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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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# Introduction. Thoughts on the Entanglement of the Concepts and Notions of a Nation, Nationalism and Identity in Relation to Video Games and Gaming Culture<sup>i</sup>

Lisa Kienzl and Kathrin Trattner

### Abstract

A critical introduction to the special issue of gamevironments focused on nation, nationalism, identity and video games as well as gaming cultures.

**Keywords:** gamevironments, Nation, Nationalism, Identity, Video Games, Video Gaming

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### Introduction

Video games are a prime example of globalized media cultures, hence, questions of nation and identity have been increasingly addressed in scientific and public discourses in recent years. For this special issue, we were especially interested in dissecting the specific relationship between national socio-political contexts and game development, the influence of the notion of the nation and nationalism as well as (national) identity building processes and religious systems and their various forms of representation in video games and in the gaming community. It is essential to question (the role of) socio-political discourses that accompany such representations. Further, it is equally important to analyze the influence of national(ist) discourses on game development, gamers' self-identification and in-game-choices. By curating this special issue, we encouraged discussions on these questions as related to video game production, in-game-representation, and negotiation interaction.

As Antonsich (2015, 305) states, “[n]ations and nationalism are not relics of the past” but are “continuously resignified in adjusting to mutating socio-political conditions”. It is exactly these socio-political conditions and contexts that are essential parts of our Cultural Studies-derived approaches towards nation and nationalism. Rather than advancing universal concepts, we are interested in the contextuality of video games culture. As Šisler, Švelch and Šlerka (2017) discuss in their paper on *Video Games and the Asymmetry of Global Cultural Flows*, video game culture without context is a paradox.

Several public discussions challenged us to engage further and deepen our knowledge of nation, nationalism, identity and video gaming. We want to highlight three examples that caught our eyes and furthermore contributed to vivid discussions: Firstly, the debate about *Kingdom Come: Deliverance’s* (2018) chief developer Daniel Vávra in 2018. Secondly, the controversy regarding the *Conference on Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology* in Montana in December 2018. And thirdly, the discussion about Blizzard, *Hearthstone* (2014) and the Hong Kong - Mainland China conflict in Autumn 2019.

We acknowledge that in- and exclusion discourses within identity as well as nation building processes are vital (Marx 2002, 125) and comprehend the resulting coherence of the other and otherness in imagined communities (Jurt 2004, 28). Despite the limits of Anderson’s approach towards nations (Bouchard 2006), the notion of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1993) is an important concept, especially when investigating negotiation processes within video games culture and gaming communities. Brubaker (2004, 116) argues for making “the category ‘nation’ the object of the analysis, rather than use it as a tool of analysis”. However, it is important to not only answer normative questions on the use of the category *nation*

(Brubaker 2004, 116), but in putting one’s focus on relevant social actors, practices and settings in video game culture and gaming communities, and to a certain extent on general issues of societal aspects involved.

## ***Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and the Perception of the White Middle-Ages**

The Czech role-playing game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* illustrates these various entanglements as the game has sparked manifold particular controversies about issues of gaming and nationalism. Since its release in 2018, chief developer Daniel Vávra’s views on an allegedly authentic historic portrayal of a white European community in the Middle Ages have generated a lot of vivid discussions of racism, authenticity and history. During these controversial debates Vávra’s twitter posts of the past years, especially the entries on #GamerGate or *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and his choice of clothes at the 2017 Gamescom, provoked harsh reactions.

In 2015, journalist Arthur Gies reviewed *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (Gies 2015a) addressing the absence of non-white characters and the game’s underlying structural sexism. The following day, Vávra (2015a) criticized Gies on Twitter for denying Europeans their right for their “own history and heritage”. Further, he asked whether Gies thought “that everytime we want to tell the story about us, we need to inject some other cultures into it not to be racist?” (Vávra 2015b). Gies (2015b) responded arguing that Vávra now would suggest that “there weren't any non-white people in a gigantic landmass in northern/western europe”. Vávra’s (2015c) very straight forward response “Yes I am, because they weren't” initiated a wide-ranging international discussion about authenticity, white supremacy and the perception of the Middle Ages.





Turning to the gaming industry in general, he then continued by criticizing its overall culture:

“There is a very vocal minority accusing games industry of non-existent crimes and giving people who dont [sic!] conform to their narrative various libellous labels. It’s already created a very toxic atmosphere” (Shimshock 2015).

