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"Train a Scribe" card from *Lost & Found*, illustration by Annie Wong and Mimi Ace



## Issue 07 (2017)

### articles

Introduction: Jewish Gamevironments – Exploring Understanding with Playful Systems

by Owen Gottlieb, 1

*Global Conflicts*, Episodic Framing and Attitude Change Towards the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

by Ronit Kampf, 5

Finding *Lost & Found*. Designer's Notes from the Process of Creating a Jewish Game for Learning

by Owen Gottlieb, 42

### reviews

*The Shivah: Kosher Edition*. A Review

by Steve Jacobs, 66

Defeat Mom using the Bible. The Controversial Debate in *The Binding of Isaac*

by Isabell Gloria Brendel, 77

*Video Games Around the World*. A Review

by Xenia Zeiler, 87

## **interviews**

Interview with Joonas Laakso, Executive Producer at Next Games Oy, Finland  
by *gamevironments*, 94

## **report**

*Video Game Development in Asia. A Research Project on Cultural Heritage and  
National Identity*  
by Gregory Grieve, Christopher Helland, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and Xenia Zeiler, 102

## ***Video Games Around the World. A Review***

Xenia Zeiler

### **Abstract**

Review of the book *Video Games Around the World* (2015), edited by Mark J. P. Wolf.

**Keywords:** global game cultures, global gaming, book review, gameenvironments

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This book, edited by video game studies scholar Mark J. P. Wolf and including a foreword by the creator of Pac-Man Toru Iwatani, is the first ever comprehensive volume on video games covering basically all world regions. And comprehensive it is: On 720 pages, 39 chapters introduce the major aspects of games and gaming in either whole continents (such as the entry on Africa), entire world regions (such as the entries on the Arab World and Scandinavia), or specific countries (such as the entries on Brazil, China and Iran). In detail, the entries cover Africa, Arab World, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Scandinavia, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America, Uruguay and Venezuela.

To present an adequate overview, the chapters follow a similar structure in the style of video game histories and aim at providing the reader with information to “follow the highlights, innovations, and advances made in the field” (Wolf 2015, 1). More

precisely, the authors were asked to include

“the history of video games in the country or region, the reception of foreign imports, domestic video game production and exports, indigenous video game culture and how it was influenced by national history, video game company profiles, video game content description, the role of academic video game studies, and the future of video games in the country or region” (Wolf 2015, 2).

By definition and because of the variant developments in the different regions / countries, this cannot and does not mean that we have the same aspects covered in each entry. Rather, the reader is provided with tailored to the region chapters. In my point of view, this constitutes one of the book’s appeals: For the first time, we are actually able to detect the varying characteristics of game cultures in different nations and world regions, by consulting one work only.

The declared goal of the volume is to provide a (concise) introductory chronicle of video games for as many countries and regions as possible, written by experts for the regions. As Wolf (2016) stated:

“... even missing one crucial essay would make the book feel incomplete. There had to be essays related to each continent, and each major national industry. So it was a matter of finding someone to write all the essays, and preferably people who were natives of the countries in question, and who understood the national context and culture firsthand, having grown up with it, or at least someone who had studied them in-depth.”

This strife for completion goes hand in hand with the understanding that today, video games are consumed, developed and produced globally. But

“Scholarly work on video games has not spread nearly as fast as the games themselves have, though this is starting to change thanks to publications and conferences, which are more global in scope” (Wolf 2015, 12).

Indeed, global dimensions of gaming cultures are still extraordinarily under-researched: “Another so far highly neglected focus in the field ... is the global aspect of digital gaming” (Campbell et al 2016, 658). This regards both the study of specific regions which are under-researched or even not yet researched at all, as well as the study of games and gaming in an overall global setting, meaning that we need to relate the studies of different regions to each other. The varying game consumptions, developments and productions do certainly not work the same way everywhere in the world, but rather, we find two divergent trends in recent game development on a global scale. On the one hand, most globally popular blockbuster games, that is mainstream games, are being developed in a few countries (primarily the United States, some European countries, as well as in Japan and Korea) for global audiences (as argued e.g. by Zeiler 2015). On the other hand, arguably smaller, indie gaming companies world-wide are developing games for international and regional audiences (e.g. Zeiler 2016).

