

Playing the Field

Video Games and American Studies

Edited by
Sascha Pöhlmann

DE GRUYTER
OLDENBOURG

ISBN 978-3-11-065525-4

e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-065940-5

e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-065572-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019944316

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;
detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2019 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston

Cover image: XXXXXX

Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

www.degruyter.com

Table of Contents

Sascha Pöhlmann

Introduction: Video Games and American Studies — 1

Mark J. P. Wolf

Video Games and the American Cultural Context — 21

Michael Fuchs, Michael Phillips, and Stefan Rabitsch

The end is nigh! Bring forth the Shepard!

Mass Effect, the Apocalypse, and the Puritan Imagination — 35

David Callahan

The Last of the US: The Game as Cultural Geography — 49

Patricia Maier

Mobility and Choices in Role-Playing Games — 65

Dietmar Meinel

Playing the Urban Future: The Scripting of Movement and Space in *Mirror's Edge* (2008) — 79

Martin Lüthe

Playing on Fields: Seasonal Seriality, Tele-Realism, and the Bio-Politics of Digital Sports Games — 97

Stefan Schubert

Narrative and Play in American Studies: Ludic Textuality in the Video Game *Alan Wake* and the TV Series *Westworld* — 113

Andrei Nae and Alexandra Ileana Bacalu

Toward a Reconsideration of Hypermediacy: Immersion in Survival Horror Games and Eighteenth-Century Novels — 131

Doug Stark

Ludic Literature: *Ready Player One* as Didactic Fiction for the Neoliberal Subject — 151

Sebastian Domsch

Strategies against Structure: Video Game Terrorism as the Ultimate American Agency Narrative — 173

Jon Adams

Why We Play Role-Playing Games — 185

Damien B. Schlarb

Narrative Glitches: Action Adventure Games and Metaleptic Convergence — 195

Sabrina Mittermeier

Time Travelling to the American Revolution – Why Immersive Media Need American Studies — 211

Manuel Franz and Henning Jansen

A Shining City and the Sodom Below: Historical Guilt and Personal Agency in *BioShock Infinite* — 221

Jacqueline Blank

The Art of *BioShock Infinite*: Identity, Race, and Manifest Destiny — 235

Veronika Keller

Sounds of Tears: Mozart's *Lacrimosa* in Different Media — 249

Nathalie Aghoro

Unspoken Adventures: On Sound, Story, and Nonverbal Gameplay in *Journey* and *Inside* — 259

Contributors — 275

Index of Names — 281

Index of Subjects — 285

Sascha Pöhlmann

Introduction: Video Games and American Studies

The present collection of essays poses two seemingly simple questions: first, what does American Studies have to say about video games? Or, put differently, how can American Studies as interdisciplinary Cultural Studies attend to what has emerged as arguably *the* most prominent medium and cultural force of the twenty-first century, in the US and globally? Second, and just as importantly, how does attending to video games change the way we do American Studies? The essays assembled in this volume postulate a dialectic relationship between disciplinary framework and objects of inquiry, i.e. between American Studies and games, but also between American Studies and Video Game Studies, a field that over the past decades has emerged as its own interdisciplinary platform. The many different explorations undertaken here link these important disciplinary questions to the structural ways in which they might be answered. This relates to the observation that gave rise to the project as much as the need for a theoretical and methodological inquiry into the mutual influence between American Studies and video games as its object of research: that this need is acknowledged quite broadly but still addressed only quite narrowly.

American Studies and Video Games: a Disciplinary Approach

Given the immense proliferation and cultural impact video games have had globally since the 1980s, and given that the USA has been the major site of the culture industry that continues to drive this development both economically and symbolically, few would deny that video games are relevant and even important objects of study with regard to American culture, and that American Studies is the proper context in which to study them. American Studies has a history of embracing new theories, methods, and objects of research as it expanded from mainly text-based philology and historiography to interdisciplinary Cultural

I would like to thank Michael Fuchs, Stefan Rabitsch, and Damien B. Schlarb for their valuable critiques of this introductory essay, as well as Jon Adams, David Callahan, Doug Stark, and Laura Symnick for their help with the manuscript in general.

Studies that now includes literature as much as any other cultural artifact, and which now also routinely transcends the national limits implied by the name of the field itself. Transnational approaches and a turn to visual culture are only two of several other paradigm shifts that continue to make American Studies a productively fuzzy discipline, and they are perhaps the two that provide the most fertile ground for a systematic integration of video games into the larger theoretical and methodological framework of the field. If it is actually happening at the moment, then this process is not simply taking place by itself but only because some scholars are actively cultivating it, and it is by no means certain that their efforts will be successful in the long run (as for example the integration of film into American Studies was).

Within the institutional framework of American Studies, this work is carried out largely by individuals in efforts that are mainly either local or even personal, with no substantial wider network for scholars to participate and collaborate in. Almost two decades after Espen Aarseth proclaimed “the Year One of *Computer Game Studies* as an emerging, viable, international, academic field,” and well over four decades after video games began making a global cultural impact (from the US), researchers in American Studies will find the institutional structures that mark even a budding field only elsewhere, if not in dedicated Game Studies programs then mainly in Media Studies programs, but not, as I contend, within their own field. This state of affairs would feel less like a missed opportunity if American Studies, with its disciplinary multiplicity, was not so ideally equipped for analyzing video games. For example, when American Studies responded to Henry Nash Smith’s challenge in 1957 to develop methods that would take it beyond the high-cultural fantasies of literary autonomy espoused by New Criticism, it opened up to Cultural Studies, to the popular, to visuality, or to mediality, and in effect created an ongoing intellectual obligation to engage emerging cultural phenomena and objects of inquiry. Americanists who work on video games feel that this is something they *can* and *should* do, that their theoretical frameworks are particularly well-suited for the exploration of video games as cultural artifacts, and that, in a nutshell, the study of contemporary American culture(s) must also be the study of video games—and yet their field has yet to tap that potential in a significant way.

