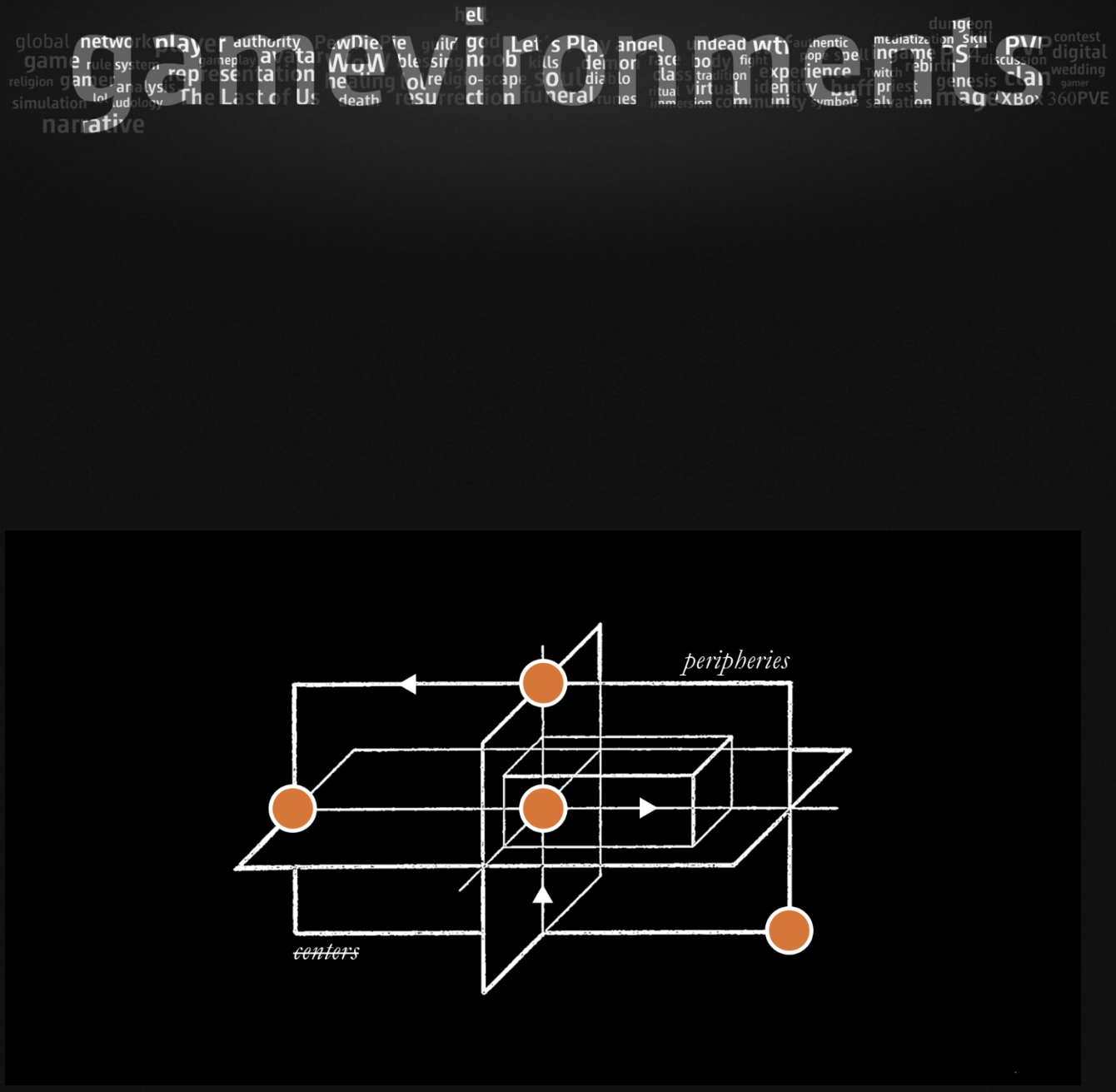

Peripheries – Title Image. Image by Aska Mayer. CC BY-NC.

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Review

Review of Christopher B. Patterson and Tara Fickle's *Made in Asia/America: Why Video Games Were Never (Really) About Us* (2024)[i]

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Abstract
A review of Christopher B. Patterson and Tara Fickle's edited volume *Made in Asia/America: Why Video Games Were Never (Really) About Us* (2024).

Keywords: Book Review, Asia, America, gamevironments

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The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 led to an increase in anti-Asian racism and violence across the globe. The USA saw a reemergence of the racial discourse of so-called yellow peril against the Asian American community in everyday practices and news. During this time of anti-Asian rhetoric, the edited collection *Made in Asia/America: Why Video Games Were Never (Really) About Us* was put together by Christopher B. Patterson and Tara Fickle and published by the Duke University Press in 2024.