Investigating the controversy about *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* we comply with approaches toward the notion of nation that define this concept as romanticized, ahistorical and exclusive creations of a common history and identity (Smith 2000). Belonging is further constructed via shared language, imagined places of cultural remembrance, historical and natural landmarks and symbolic elements (Thiesse 1999). The analysis of the interview published at Breitbart uncovers that Vávra in his statements utilizes concepts such as nation, nationalism and identity, when talking about the target of critical approaches.

“I am making a game about the history of my country... all of a sudden there are people telling me that I should not make it as it really was, or how I as an author feel it should be, but as it should have been according to their political views.” (Shimshock 2015)

In short, the above statements suggest that the concepts of identity and nation influence the development of game content. Otherwise, not only the concept of nation but furthermore the chauvinistic feeling toward the notion of the nation that super-elevates one’s own community through exclusion processes (Arendt 2008, 231) often comes to play. By exaggerating the own (ethnic) community and claiming a particular geographical area, nationalism develops into an ideology. Combine these ideas – subsequently enhancing existing cultural exceptionalist views – with the ambitions for political power (Lenhardt 1990, 192) and a potent ideological movement will evolve from these nationalistic values. Of course, language or religion



political viewpoints and his engagement in US politics. In addition, further issues were raised at this conference. Critical voices particularly complained about the non-transparency within the overall organization of the conference, the involvement of David Levy, who was part of a fraud scandal (Pavlo 2019), and the overall misbehavior of the main event organizer Adrian David Cheok.

As a result, researchers withdrew their contributions and also posted their withdrawal on twitter (e.g., Matsumura 2018, Kirman 2018). Finally, the conference was cancelled (Hall 2018) due to widespread protests of the international academia, (e.g., Oppermann 2018, Whitehead 2018, Deterding 2018, Taylor 2018, DiGRA Australia 2018) leading to an abstruse statement on the conference’s twitter page, claiming that “anti-free speech” (ACE 2018 2018) movements shut down the conference. The tweet included an attached image – with the aforementioned statement in the upper part of the picture – displaying the book burnings in Nazi Germany in 1933. This post faced vast criticism due to its content but also due to its unknown source.

This debate shows that the academic realm is a vital place where concepts such as nationalism and identity are in constant need of redefinition and re-evaluation. We are not weary of emphasizing the powerful role that academia has in the composition and exchange of ideas and concepts and therefore believe that this debate demonstrates the importance of critically questioning that role. This example shows that the essential normative cultural categories in constructing nationalism (Gellner 2006, 6-7) and nationalist ideologies are not only issues of the gaming communities or the public sphere, but in turn also have to be addressed in an academic context. With regard to video game cultures, however, we agree with Mukherjee (2017, 108), who in *Videogames and Postcolonialism* pointed out that “videogames have shown considerable potential in representing the multiplicity of perspectives”. Apart from

that, Mukherjee (2017, 108) observes a similar multi-perspective approach in the fields of game development and game research.

### #BoycottBlizzard and Free Hong Kong

Finally, another recent controversy from the esports community reveals the socio-political dimension of gaming culture. Blizzard, their video game *Hearthstone* and the Hong Kong - Mainland China conflict were subject of that dispute. In October 2019 pro-gamer Ng Wai *Blitzchung* Chung, during a livestream at the Asia-Pacific *Hearthstone* tournament in Taipei, protested against Chinese policy action aimed at Hong Kong. As a consequence, Chung was banned for one year and denied his prize money by Blizzard (Blizzard Entertainment 2019). Viral protests inevitably followed and soon Blizzard reduced the sentence. However, the protests using the hashtag #BoycottBlizzard continued, resulting in international media attention and a collective call for action, such as uninstalling Blizzard games or cancelling subscriptions, furthermore campaigns like *gamers for freedom* and large protest manifestations at the BlizzCon 2019 in Anaheim. In particular, the six month bans of US gamers Casey Chambers, Corwin Dark and Torin Wright, who flashed a sign during a tournament that read "Free Hong Kong, Boycott Blizz" (Chambers 2019), led to a wide-ranging vivid public discussion in the US. J. Allen Brack, president of Blizzard Entertainment, in an open letter argued that the company of course would encourage free speech but would not allow political statements during tournaments. He further explained that "[t]here is a consequence for taking the conversation away from the purpose of the event and disrupting or derailing the broadcast" (Brack 2019). Brack (2019) continued stating that Blizzard "will continue to apply tournament rules to ensure our official broadcasts remain focused on the game and are not a platform for divisive social or political views".

