game environments

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Playing America. An Introduction to American Culture through Video Games

Michael Fuchs and Stefan Rabitsch

Abstract

This research report sketches one of our current projects – a textbook which approaches *America* (an imaginative construct more so than a geographic location) through video games. Thus, the intended outcome of this project is a ready-to-use primer to the key principles, myths, and beliefs that constitute America explained through the most relevant medium of the early twenty-first century – video games. Driven by the idea that the interactivity specific to video games facilitates student engagement, our textbook suggests a novel approach to engage with and understand both American Studies and American culture.

Translated into contemporary meme discourse, the notion of *play America, they said; it will be educational, they said* speaks to the basic impetus that informs the goals, scope, and rationale of our work-in-progress textbook: A ready-to-use primer to the key principles, myths, and beliefs that constitute America explained through the most relevant medium of the century – video games. Once hailed as the medium of the future, video games have undoubtedly become a culturally relevant and economically viable art form; and it seems safe to say that they will remain so for the foreseeable future. To be sure, we do not suggest that video games are culturally distinctive, much less exclusive to the United States, as other parts of the world have developed equally rich video game cultures which, given the fact that the medium is as much a

product of and contributor to a globalized transmedia entertainment mass market, stand in vibrant exchange with each other. However, the degree of their cultural profusion and integration in American everyday life is remarkable given that only two decades passed between their humble origins as novelties in the early 1970s and their rapid mass market proliferation in the 1990s. Observing that "[f]rom generation to generation, from birth to retirement, gaming touches most aspects of American life" (2019, 4–5), John Wills (2019) has labeled the United States a "Gamer Nation" which increasingly interacts with "gamic America" – that is, "versions of America produced by programmer imaginations, computer chips, and joystick twitches" (2019, 9–10).

Video Games and American Culture

A number of factors have contributed to video games becoming a powerful cultural 87 adhesive that informs how Americans see themselves and their country's history, how they relate to each other, and how they view the rest of the world. On the other hand, non-Americans increasingly encounter and draw conclusions about the American experience through video games. Indeed, art historian Douglas N. Dow (2013, 216) has observed that his students (believe to) know historical places and past architecture from video games such as the *Assassin's Creed* series (2007-2018).

This understanding of historical, material reality based on simulations evokes Jean Baudrillard's (1993, 16) concept of hyperreality, in which "[r]eality has passed completely into the game of reality"– that is, reality has become engrossed by and dependent on representations, reflections, and refractions of itself. In the 1980s, America (more an imaginary construct than a geographic location) epitomized the evolution toward hyperreality for the French cultural critic. Disneyworld and Las

Vegas are prime examples frequently mentioned in this context; for Baudrillard (1994, 12), these spatially confined hyperreal places seek to "make us believe that the rest [of the United States] is real" even though "all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation". His point is that Disneyland is California is America. "The American way of life" (Baudrillard 1988, 95), he hence diagnosed, "is spontaneously fictional, since it is a transcending of the imaginary in reality" (Baudrillard 1988, 95). "A simulation in its most developed state", he continued, Americans lack "a language in which to describe it, since [Americans] themselves are the model" (Baudrillard 1988, 28). For a people who have defined themselves and the spaces they inhabit as always-already a simulation – in other words, a fantastic construct – what better language is there then to experience and understand – and thus talk, think, and teach about – America than video games?

Video Games and American Studies

An additional, related set of factors makes this textbook project, which is conceived as an easy-to-use introduction to American Cultural Studies, not only economically viable and desirable, but also urgently necessary. As a discipline, American Studies is a broad church, welcoming a decidedly interdisciplinary congregation; traditionally, it has accommodated a cacophony of voices, methodologies, schools of thought, not to mention fads, which have often been at odds with each other. They perpetually speak to the discipline's built-in indeterminacy – which is at least in part wedded to the idea of America as an "unfinished country" (Lerner 1959); a seemingly never-ending "experiment" (Semonche 1998, 1).

Certain strands of American Studies have given us a solid toolbox to work with powerful cultural myths and narratives that continue to have significant currency. While what has since become known as the culture wars of the 1990s, which continue to fuel a socio-cultural pendulum that swings back and forth ferociously, their collateral effects have also trickled down into the discipline where they arguably led to an increasing rejection of the historical albeit still useful bedrock of American Studies in favor of more popular paradigms such as Affect Studies and Performance Studies. This is not to suggest that these newer methodologies are unimportant (indeed, far from it), but some of their proponents reject and denounce earlier paradigms as problematic, outdated, and no longer pertinent. The discipline would do well to remember that it can ill-afford a methodological tug of war where it is either the one or the other – in particular in the context of popular culture artefacts such as video games. Their significance as a powerful medium for cultural representation, replete with symbols and meaning(s), is just as important as the affects that players experience while being immersed in playable America(s). This is why the "methodological openness" characteristic of American Studies, Sascha Pöhlmann (2019, 7) has argued, "retains its contemporary relevance", as it is needed when attending to "*the* most prominent medium and cultural force of the twenty-first century" (Pöhlmann 2019, 1).