Made in Asia/America starts with a brief history on Asian/American racialisation and discourses in digital media, pointing towards the breeding of new forms of techno-orientalism with the rise of gaming cultures. The introduction frames games as a ludo-orientalist medium, a term taken from Fickle's prior work, "wherein the design,

marketing, and rhetoric of games shape how Asians as well as East-West relations are imagined" (Fickle 2019, 3). As racial stereotypes of Asians are currently associated with technology, the collection is interested in considering whether the shift to digital media in the past decades shows a novel phenomenon of racial thinking or if it such thinking is "easily encoded into digital media through its supposed absence" (Patterson and Fickle 2024, 6). As the editors point out, many games are littered with exotic content and stereotypical Asian characters, but these racialisations are often obscured by either not referencing any Asian country or space directly, and/or by wrapping these games in positive feelings of pleasure and fun (Patterson and Fickle 2024, 7). The editors thus asked chapter contributors to engage with questions such as: "how do games combat facile discussions of racial and other forms of diversity?" and "how do we make arguments about games that expose imperial networks?" (Patterson and Fickle 2024, 14).

A North American Narrative

In the introduction's overview on game studies, the editors note that one of their challenges is that scholars they witnessed in game studies spaces treat Asian games localised for Western audiences as universal products that have little to do with any structures of power rooted in orientalism, colonialism, or imperialism. The collection posits itself as the first edited collection that explores how the "logics, flows, and intimate relations orbit the social anxieties and racializations of Asia/America" (Patterson and Fickle 2024, 4). The editors reflect in the conclusion (called a Coda here) a bit more on what this exploration meant to them, as they state that, during the writing process, chapter contributors, roundtablists, and even reviewers consistently challenged them with the same critical inquiry of "how do games fundamentally disrupt our normative ways of understanding race?" (Patterson and

Fickle 2024, 307). Their answer is one that imagines radical possibilities that take the discussion beyond diversity and toward more antiracist and abolitionist political practices supported by videogames as means to offer an understanding of race. *Made in Asia/America*, then, constructs itself as a multicultural collection that aims to diversify the field of Game Studies while decentring the Asian American identity (Patterson and Fickle 2024, 310).

The editors often refer to the field of game studies in a broad manner, but the collection's concrete focus is on North America, meaning here the USA and Canada. I like the collection's specific focus on issues of race and Asian bodies in North American game culture, but the introduction's narrow story regarding game studies reveals a point of contention, because it takes a North American version of the history of game studies for granted. The blurb on the back cover (present only in the collection's physical version) states that the collection shifts away from "Eurocentric, white, masculinist takes on gaming" by focusing on minority and queer experiences, practices, and innovative scholarly methods (Patterson and Fickle 2024, blurb). This stepping away from a Eurocentric focus on game studies is most clearly seen in the introduction's section called "Playing with Ourselves: On Game Studies," which serves as the main explanation on the collection's contribution to the field. This section frames Dutch historian Johan Huizinga and French sociologist Roger Caillois as the "founding fathers" (Patterson and Fickle 2024, 10) of modern game studies to criticise a part of the game studies field in the early 2000s for its continued boundaries between digital games and the sociopolitical world. This boundary is attributed to the idea of the *magic circle*, originally only a single word[ii] mentioned just a handful of times in Huizinga's (1938) *Homo Ludens* but which obtained its own life in game studies through Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman's (2004) *Rules of Play*.[iii] An explanation on the legacy of this word is, unfortunately, absent from this particular

collection. However, this critique of game studies' legacy can be traced back to Fickle's (2019) previous monograph, *The Race Card*, that explores Huizinga's *magic circle* and Caillois' definition of play as ludo-oriental in more detail.

The introduction's story regarding game studies unfortunately shows omission of scholarly work from outside of North America, giving the impression that North American scholarship is representative of the entire field. The same section, "Playing with Ourselves," continues from Huizinga to the infamous "narratology/ludology debate", described as a discursive but "insular debate" (on which I agree) of competing sides in the early 2000s that overshadowed scholars focusing on the social impact of games (Patterson and Fickle 2024, 11). The overshadowed scholars are named, Lisa Nakamura and Henry Jenkins – both prominent scholars located in the USA – but the omission of other game scholarship is notable. In my opinion, the introduction would have been able to frame the collection better as a unique contribution if it had included contemporary scholarship adjacent to the fields of game studies and Asian American Studies – preferably to give space to lesser-known scholars. I'm thinking of works on postcolonial games (James 1963, Hammar 2016, Euteneuer 2018) including those by their own contributors (Hutchinson 2016, Mukherjee 2017); works on imperialism (Jin 2015), race and leisure (Mowatt 2018), indigenous cultural heritage (Laiti et al. 2020), or refugees (Navarro-Remesal and Pérez Zapata 2019); or, works on regional game studies such as China (Liboriussen and Martin 2016, Chen, McAllister, and Ruggill 2024), Korea (Jin 2010, Anonymous 22-01 2022, Chee 2023), Japan (Daliot-Bul 2014, Nguyen 2022, Bruno 2023), and maybe even works on Latin America (Penix-Tadsen 2016) or on Eastern Europe (Švelch 2018). While some of the works I mention here were published after this collection had likely already reached the production stage, the point is the bounty of available scholarly work. Instead, the presence of the so-called narratology/ludology

debate in this section serves to draw attention to works from the 2010s, presented as a "second life" (Patterson and Fickle 2024, 11) in game studies, which are works published by those in the Anglosphere. If it can be said that game studies saw a second life in the 2010s, then it is only a North American one.