This situation is not only frustrating to the individual researchers but also has adverse effects on the research as a whole, as it is in danger of lacking the contextualization and historicity that should mark scholarly discourse. Simply put, if you keep being told that you do something nobody else is doing in your field, you might actually believe it, and then fail to acknowledge over two decades of academic video game criticism and many more of games theory. Yet even if the individual researchers avoid the traps of presentist bias and dis-

cursive decontextualization, they may find themselves unable to contextualize their work institutionally, try as they might, within the intellectual and material resources available to others. This may mean not being accepted into a graduate program in American Studies, or being accepted and then told that nobody can actually supervise their dissertation; it may mean never actually getting to present one's project in a research colloquium because any such presentation needs to dwell too much on fundamentals; or it may mean routinely paying for any book you need because the library at your institution does not carry them. These are not merely personal inconveniences but symptoms of a larger problem: American Studies has barely begun to explore the massive potential of taking its tools to work on something that is so far left largely untouched but actually sits right in the center of its Cultural Studies workshop.

Again, this assessment should in no way imply that American Studies has not yet turned its attention to video games at all, and it is not meant to disparage the scholarly efforts that started this process of integration decades ago,¹ or those that have worked to consolidate it more recently.² There is no need for any avant-gardist rhetoric, and neither this text nor the collaborative project it introduces are offered in a spirit of breaking new ground. Instead of perpetuating the myth that scholars working on video games in American Studies do what no one else is doing (all of them!), the goal is rather to find the communal in what now still seems individual, and seek ways in which what feels like loose ends may be woven together to form a more coherent tapestry of approaches that might have theoretical and methodological implications for the analysis of video games but also for the field at large.

1 Randi Gunzenhäuser described video games as a 'challenge to the sciences' in 2003, and her essay is exemplary of these early, turn-of-the millennium explorations from a number of fields that inquired into the structural and institutional conditions of analyzing video games in order to find out how to ask questions in the first place before trying to answer them.

2 Let me highlight just three recent publications that show how productive work at the intersection of American Studies and Video Game Studies can be. Michael Z. Newman's *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America*, published in 2017, is a historical work that considers "the cultural significance of the emerging medium" (5) as well as "how people understood and thought about video games as a whole" (6) in its US-American context. Phillip Penix-Tadsen's 2016 monograph *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* exemplifies the hemispheric notion of American Studies as it analyzes how culture uses games and how games use culture in Latin American contexts. This approach is explored further in a special issue of the journal *forum for inter-american research* devoted to "Encounters in the 'Game-Over Era': The Americas in/and Video Games" (vol. 11, no. 2, 2018), edited by Mahshid Mayar. Last but not least, John Wills's *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* is forthcoming from Johns Hopkins UP in 2019.

By the same token, the issue is thankfully no longer one of introducing video games to American Studies but rather of connecting and consolidating individual and insular efforts, not to create a monolithic ‘method’—quite the opposite—but to systematically discuss ways in which video games may present a challenge to the current methods of American Studies, how they might demand new methods, or how they might reinvigorate methods that have become unfashionable but are still part of the field’s historical repertoire.

This project, then, avoids the rhetoric of paradigm shifts and newness and instead sets out to explore the ways in which American Studies may systematically integrate video games into its analyses as a dialectic. This is based on the assumption that one never merely takes a certain methodology to a research object in a one-directional way of application, but that the object as much applies itself to the method as the method is applied to the object. In other words, the question is not only how, say, video games may be analyzed ecocritically by adapting the methods Lawrence Buell and others have developed for literary analysis (for example by wondering if and how the four main properties of the environmental text Buell lays out in the introduction to *The Environmental Imagination* (cf. 7–8) might be adapted to theorize the environmental game).³ The question is also what lasting effects such an engagement might have on ecocriticism itself. For example, what happens to the concept of place that is so central to ecocriticism when it is applied to simulated environments with different rules of perception, embodiment, movement, attachment or symbolic inscription, or how do the unique possibilities of remediating and constructing nature in video games affect our cultural imagination of the natural?

One might describe the unfortunate ludology-narratology debate that preoccupied the early days of Video Game Studies as a consequence of a misguided attempt to impose established methods onto an object of study that resists them, and for good reason. ‘Reading’ video games as narratives was a perhaps understandable yet fallacious effort to make the object fit the method instead of the other way round; with the benefit of plenty of hindsight, I would describe it as a case of ‘when all you have is narratology, all you see is stories.’⁴ This de-

³ See Alenda Y. Chang’s “Games as Environmental Texts” and Colin Milburn’s “Green Gaming: Video Games and Environmental Risk” as prominent examples of a growing body of ecocritical perspectives on video games. Cf. also the special issue of the online journal *Ecozon@* (vol. 8, no. 2, 2017) on “Green Computer and Video Games.”

⁴ Marie-Laure Ryan’s *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, published in 2001, is an example of how narratology learns from video games rather than simply treating them as yet another story-telling medium, and with this shift perhaps already indicated at the time that the debate would fortuitously not end with entrenched sides.

bate is mainly of historical interest now, especially as it “has turned into discussion whether it really happened in the first place” (Mäyrä 10). Yet it is instructive as a warning on how to integrate new objects of research into an existing methodological canon, especially when other fields are already dealing with said objects of research in their own way.