By now, we are in the fortunate position to draw on more than two decades' worth of video game studies. Having overcome its inaugural disputes over methods by embracing interdisciplinarity, video game studies has matured into a remarkably fertile and forward-thinking discipline, bringing together social scientists, humanities scholars, computer engineers, programmers, and the video game industry in ready exchange. In the past decade, scholars have increasingly explored video games as an immersive vehicle for representing and simulating historical pasts. Zach Whalen and

Laurie Taylor's *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games* (2008),
Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew Elliott's *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and
the Simulation of History* (2013), and Adam Chapman's *Digital Games as History: How
Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (2016) have
paved the way for more work on how video games remediate and make playable the
cultural experience of "imagined communities" (Anderson 2006) such the United
States. The field is wide open since "the idea of games as reflections of cultural
themes remains an interesting but under-explored idea" (2015, 40), as Simon
Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca have asserted. Let's
not forget, it was Marshall McLuhan (1964, 6) who maintained that "the games that
people play reveal a great deal about them". And we would hasten to add that the
games that people play can also *teach* them a great deal about themselves, other
cultures, history, and the power of immersive, playable narratives – to name but a
few.

Reinvigorated forays into the place and potential of video games in education
present another outgrowth of video game studies' coming of age. Buzzwords such as
gamification, edutainment, or tangential learning have been making the rounds for at
least a decade. What they point to is a broader interest in excavating an earlier
chapter in the history of game-based learning and teaching – the rise of game theory
in the 1940s with its attendant approach to teach through and with games (which, in
turn, drew on much older practices in military training) – and adapting it to 21st-
century circumstances. There is no doubt about it: Video games have gained a
foothold in seminar rooms and game labs on college campuses, and, to a lesser
degree, in school classes. Recent scholarship in this area (e.g., Bell 2018, Blumberg
2014, Kafai and Burke (2016), and Siyahhan and Glee (2018)) signals a palpable need
for resources that assist educators in their attempts to teach through and with video

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games. This need will only grow considering that practically everyone under the age of thirty plays digital games (i.e., including mobile and browser games) on a regular basis. From an American Studies point of view, what is consequently needed is a resource that elucidates the American experience to twenty-first-century students for whom video games have become one of the primary vehicles through which they come in contact with, access, and learn about the United States.

Playing America

Rather than reinventing the proverbial wheel, *Playing America* builds on a solid foundation of American Studies, but infuses it with a hefty dose of digital media literacy, while seeking to expand the catalogue of textbooks by an entry that exemplifies key ideas and approaches in American Studies solely through video games.

In the wake of the culture wars of the 1990s, the field of American Studies has been looking for its identity. Indeed, American Studies has been haunted by its very name – what, in fact, does *American* Studies mean? In her widely cited presidential address at the 1998 meeting of the American Studies Association, Janice Radway (1999, 2) stressed that since the 1970s, American Studies has continuously "challenged some of the early assumptions that grounded the field of American Studies" – in particular "the presumption that American culture is exceptional in some way and that it is dominated by consensus". Or, as David Brooks (2017) wrote in an op-ed piece for *The New York Times* on the occasion of the first Thanksgiving under President Trump, "Today, we have no common national narrative, no shared way of interpreting the flow of events. […]. We have no common set of goals or ideals".

While *Playing America* will, of course, acknowledge these interventions and thus question the very notion of *America*, discuss the plurality of American culture*s*, critique notions of American exceptionalism, and broach inter- and transnational dimensions of *America*, as an introductory text, the book will assume that a *National Symbolic* still unites the American nation. As Lauren Berlant (1991, 20) has explained, the *National Symbolic* is

> "[t]he order of discursive practices whose rein within a national space produces, and also refers to, the 'law' in which accident of birth within a geographic/political boundary transforms individuals into subjects of a collectively-held history".

"Its traditional icons, its metaphors, its heroes, its rituals, and its narratives" (Berlant 1991, 20), she continues, "provide an alphabet for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity" (Berlant 1991, 20). The American national identity, Susanne Hamscha (2013, 17; 42–43) has argued, emerges from a relatively small number of "foundational scenarios" of Americanness, which are constantly revisited in (popular) culture. While our focus on a seemingly homogeneous American culture might seem invalid and archaic – as if we were trying to retcon the evolution of American Studies and reset it to an earlier era, when the field was less complex and answers (relatively) simple – we believe that such a step is required to emphasize the continued relevance of certain key myths and icons in American popular discourse – popular culture included. In particular, as Hamscha (2013) also repeatedly stresses in her book *The Fiction of America*, any challenge or subversion of key ingredients to *the* American national identity, the nation's myths and symbols, always invokes – and hence perpetuates – them at the same time.