In a review of a few pages it is literally impossible to go into details even just with some of the 39 excellent chapters. So while a number of the book’s chapters deserve special credit, for the innovative material they provide and for opening new game cultures to the reader, let me pick out one example in this review: The chapter on India. India currently belongs to the more rapidly changing gaming cultures and uprising markets, regarding both game production and consumption. Souvik Mukherjee presents “the sleeping giant of the video game world” (2015, 235) on 13 pages, by giving an introduction to e.g. the India’s players and industry. The chapter starts with contextualizing the ludic aspects in Indian culture, by introducing to the

Hindu concept of *lila*, “divine play”. The long tradition and wide acceptance of such a pronounced ludic heritage may lead the reader to conclude that video gaming is a non-contested activity in contemporary India – but, as the chapter later points out, in fact e.g. Indian parents show concern about kids playing video games. The chapter continues with its logical structure by providing some context information on the representation of India in video games (which have not been produced in India). While an interested reader maybe would have valued more mention of the prevailing othering or plain-out colonial representations of India in many mainstream video games, it is understandable that not all aspects can be taken into account in detail on such limited space.

The chapter opens its discussion of video games in India with a history. Interestingly, this history reaches back as far as 1999, though we find only very few examples (which have been heavily criticized for their technical developments). The history of video games in India in the first decade of the 2000’s was characterized by the founding of several Indian gaming companies (e.g. Indiagames, Dhruva Interactive and Lakshya Digital) and while some games have been produced entirely in India even in this early phase of Indian game development, Indian companies still largely contributed to international collaborations. Examples are the involvement of Indiagames in developing *Spiderman* (2003) for mobile phones, *BioShock* (2008) and *Garfield* (2004), as well as Dhruva’s international collaborations to develop e.g. *TOCA Race Driver 3* (2006) and *Operation Flashpoint: Red River* (2001).

“Indigenous games” according to Mukherjee (2015, 238) are games produced in India and/or drawing on India related themes, and first appeared in the late 2010’s. Examples are the PlayStation2 games *Singstar Bollywood* (2007) and *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* (2009), as well as *Chandragupta: Warrior Prince* (2011). Then, “from 2010



onward there has been a surge in the development of games for mobile platforms such as Android and iOS all over the country” (Mukherjee 2015, 238) and not surprisingly, the Indian game industry since then (until currently) has heavily concentrated on this market. Additionally, collaborations between Bollywood and the video game industry have initiated numerous Bollywood games. Since around 2010, we can also see a growing indie game development scene in India, providing sophisticated game design.

Mukherjee continues with information on players, the industry, and game design education in India. It becomes clear that a vast majority of Indian players still prefer non-Indian games, and thus stay in line with what we may call international mainstream gaming practices. The industry in India, while massively expanding with new game development studios popping up all over the country, still faces many obstacles. Nevertheless, India at the time of the book’s publishing in 2015 began to follow international trends regarding game design education, and Indian academic institutions began to include game design programs in their degree structures.

It is true that the academic study of Indian video games and gaming in India has just begun. But concluding on all the information given in his chapter, Mukherjee correctly points out that even at this point, we might safely acknowledge that India’s “potential as a creative zone, a market, and a playing community is huge and undeniably significant” (Mukherjee 2015, 245). Keeping these sheer facts in mind and considering the carefully discussed and very informative content of Mukherjee’s chapter – reaching from historical contextualization of play and games long before the times of video games to the state of the art in the industry at the time of the book’s publication – this chapter on India, in my understanding, certainly makes one of the volume’s more appealing chapters.

Overall, *Video Games Around the World* provides very informative and adequately comprehensive overview chapters on regions and countries ranging from very well-researched nations such as the United States and Japan, over less known and studied countries such as Austria and China, to still very little known and almost not researched regions such as Iran and Venezuela. Some of the book’s chapters cover regions which have never been studied at all so far. Thus, the book’s appeal is two-fold: On the one hand, some of the chapters introduce us to specific geographical areas or nations which have not been the focus of research so far, and as such familiarize the reader with entirely new game cultures and contexts around the globe. On the other hand, the book as a whole provides an overview of the vast and varying global game and gaming landscapes, including regions with more established gaming cultures, thus providing an excellent starting point for readers interested in established game nations, as well. I join the editor Mark J. P. Wolf (2016) in his assessment of the volume and his wishes for the future of the study of global game cultures:

“The essays make up a good collection and work well together, presenting a truly global portrait of the video game industry. And yet it’s obvious that a single essay is only scratching the surface of a whole national industry, even if that industry is only a decade or two old. But at least it’s a start, and hopefully one that will encourage more international collaborative scholarship.”

### References

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