Disciplinary Fuzziness and Foundational Gestures

Asking what American Studies can bring to the table today in a more general, interdisciplinary discussion and critical analysis of video games should not imply that American Studies has not already been sitting at that metaphorical table and is but a newcomer to a scholarly discourse that has already been well-established by others elsewhere. In fact, a number of significant early contributions to the emergent field of Video Game Studies were made in the context of American Studies (in the guise of “English” in the USA) and have grown from the Literary and Cultural Studies environment of that field. For example, the now canonical essay collection *First-Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, first appeared online at *electronic book review*. Its take on video games is heavily inflected by the publication’s core interest in technology and literature, so that one might trace one critical lineage of Video Game Studies back to a particular trend in literary studies. American Studies is one of the fields that Video Game Studies had to emancipate itself from in order to become a field in itself, as the latter needed to establish itself especially beyond the grasp of literary studies or film studies to ensure that these would not “force outdated paradigms onto a new cultural object” (Aarseth) and would co-opt its object of research into existing scholarly practices that would disregard its unique properties. (And for good reason: literary studies clearly exhibited such imperialist tendencies when, high on a misconstrued deconstructionist claim that “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (Derrida 158), it eagerly claimed images, film, and any other medium as part of its proper domain by declaring them all texts.)

Yet I am not interested here in historically sorting out the many paths that led to the formation of the discipline of Video Game Studies, which has firmly established itself on the academic scene in the last two decades as a truly interdisciplinary conglomerate that involves the discourses of Media Studies, design, programming, Literary and Cultural Studies, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and numerous other disciplines without fusing them into a singular streamlined approach. The question of what American Studies may uniquely contribute to and draw from this network cannot be answered by iden-

tifying influences, especially as this would imply a derivative linearity that would not do justice to the complexity of either discipline. Instead, it seems to me that this question must be future-oriented, and the two fields may now engage in a productive dialogue in which they influence and speak to each other rather than struggle for hegemony of interpretation over a particular cultural field or medium. Espen Aarseth wrote in 2001 that the “colonising attempts” from literary and film studies would continue to happen time and again until “computer game studies emerges as a clearly self-sustained academic field.” I believe that this is now the case, and that these fields may now—along with others such as historiography that make up the multiplicity of American Studies—return to the conversation without either an intended or suspected colonial intention.

This conversation seems particularly promising because Video Game Studies and American Studies share a crucial characteristic: they are both deeply interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary fields that are so diverse in their methods, theories, and scholarly practices that these can only be described in terms of family resemblances rather than a few paradigms that would clearly define what these fields are doing and how they are doing it. Any such summary is reduced to tautology (although it hides complexities of definition that are far from easily resolved): American Studies is the study of American culture, and Video Game Studies is the study of video games, but each field would readily admit that its boundaries are fuzzy, fictional, and rather due to pragmatic institutional necessity than an actual epistemological certainty about what exactly it is they are up to. This uncertainty is perhaps even bigger in American Studies than in Video Game Studies: while one of the founding acts of the latter was to debate how a game might be defined,⁵ it never doubted that they exist, whereas the former came to wonder more fundamentally whether such a thing as ‘American culture’ exists at all, and if so, what its modes and conditions of existence are.

Famously, Janice Radway, as president of the American Studies Association in 1998, speculated on ways of changing the name of the association: “Does the perpetuation of the particular name, ‘American,’ in the title of the field and in the name of the association continue surreptitiously to support the notion that such a whole exists even in the face of powerful work that tends to question its presumed coherence?” (2) Turning against the assumption of an *a priori* cultural unity that is then being studied, “past and present, as a whole” (Smith 197),

5 Even though this debate naturally took place across a variety of publications, I would still recommend Jesper Juul’s useful summarizing take on the subject in *Half-Real: Video Games between Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005), a monograph that remains one of the most lucid and persuasive in the field.

postnationalist American Studies rather inquires into how this “imaginary unity” (Radway 3) comes about if it is not always already there. It seeks “to complicate and fracture the very idea of an ‘American’ nation, culture, and subject” (17) rather than perpetuate it. Notably, this is not the same as trying to reveal “America as non-existent” (30), as Alan Wolfe claimed in his notorious response to Radway and the postnationalists, but it is rather an inquiry into the reality of the imaginary. It probes how imagined communities are imagined and how they attain reality through symbolic and material practices, and how these shape identities, politics, societies, and individual lives. (Needless to say, video games play a significant role in this imagination of community, and they are unique in how they connect the imaginary and the real.)