Accordingly, we will open the book by looking at American temporalities and American spaces. American temporalities are defined by never-ending cycles of ever-

new beginnings which, no matter how forward-thinking America may seem to be, always nostalgically hark back to a past golden age that never was. By employing "apophatic discourse [...] which rigorously erases the finite as the way of knowing the Infinite," Terence Martin (1995, x) has noted, American narratives "imagine the world over again, to reconstitute the story of the nation from a point inaccessible to history". In *The Last of Us* (2013), for example, the realization of a post-human (and, hence, actually post-American) future is wedded to the celebration of American pastoralism and an idealization of nature in line with American Romanticist ideals. The game also demonstrates the intricate interrelation between imaginations of time and space, as going westward means going "into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure", to draw on Henry David Thoreau (1991, 87). We will examine this notion of *westward movement equals progress* in more detail, in particular in connection with western games such as *Red Dead Redemption* and its sequel (2010, 2018).

Importantly, *SPACE*, the American poet Charles Olson (1947, 11) proclaimed in *Call Me Ishmael*, is "the central fact to man born in America". Similarly, in one of the foundational texts of video game studies, Espen Aarseth (2001, 154) suggests that video games "are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation". Thus, we will put particular emphasis on space and also examine representations of American cities in games such as the *Mafia* series (2002–2016), the last couple of entries in the *Grand Theft Auto* series (2001–2013), the *Max Payne* series (2001–2012), and the two *The Darkness* games (2007, 2012). And even though contemporary renditions often picture America as one vast urban landscape, and more than 80% of the country's population lives in cities today, there are vast open spaces in-between. We will study the significance of these open spaces through *Far Cry 5* (2018) and *Far Cry: New Dawn* (2019). Not only do these games make explicit the divides separating

America's urban from its rural populations, but they also speak to secessionist and utopian aspirations which are informed by the *sacred* right of Americans to self-government and its attendant distrust of centralized power structures. Delving deeper into the meaning of natural vastness, we will trace the lineage of moments of sublime natural beauty in *Red Dead Redemption II* to painting traditions in the nineteenth century vis-à-vis the disastrous effects of this belief in America as a cornucopian space. According to Terence Martin (1995, xi), "a sense of inexhaustibility guaranteed to Americans a unique purchase on the future", which gave rise to destructive extraction economies that, in turn, fueled the rise of America as a behemoth of industrial capitalism.

Maybe the most widely known American myth is the American Dream – the idea of a "better, richer, and happier life" in the United States, which James Truslow Adams (1931, xx) considered America's "greatest contribution [...] to the thought and welfare of the world". In this context, we will explore topics such as the influence on neoliberalism on the conception of life as an enterprise in *GTA V*, various tycoon games, and *The Sims* series (2000–2014), and the promise of overcoming racial barriers through the purportedly meritocratic system of sports in select story modes in sports games, such as André Bishop's meteoric rise from prison inmate to boxing world heavyweight champion in *Fight Night: Champion* (2011).

While the realization (or, rather, promise) of the American Dream is arguably inscribed into the texts of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, another national narrative was also born out of the American Revolution – the American melting pot. While J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur invoked the narrative as early as 1782 in his *Letters from an American Farmer*, the metaphor arguably did not gain currency until the 1908 play *The Melting Pot* reached

the masses who witnessed a significant increase in immigration to the United States. Crèvecœur (1782, 70) argued that "the American" is defined by "leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners" and

> "receiv[ing] new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world".

To be sure, the United States is a country of immigrants. And, of course, this core element of America finds reflection in video games as evidenced by blockbuster titles such as *GTA IV*, which tells the story of an immigrant from an unnamed Balkan country lured to the United States by his cousin's stories about the land of opportunities, only to be confronted with the realities of life in the urban jungle of New York City-inspired Liberty City.

Finally, we will explore America's belief in its divinely ordained redemptive role in the world – an idea which Ernest Tuveson (1968) referred to as "redeemer nation" in his classic 1968 study (see also Spanos 2016). Here, we will discuss post-9/11 military shooters as "ideological allies" (Annendale 2010, 98) in the War on Terror, as they transformed what Marc Redfield (2009, 13–48) has called the "virtual trauma" of 9/11 into a triumphant story of American military success and ideological hegemony across the globe. While video games such as *September 12th: A Toy World* (2010) have challenged the populist view of the War on Terror, we will argue that Cold War games already confronted America with the consequences of her military interventions and actions across the globe. Many Cold War games suggest that "[t]he only winning move is not to play" (*WarGames 1983*) as the NORAD Computer WOPR concludes in the Cold War cult flick *WarGames*.

Overall, *Playing America* will thus introduce a scaffold of quintessentially American narratives that provide the raw material out of which the American national identity is molded. Our textbook will offer general introductions to the scaffold's constitutive elements, along with pertinent permutations thereof, explicating each of them by way of a selection of specific game texts. Here, we will embrace the textual and ludic openness of video games. Like all popular culture, video games are "not monolithic or homogenous in [their] ideological approaches", to draw on Terence McSweeney's (2018, 35) recent book on the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Consequently, they are open up a host of different, partly wildly contrasting, meanings. Each chapter will be garnished with a ready-to-use bibliography of recommended secondary sources, suggestions for video games, discussion questions, and – ideally – a repository of audiovisual material including playthroughs and commentaries that educators may use in different teaching settings.

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