In this matter, American politicians formulated an open letter to the Chief Executive of Blizzard, Robert A. Kotick. On 18<sup>th</sup> October Senators Ron Wyden and Marco Rubio as well as Congress Members Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Mike Gallagher and Tom Malinowski (2019) requested Kotick to “decide whether to look beyond the bottom line and promote American values – like freedom of speech and thought – or give in to Beijing’s demands in order to preserve market access”. In the end, this dispute was made subject of a wide-ranging US news media discussion addressing the “growing challenge of balancing democratic ideals with the lure of profit in authoritarian countries” (Schiesel 2019). All in all, discussions on the importance of free speech as an essential value in democracies, in particular in Western democratic nations, shed a light on the close relationship between politics and economics, the construction of (national) identities and political activism that are in sum integral parts of gaming culture on multiple levels. In particular, the association between democratic values and the notion of the nation made by various participants in widespread American debates indicate the socio-cultural dimension of these concepts.

At the beginning of this introduction, we discussed various examples that led us to initiate a general call for papers and finally the publication of this special issue of the journal *gamevironments*: Firstly, the controversy of (romanticized) historical perceptions and racism in the discussion about *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*’s portrayal of medieval Bohemian society. Secondly, the entanglement of far-right politics and academia in the controversy about the *International Conference on Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology*. And lastly, the interconnection of democratic values and the notion of the nation as well as its socio-cultural aspects best exemplified in the debate about Blizzard. In our opinion, these examples demonstrate how differently concepts such as nation, nationalism or identity are interconnected in various discourses within video gaming cultures.

## Contributions to the Special Issue

We called for contributions on nation(alism), identity and video gaming in order to explore the multilayered socio-cultural and political contexts of video games and gaming. With this in mind we wanted to combine different views addressing socio-political issues and cultural influences on various types and aspects of video games and gaming cultures. Due to these manifold aspects and contexts of how nation(alism), identity, and video gaming intersect, we also think it is vital to enable plural perspectives on the topic of investigation.

What distinguishes video games from other types of media is the way users interact with them, namely, through a specific set of rules. Melissa Kagen’s article discusses the possibility of playing games *against* their rules as a form of protest. In particular, she examines how the practice of playing against the grain harbors the critical potential to engage with borders and immigrant experiences.

Assembling this special issue, we also wanted to encourage non-academic contributions in order to promote a fruitful dialog. This was exactly the primary objective behind the idea of a *Virtual Roundtable Discussion: A moderated discussion with four participants representing different perspectives on our topic of investigation – giving us insights into the realm of academia, political commentary and activism, and game design.* We talked to Megan Condis, assistant professor at the Department of Communication Studies at Texas Tech University, Marijam Didžgalvytė, a London-based freelance content creator dissecting the intersection between video games and politics, Georg Hobmeier, an Austrian media artist and game designer, and Souvik Mukherjee, assistant professor of English literature at Presidency University, Kolkata, about the impact of nation(alism) and identity on the production of video games and gamer cultures and the related socio-cultural discourses involved.

Issues of nation(alism), identity, and video gaming are also raised in national video game production cultures. Japan, for example, offers a particularly vibrant video game production culture that features a rich field for exploring mediations of Japanese cultural heritage. In their research report, Sarah Zaidan, Richard Pilbeam, and Elin Carstensdottir explore how Japanese cultural heritage takes form in the action-role playing game *Bloodborne* (2015) by simultaneously deploying Japanese and Western cultural symbols.

Video games like *Bloodborne* are, furthermore, impactful cultural exports that are consumed beyond national borders. Global marketing strategies of video games also shape our conceptions of cultures and nations. In their research report, Michael Fuchs and Stefan Rabitsch present their book project *Playing America. An Introduction to American Culture through Video Games*, explaining their approach towards America as imaginative construct that is based on analysis of US representations in video games.

Otherwise, apart from the global video game industry such as US-American or Japanese subsidiaries often powered by high-budget productions and marketing, there are numerous others that do not approximately enjoy the same media coverage. Their voices, thus, remain unheard on a larger scale. Our interviews, in this sense provided an opportunity to conversate with game developers from countries that are often underrepresented in such conversations.

In the interview about the Togolese game *Origin – the Rise of Dzitri* (2019), particularly non-Western perspectives and postcolonial approaches to issues of nation(alism), identity and video gaming were covered. The game, developed in Lomé, features the character Edoh on a journey to historic places in the city to revive





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