This positive uncertainty about disciplinary core concerns and methodologies is nothing new. If there is any tradition in American Studies that really characterizes the field from its inception through its myriad contemporary manifestations, then it is a tradition of persistent self-questioning and a stubborn refusal to let any answer to these questions crystallize into a single and stable unity that would define American Studies beyond the tautology mentioned above. This is why Henry Nash Smith’s seminal essay “Can ‘American Studies’ Develop a Method?” retains its contemporary relevance even though it is clearly rooted in a particular historical and intellectual context. Critically adapting the text to American Studies today, one would certainly want to read “the desire to study American culture as a whole” (206) not as a nationalist fantasy of a pre-existing wholeness but rather as an inclusive desire to consider *any* form of cultural expression, and not merely “the full range of meanings available to us in the arts of complex modern societies” (207). Yet the most relevant aspect of Smith’s essay today is the methodological openness he highlights. Perhaps born of necessity as an interdisciplinary attempt to recontextualize the literature that has been decontextualized by New Criticism, it has outgrown this particular desire and has developed into a theoretical and methodological pluralism that cannot be grasped in terms of linear paradigm shifts but rather in terms of an ever-changing interdisciplinary network that holds even though its central node, American culture, no longer stabilizes it. One could say that the pragmatic, improvisational, processual *bricolage* proposed by Smith—“a kind of principled opportunism” (207)—did not prepare the way to a method for American Studies but has *become* its method; there is nothing as permanent as a provisional solution. According to Smith, “[t]he best thing we can do [...] is to conceive of American Studies as a collaboration among men working from within existing academic disciplines but attempting to widen the boundaries imposed by conventional methods of inquiry”; he adds that “inquiries which have their starting-points in various academic departments can converge as they are brought to

bear upon a single topic, namely, American culture past and present” (207). The singularity of this topic is as questionable as Smith’s assumption that it is only men who work on it, but he is right in pointing out that “Method in scholarship grows out of practice” (207). Something as complex as American culture must be addressed in a combined inter- and multidisciplinary scholarly effort that will never have *a* method but only ever methods in the plural, just like it will always deal with cultures rather than a single unified culture.

This characteristic methodological fuzziness and openness of American Studies corresponds to that of Video Game Studies, where Espen Aarseth’s “Computer Game Studies, Year One” in 2001 inaugurated the e-journal *Game Studies* as a central publication platform for the field. Despite its different context, Aarseth’s editorial shares notable family resemblances with Smith’s programmatic essay. Reading these two texts alongside each other is instructive in that both engage with the challenges and advantages of interdisciplinarity, and how they may productively reconnect on those terms. Aarseth identifies his historical moment as one in which “it might be the first time scholars and academics take computer games seriously, as a cultural field whose value is hard to overestimate,” and therefore also a “very early stage” in which “the struggle of controlling and shaping the theoretical paradigms has just started.” Aarseth might as well have asked “Can ‘Video Game Studies’ develop a method?”:

Computer games are perhaps the richest cultural genre we have yet seen, and this challenges our search for a suitable methodological approach. We all enter this field from somewhere else, from anthropology, sociology, narratology, semiotics, film studies, etc, and the political and ideological baggage we bring from our old field inevitably determines and motivates our approaches.

While Smith’s methodological musings oppose the dominance of an existing method that he found lacking for its limiting focus on a decontextualized high literature, Aarseth has no such identifiable opponent. He proceeds from the methodological multiplicity that Smith envisions at least as a pragmatic interim goal. Aarseth envisions “uniting aesthetic, cultural and technical design aspects in a single discipline,” but this unity is functional and structural rather than methodological, and it is certainly not intended as homogeneity:

Of course, games should also be studied within existing fields and departments, such as Media Studies, Sociology, and English, to name a few. But games are too important to be left to these fields. (And they did have thirty years in which they did nothing!) Like architecture, which contains but cannot be reduced to art history, game studies should contain media studies, aesthetics, sociology etc. But it should exist as an independent academic structure, because it cannot be reduced to any of the above.

Despite their differences, Smith's and Aarseth's texts share a paradigmatic vector: they both understand that the complexity of their objects of research is such that it may only be addressed in equally complex ways, and that doing so means finding common ground between as large a variety of scholarly approaches as possible. The objective then is to find ways to cultivate this multiplicity without either leveling the differences between these perspectives or establishing a rigid hierarchy between them.

Video Games as Objects of Inquiry: A Methodological Approach

The unique mediality of video games will continue to present one of the biggest challenges to the methodologies of American Studies. For example, it will both enhance and question the so-called visual turn the field has undergone in recent years. Video games lend themselves to be analyzed in visual terms but also cannot be reduced to the visual (just like they cannot be reduced to sound, music, gameplay, narrative, symbolism, or any other single factor that would dominate the irreducible complexity of the medium). Its turn to visibility indicates that American Studies is well past its exclusive philological focus, even though it retains a strong text-based concern. It is worth emphasizing here that this philological tradition is not to be dismissed wholesale as a methodological toolbox when it comes to analyzing video games just because a certain part of that tradition has played such a problematic role in theorizing them. What has come to be identified as a narratological position in video game studies—the notion that games tell stories—has its roots in the long tradition of narrative analysis that dominates the study of American literature today, as narrative forms of literature dominate the literary market and the academic scene. Notably, this kind of narratology is not the same as the narratology that literary scholars speak of when they refer to a particular kind of analysis. Even though the latter has strongly influenced the narratological position on video games, it must not be conflated with it. A terminologically precise understanding of narrative analysis will avoid the double fallacy of either treating games as stories or of interpreting their narrative elements only in narratological terms, thus missing the many other ways in which literary studies may deal with narrative (since narratological analyses of texts are at best a limited, if not marginal subset of literary interpretation today). Philipp Schweighauser draws attention to this distinction in his essay “Doubly Real: Game Studies and Literary Anthropology; or, Why We Play Games,” in which he argues that narratology is only a part of literary theory,