Organisation of the Collection

The collection is divided into five parts: Gaming Orientalism, Playable Bodies, Localizing Empire, Inhabiting the Asiatic, and Mobilizing Machines. Each part is introduced by a Designer Roundtable followed by three chapters, providing a structural consistency that lasts throughout. The collection diverges somewhat from conventional academic publications in its editorial practice to focus on what the editors call *interaction*, which refers to the fostering of collaboration between editors and contributors. Framing the editorial process an experiment, the editors encouraged the contributors to write short, playful, and experimental chapters that would build upon each other. This is neatly accomplished through the collection's division into the five parts that each highlight games as contested sites where meanings of Asia and America are constantly negotiated in different ways. The contributor biographies show that the contributors range from junior and independent scholars to tenured professors, with expertise such as media and culture studies, immigration, postcolonialism, Asian/America, Japan, China, or Korea Studies, and more. Most of these scholars are located in North America, and a few are located internationally. The editors also fostered collaboration by inviting national and international game makers, who identify as Asian American and marginalised, for participation in roundtables to discuss their views on race in their games that became introductory devices for the five parts in the collection.

The editors mention that they were not concerned with citations in the chapters, encouraging the contributors to use less citations and more of their own experiences. The result is 14 short, easily readable and playful chapters engaging with scholarship in game studies. Notably, thorough engagement with scholarship beyond the editors' prior works on games, race, Asianness, or East and South Asian game industries – like the works I suggested above – is limited in this collection, with only a handful of chapters engaging with more global scholarship. Although I can understand that this omission is likely due to the collection's focus and experimental priorities, when combined with the citational practices in the introduction, I am led to consider it a missed opportunity.

Highlights of this collection include chapters with strong theoretical standpoints that convincingly engage with different cultural histories and racial constructs across various cultures and nations, contributing to the complex interdisciplinarity of Asian American studies and game studies. I particularly enjoyed the contributions by Rachael Hutchinson, Souvik Mukherjee, Gerald Voorhees and Matthew Jungsuk Howard, Keita Moore, Sarah Christina Ganzon and Haneul Lee.

Conclusion

The target audience for this collection is a tricky one due to its dispersed nature of being an edited collection consisting of different editors and contributors. Despite my own academic background in Japan studies and game studies, *Made in Asia/America* has trouble convincing me that I belong to the target audience. The introduction and conclusion address a North American reader interested in the North American interpretation of Asia and game studies. The individual chapters do not necessarily share this target audience, with the highlighted chapters being especially well-versed

in global scholarship. For these reasons, I am of the opinion that this collection is of interest to readers who are looking for an entry point into topics of videogames, race, and Asianness. For readers interested in gaining a deep understanding of the collection's scope and point of departure, some degree of familiarity with the editors' prior works, like Fickle's (2019) *The Race Card* and Patterson's (2020) *Open World Empire* is recommended.

Despite my critical statements, I believe that this edited collection managed to succeed in its aim to diversify game studies. It has included experimental chapters with diverse topics that each show how games emerge as contested sites of meanings about Asia/America. For that, I wish to applaud it.

Moreover, one of the best things about this collection is that the editors were able to make the digital copy open access. The paperback copy retails for about USD 30 – a rare occurrence nowadays in academic publishing. This means that the collection is available to everyone with internet connection, which is of especially great importance to those without academic affiliations or the budget to purchase expensive academic books. Both the free digital version and the paperback version can be found on the Duke University Press website.

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[ii] Huizinga's "magic circle" is only one word in the original Dutch version, "*toovercirkel*" (Huizinga 1938, 37).

[iii] As extensively explained by Krul (2006), Huizinga's perspective on play has a long history of being misinterpreted. Huizinga wrote Homo Ludens as a prescriptive critique against the rise of bureaucratic and materiality-focused mass culture of the 1920s and 1930s, specifically American capitalism and the totalitarian states of Italy and the Soviet Union, shaped by economic crises, totalitarianism, and upcoming wars (Huizinga 2006, 24). His description of *spel*, a Dutch term, used in the original *Homo Ludens*, that linguistically bears a broader meaning than the English term *play*, used in the English version, created a myriad of paradoxes and contradictions (2006, 19). This resulted, among others, in that his use of play has often been interpreted as play being an element in culture, while Huizinga (2006, 15) meant *spel* as a fundamental element of culture. For a thorough explanation on Huizinga's Homo Ludens in historical context, see Krul 2006.