and a contested one at that. He convincingly outlines useful perspectives on the study of video games beyond that particular approach (focusing in particular on Wolfgang Iser's theory of fiction). Yet I would argue that literary studies has a particular area of expertise that has not yet been even remotely tapped in relation to video games, even though it shares a fundamental property with them that would make its obvious differences all the more fascinating to explore. In fact, this form of cultural expression—once central to the field of American Studies—has been obscured by the intense contemporary focus on narrative with regard to literature: poetry. Like video games, poetry is fundamentally non-narrative in the sense that it *may* be narrative, even strongly so, but that this remains an optional quality. Of course, poetry is mainly textual, visual, and/or acoustic, while video games combine audiovisual, tactile, and textual elements. Yet the tools of poetic analysis may still be more appropriate to the interpretation of video games and their cultural relevance than those of narratology. For one, they will draw attention to the minute details of form and style, to devices such as synecdoche or juxtaposition, to the intricacies of symbolism, and to the play of meaning and its possibilities beyond the constraints of plot, character, and setting.⁶ For example, Ezra Pound's theory of Imagism or William Carlos Williams's notion of the poem as a "machine made out of words" (256) may provide literary perspectives on the aesthetics and the symbolic qualities of video games that narrative approaches are missing. One may also add the explorations of the visual beyond the textual by concrete poetry as well as the poetic insistence on the auditory, the sensual, and the performative as much as the textual. This is not to say that narrative approaches to video games are inherently flawed, especially not when considering the sheer diversity of such approaches that barely share anything but that label; it only serves to indicate what else may be found in digging deeper beyond the top layer of narrative analysis in the toolbox of American Studies.

At the same time, the methods of literary analysis—narrative or otherwise—will undoubtedly have to increasingly incorporate the aesthetics of video games into their discursive repertoire as the texts they scrutinize do the same. Just a few brief examples: Thomas Pynchon's novel *Vineland*, published in 1990 and set in 1984, uses scarce references to fictional and real video games (such as "'Nukey,' which included elements of sex and detonation" (160)) mostly in order to situate the narrative in its appropriate contemporary pop-cultural setting; yet his 2013

⁶ I explore these parallels further in my essay "Whitman and Everything: Playing with the Poetics of Scale," which analyzes Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855) alongside David O'Reilly's *Everything* (2017).

novel *Bleeding Edge*, set in 2001, fundamentally draws on games and gaming culture also on a symbolic level, most notably with regard to the digital utopia/dystopia of “DeepArcher,” which has “forerunners in the gaming area, [...] like the MUD clones that started to come online back in the eighties, which were mostly text” (69). Mark Z. Danielewski’s series *The Familiar* goes even further as it explores the potential of the novel beyond the textual: for example, it reveals its own fundamental narrative constructs (or “Narcons”) as digital, “nothing but numbers. Zeros and ones” (TFv1 565), and they may “take on multiple shapes whether textual, musical, figurative, abstract, even performative” (TFv1 575). This transmedial take on narration is influenced by video game aesthetics and mediality, which requires a move beyond the literary categories of narratology.⁷ The novels use the fictional game of *Paradise Open* as an example of how reading and playing may intersect while remaining distinct. The novels even find a kind of guiding metaphor in software code for their use of visual elements that are always more than mere illustrations: they do include textual code in C++ (e.g. TFv2 111–13), but they also comment on how in the execution of a program “‘image subitizes language” (TFv1 380). This duality is at the heart of its textual, visual, and material aesthetics, and it must be grasped not only in digital terms, but also in the multimedial aesthetics of video games that combine different symbolic forms with an embodied process of interaction.

Interaction might be the right term of understanding how the theories and methods prevalent in American Studies relate to video games as its object of research, as both will mutually affect each other. This includes the more formal approaches I have just mentioned as well as those methods that inquire into the relation between the imagination and identity—in the widest sense of the term—asking the critical questions about race, class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, nationality, ethnicity, and so many other categories that American Studies has rightfully focused on in recent decades in its search for appropriate methods of understanding ‘American culture.’ The theoretical and methodological repertoire that is associated with each of these categories and their intersections are undoubtedly vast and promising, and the notable work that has been done in this regard only indicates how much more there is to be done.

Feminist criticism of video games, for instance, has come a long way since *From Barbie® to Mortal Kombat* (edited by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins in 1998). Perspectives rooted in Cultural Studies rather than psychology or game

7 For a multifaceted exploration of the implications of such a move, cf. *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (2014).

design seem desirable now more than ever to spur on this movement; and even though notable work has been done since Mia Consalvo's 2003 essay "Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances: Studying Sexuality in Video Games," both the first anthology on *Queer Game Studies* (edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw) and the collection *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (edited by Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm) were only published in 2017. The issue of race in video games has been addressed powerfully and repeatedly by scholars such as Anna Everett;⁸ she adapted Eric Lott's work on minstrelsy to the new task at hand. Yet these groundbreaking efforts⁹ are clearly the beginnings rather than the conclusions to a critical body of work on the subject. And finally, most of the work on video games and social class seems to be done in the social sciences rather than in Cultural Studies, even though a Marxist critique of the largest culture industry today would surely be as merited as a reading of individual games (Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's 2009 study *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* still remains the most substantial scholarly contribution to that effect.)

All these examples only go to show that video games must be fully integrated into the established and emerging methodological repertoire of Cultural Studies at large, and that American Studies with its strong theoretical diversity must find a way of incorporating video games not just as yet another object of study but as one that may fundamentally challenge the field to reevaluate its methods. Of course, there is also a basic, urgent necessity to address the role of video games in the analysis of American culture from a scholarly perspective, and both the relevance of the medium and the need for a critical perspective on the discourses that surround and constitute it are best exemplified by two separate but connected news items that were published within two days in 2018. On April 9, *Grand Theft Auto V* was described as "the most financially successful media title of all time" (Cherney), earning about six billion dollars in revenue since its initial release in 2013. On April 8, the official White House YouTube channel released a highly controversial, entirely decontextualized supercut video entitled "Violence in Video Games"; this is the video President Trump showed at a meeting with representatives of the video game industry which he called after having speculated on violent video games being the cause of

8 See especially her co-authored essay "The Power of Play: The Portrayal and Performance of Race in Video Games" (with S. Craig Watkins) on this topic.

9 To these efforts one should add Adrienne Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (2015), Soraya Murray's *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (2017), as well as the edited collections *Queerness in Play, Feminism in Play*, and *Masculinities in Play* (all 2018).

the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on February 14, 2018 (Sirani). These two media events mark the immediate historical context of the project at hand and frame the scholarly challenges ahead: on the one hand, video games are the biggest culture industry out there, not only in economic terms but also in terms of cultural pervasiveness; on the other hand, the discourse on video games is still very much contested, not only because of the revival of a debate most people were already tired of in the 1990s by a president who would prefer not to talk about the second amendment instead, but also because evidently their *cultural* and *political* force remains largely unexplored while their *psychological* and *social* impact is highlighted.¹⁰

Perhaps it will be American Studies that may provide a self-reflexive element of scholarly critique in adding (or even opposing) more cultural approaches to psychological ones, especially when the latter's premises and methods seem dubious and their results, therefore, questionable. In any case, American Studies can and must be more than simply a counterpoint to other perspectives. Most importantly, the question of what American Studies has to say about video games must be the question of what it has to say that might not as well be said in and by other fields, and what its genuine and unique contribution to the interdisciplinary field of Video Game Studies might be. My own answer to this question is that the most important thing it can offer are critical perspectives on the construction of American culture in and through a global medium, not understanding American culture as a given or Americanness as a unified set of properties, but rather drawing attention to the contested space of Americanness, its symbolic constructions and political implications, its ideologies, stories, histories and myths, its homogenizations and exclusions, and most generally its imagination of community with very real effects. If American Studies no longer assumes there is a singular American culture to begin with (without giving up on the concept of culture itself), then its interest has shifted toward how American culture is constructed, invented, negotiated, and challenged, to what end this imagination occurs, and who gets to do the imagining under which material conditions—and video games are a prominent realm of cultural production in which

10 President Trump established the Federal Commission on School Safety in the aftermath of the Parkland shooting. It presented its report to the President on December 18, 2018. In this report, there is only a remarkably brief section on “Violent Entertainment and Rating Systems,” which concludes that “scholars and researchers disagree about the effect of exposure to violent entertainment” (63) and highlights the importance of existing rating systems for parental guidance. The Commission thus refuses to identify video games as a singular cause of school shootings, and its conclusion suggesting ways of preventing school violence in the future does not even mention them again.

all these processes are taking place and merit scholarly contextualization, scrutiny, and critique. Transnational approaches have only highlighted further the necessity to understand such cultural processes beyond the epistemological limits of the national. Perhaps no other object of research demands a transnational framework as video games do, as they epitomize the glocal in their distribution on a global market with significant regional specificities. In short, I see the biggest conceptual contribution by American Studies to Video Game Studies in its pronounced skepticism toward its own object of research. The best way to study the role of video games in American culture and the role of American culture in and for video games, it seems to me at least, is to take none of the two as a unitary given. Rather, it serves to understand them as truly mutually constitutive without assuming the priority of one over the other. This is a tall order, to be sure, so it is really time to play now.

Essay Summaries

The contributions in this collection all accept this invitation to play with this dialectic in one way or another, and despite their multiplicity they are far from exhaustive in their approaches to the task at hand. This volume certainly wants to start a conversation rather than end one. It is designed to offer a variety of perspectives rather than a streamlined approach that would make a normative case for a particular position that should become paradigmatic for American Studies. In the spirit of Smith and Aarseth—I hope—this collection highlights the pragmatic over the paradigmatic, either by exemplary analyses or by more theoretical reflections on interdisciplinary methodology. Since American Studies is so many things to many different people, its approaches to video games cannot be reduced to a single or even just a few perspectives, and even though there is a need for discussing what works and what does not, this discussion cannot occur in terms of agreeing on the single right way of doing things but rather of agreeing to disagree productively. This is what lies ahead, then:

The collection opens with Mark J. P. Wolf's "Video Games and the American Cultural Context," which provides a broad historical overview of the combined cultural, technological, and commercial conditions that have allowed the video game industry in the USA to develop and prosper as a central node in what has now become a global video game economy of production and reception.

Michael Fuchs, Michael Phillips, and Stefan Rabitsch expand on the cultural aspect by focusing on a particularly relevant trope in the repertoire of how Americanness is constructed. In "The end is nigh! Bring forth the Shepard!

Mass Effect, the Apocalypse, and the Puritan Imagination,” they discuss the game trilogy as an updated Jeremiad with an uneasy relation to the national discourse this mode of discourse has come to define.

In a related manner, David Callahan in “The Last of the US: The Game as Cultural Geography” focuses on the representation of spaces and places in *The Last of Us*, arguing that the game invokes and subverts a variety of cultural and historical subtexts as it traces the westward movement of the protagonists through an American landscape.

Patricia Maier is concerned with a particular form of movement in “Mobility and Choices in Role-Playing Games,” in which she analyzes *Skyrim* in terms of the tropes associated with American road narratives, arguing that the game associates different types of mobility with different ethics in its own in-game system of ‘racial’ segregation, and that it uses the resulting tension to evoke moral decisions in the player without flagging them as such or pre-judging them.

Dietmar Meinel concludes this cluster on movement and spatial representation with “Playing the Urban Future: The Scripting of Movement and Space in *Mirror’s Edge* (2008),” in which he adapts the theories of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau to analyze how the game mediates an urban environment and scripts a particular form of its potentially transgressive traversal, Parkour.

Martin Lütke turns to a different form of bodily movement in “Playing on Fields: Seasonal Seriality, Tele-Realism, and the Bio-Politics of Digital Sports Games,” as he analyses the *Pro Evolution Soccer* and *Madden* digital sports franchises for their relation to the serial and televisual aesthetics of their analog counterparts, and also shows how these games reproduce anxieties of the digital era regarding the fragility and volatility of the human body in general, and the (white) male sporting/slouching body specifically.

Stefan Schubert considers a different area of contemporary US-American popular culture in “Narrative and Play in American Studies: Ludic Textuality in the Video Game *Alan Wake* and the TV Series *Westworld*,” and his comparative analysis of these two artifacts (along with other examples such as Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*) establishes an abstract theory of the interrelations between play and narrative from an intermedial perspective that attests to an increasing fusion of these forms in the twenty-first century.

Andrei Nae and Alexandra Ileana Bacalu step back three centuries from there for a different kind of comparative analysis in “Toward a Reconsideration of Hypermediacy: Immersion in Survival Horror Games and Eighteenth-Century Novels,” which discusses the *Silent Hill* series and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (among other examples) in terms of their related hypermedial form that seeks to heighten immersion not by erasing but by emphasizing mediation.

Doug Stark then addresses this relation as a fusion in the genre of the video game novel in “Ludic Literature: *Ready Player One* as Didactic Fiction for the Neoliberal Subject.” He sets the playfulness of Ernest Cline’s fiction and its expansive intertexts in relation to a larger neoliberal practice of gamified self-fashioning within a framework of ludic cultural capital, reading its allegedly sub- or even countercultural gamer ethic as an updated version of Max Weber’s protestant work ethic for the digital age.

Sebastian Domsch engages in a different kind of literary analysis in “Strategies against Structure: Video Game Terrorism as the Ultimate American Agency Narrative” in order to describe how video games establish narrative archetypes through their gameplay mechanics rather than the modes of semanticization that are usually considered as integral to their storytelling; listing navigation, survival, accumulation / attrition, and destruction, he focuses particularly on the latter as a ‘terrorist narrative’ that highlights the tension between individual agency and structure.

This is precisely the abstract concern of Jon Adams in “Why We Play Role-Playing Games,” although coming from a different angle that purposefully blurs the line between game and non-game further. Adams argues that RPGs offer a playful way of acquiring algorithmic literacy in a world that has become increasingly algorithmic, and as they teach players how to position themselves critically toward the algorithmic systems that run their lives to a significant extent, and how they might even “game the system” in the process.

Damien B. Schlarb writes about more concrete structural (self-)subversion in “Narrative Glitches: Action Adventure Games and Metaleptic Convergence,” as he discusses how *X-Men* (1993), *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009), and *Pony Island* (2016) stage moments of metalepsis in which simulated machinic failure becomes part of narrative, showing how video games uniquely use these interstices between the material and the cultural in their meaning-making.

Sabrina Mittermeier explores this connection further from a very different perspective in “Time Travelling to the American Revolution—Why Immersive Media Need American Studies,” as she addresses the combination of material, historical, and cultural aspects in American theme parks and video games alike. She discusses how *Assassins Creed 3* and Disney’s Magic Kingdom and Epcot represent the American revolution, and how these participatory media fare when confronted with the (often political) demands of historical ‘accuracy.’

In another twist that takes us back to video games and constructions of Americanness, Manuel Franz and Henning Jansen discuss historical representation in *BioShock Infinite*. In their essay “A Shining City and the Sodom Below: Historical Guilt and Personal Agency in *BioShock Infinite*,” they analyze the game for its history-related content as they argue that its depiction of history ad-

dresses individual responsibility and guilt as a driving force of commemorative culture. They show that the game seeks and largely fails to evoke such responsibility and guilt in the player.

Jacqueline Blank continues the discussion of this game in “The Art of *BioShock Infinite*: Identity, Race, and Manifest Destiny” by focusing on a particular visual aspect that is central to how its own variety of Americanness is conveyed to players. Comparing major in-game paintings with historical ones, she shows how the ideological context and purpose of the latter informs that of the former by way of a shared visual aesthetics that critically embeds the gameworld in US-American cultural history.

Veronika Keller concludes the discussion of *BioShock Infinite* with a musical analysis in “Sounds of Tears: Mozart’s *Lacrimosa* in Different Media.” Using Miloš Forman’s *Amadeus* as a starting point, she traces how this particular piece of classical music accumulates layers of meaning through different iterations in various cultural artifacts across media, and how it goes beyond this process in *BioShock Infinite* in assuming not only a symbolic but an interactive role.

Nathalie Aghoro concludes the collection with a focus on sound rather than music in “Unspoken Adventures: On Sound, Story, and Nonverbal Gameplay in *Journey* and *Inside*.” She argues that these games, despite their differences, both use nonverbal sounds to generate individual storytelling experiences that invite players to evaluate social dynamics and world-subject relations as they are fundamental to the exploration of their own agency within the game and at its limits.

With this variety of individual approaches, this collection serves as a basis for an extended debate within American Studies on how the field may deal with video games and how it may change in order to do so. Even though this is what some readers might expect from a more abstract introduction such as this one, it would be unduly limiting to identify more precise potential fields of interest or methodological implications for American Studies here. The beauty and challenge of how American Studies may integrate video games more and be changed by them, however, is that not even a well-meaning speculation would do justice to the potential that is actually out there. I would only caution that we avoid the pitfall of misrepresenting our objects to make them fit a particular method. I see the biggest potential for American Studies in exploring this dialectic between what is studied and how it is studied, and I have no doubt that any analysis mindful of this will prove to be productive in more than one way.

Works Cited

- Aarseth, Espen. "Computer Game Studies, Year One." July 2001, www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html. Accessed 15 Jan. 2019.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard UP, 1995.
- Cassell, Justine, and Henry Jenkins, editors. *From Barbie® to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. The MIT Press, 1998.
- Chang, Alenda Y. "Games as Environmental Texts." *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2011, pp. 57–84.
- Cherney, Max A. "This Violent Videogame has Made more Money than any Movie Ever." *Marketwatch.com*, Dow Jones & Co., 9 Apr 2018, www.marketwatch.com/story/this-violent-videogame-has-made-more-money-than-any-movie-ever-2018-04-06. Accessed 15 Jan. 2019.
- Consalvo, Mia. "Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances: Studying Sexuality in Video Games." *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, Routledge, 2003, pp. 171–94.
- Danielewski, Mark Z. *The Familiar*. Pantheon, 2015–2017. 5 vols.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.
- Dyer-Witheford, Nick, and Greig de Peuter. *Games of Empire. Global Capitalism and Video Games*. U of Minnesota P, 2009.
- Everett, Anna, and Craig Watkins. "The Power of Play: The Portrayal and Performance of Race in Video Games." *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, edited by Katie Salen, The MIT Press, 2008, pp. 141–66. doi: 10.1162/dmal.9780262693646.141. Accessed 15 Jan. 2019.
- "Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety." U.S. Department of Education, 18 Dec. 2018, www2.ed.gov/documents/school-safety/school-safety-report.pdf. Accessed 15 Jan. 2019.
- Gray, Kishonna L., Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen, editors. *Feminism in Play*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2018.
- Gunzenhäuser, Randi. "Computerspiele als Herausforderung an die Wissenschaften." *Computerspiele—Eine Provokation für die Kulturwissenschaften?*, edited by Evelyne Keitel et al., Pabst Science Publishers, 2003, pp. 107–114.
- Harper, Todd, Meghan Blythe Adams, and Nicholas Taylor, editors. *Queerness in Play*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2018.
- Mäyrä, Frans. *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture*. Sage, 2008.
- Mayar, Mahshid, editor. *Encounters in the 'Game-Over Era': The Americas in/and Video Games*, special issue of *forum for inter-american research*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2018, inter-america.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Vol-11.2-ready.pdf. Accessed 15 Jan. 2019.
- Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. The MIT Press, 2005.
- Malkowski, Jennifer, and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, editors. *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Indiana UP, 2017.

- Milburn, Colin. "Green Gaming: Video Games and Environmental Risk." *The Anticipation of Catastrophe. Environmental Risk in North American Literature and Culture*, edited by Sylvia Mayer and Alexa Weik von Mossner, Winter, 2014, pp. 201–18.
- Murray, Soraya. *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*. I.B. Tauris, 2017.
- Newman, Michael Z. *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America*. MIT Press, 2017.
- Penix-Tadsen, Phillip. *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America*. MIT Press, 2016.
- Pöhlmann, Sascha. "Whitman and Everything: Playing with the Poetics of Scale." *Revisiting Walt Whitman: On the Occasion of his 200th Birthday*, edited by Winfried Herget, Peter Lang, 2019, pp. 55–80.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Bleeding Edge*. Penguin, 2013.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Vineland*. Little, Brown & Co., 1990.
- Radway, Janice. "What's in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 20 November, 1998." *American Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 1, March 1999, pp. 1–32.
- Ruberg, Bonnie, and Adrienne Shaw, editors. *Queer Game Studies*. U of Minnesota P, 2017.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure and Jan-Noël Thon, editors. *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. U of Nebraska P, 2014.
- Schweighauser, Philipp. "Doubly Real: Game Studies and Literary Anthropology; or, Why We Play Games." *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2009, pp. 115–32.
- Shaw, Adrienne. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. U of Minnesota P, 2015.
- Sirani, Jordan. "Trump: Video Game, Movie Violence Is 'Shaping Young People's Thoughts.'" *IGN.com*, 22 Feb 2018, www.ign.com/articles/2018/02/22/trump-video-game-movie-violence-is-shaping-young-peoples-thoughts. Accessed 15 Jan. 2019.
- Smith, Henry Nash. "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?" *American Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 2, part 2, 1957, pp. 197–208.
- Taylor, Nicholas, and Gerald Voorhees, editors. *Masculinities in Play*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2018.
- "Violence in Video Games." *YouTube*, uploaded by The White House, 8 March 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=0C_IBSuXloo.
- Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, and Pat Harrigan, editors. *First-Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. MIT Press, 2004.
- Williams, William Carlos. "Author's Introduction to *The Wedge*." *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams*, Random House, 1954, pp. 255–57.
- Wolfe, Alan. "Anti-American Studies: The Difference between Criticism and Hatred." *The New Republic*, 10 Feb. 2003, pp. 25–32.