

Editorial:

Postcolonial Play in the Orient's Sandbox

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Abstract

In this introduction to the special double issue, the guest editors outline their vision behind the work by giving a short overview of the orientalist bias in game studies, the postcolonialist turn in the field, and the need for South Asia-centric scholarship to contribute to and invite South-South discourse in games scholarship. This short introduction also introduces the various contributions to this double issue which range from academic articles to book reviews to comments.

Keywords

South Asia, postcolonialism, South-South discourse, orientalism, videogames

The story of oriental thinking around games goes back many centuries. Thomas Hyde's 17th-century text, *De Ludis Orientalibus* (1694), addresses, in detail, many games that are referred to as "Oriental." Hyde refers to chess as a form of battle "not indeed imagined, as of planets or stars, but real; not modern, but ancient, oriental, Indian" (1694). Over a century later, Sir William Jones, the champion orientalist, wrote his essay on Indian chess in 1807. The terms "orientalist" and "Orient" have, however, since gained a very different meaning after postcolonial thinker Edward W. Said's research in his seminal book, *Orientalism*, published in 1978. The Orient, according to Said, is a semi-mythic construct and the premise of Orientalism is the "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1978). The description of the East by the West is often one of mystique, fantasy and the exotic as opposed to the practical rationality of Europe; orientalism presupposes that the Orient needs to be described and cannot represent itself accurately. Just as with other cultural phenomena, orientalism in games too did not stop with Hyde or Jones. In the ensuing centuries, oriental games and play "need" to be described by the European scholar, often in colonial scenarios; similarly, European games such as football and cricket "need" to be introduced in the colonies to instil morality and discipline in the subject nations.

Arguably, the trend persists long after the end of European colonialism, even in the most recent form of ludic activity: digital games. The content of digital games, from Europe and North America, and even from Asian countries, perpetuate colonial and orientalist stereotypes as shown in the earlier research of the editors (Mukherjee 2018; Rizvi and Chowdhury 2021; Rizvi and Mukherjee 2023). With the recent and much-belated postcolonial turn in games studies (see Lammes 2010; Penix-Tadsen 2016; Mukherjee 2017; Mukherjee and Hammar 2018; Harrer 2018), there is a heightened awareness of the need to reexamine the inherently orientalist constructions in digital games (see Šisler 2008; Zeiler and Mukherjee 2022) in the ludic, narrative, player experience and industry aspects. From exotic characters and locales in, for example, *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* (Naughty Dog 2017) and *Far Cry 4* (Ubisoft Montreal 2014) to the scant attention paid to the video game industry in Asia (see

Patterson and Fickle 2024), the problem is deep-seated. We plan to address this continued orientalism in games, particularly in the case of digital games, in this special double issue of *CyberOrient*, titled *Postcolonialism, Orientalism, and Video Games*.

In the first instalment of this double issue, Soraya Murray's article, "Raji's Burden" raises the important question of "what it means to insert culturally specific non-Western themes and narratives into a conventional Western rule-based system" and whether even games from the so-called Global South also tend to slide back into the set Western conventions of game design. When the same applies to cultural representation, then the whole question of Orientalism is reconfigured, and the problem Murray poses for *Raji* is aptly bridged over into the second instalment, by Vít Šisler in his essay, "Theoretical and Methodological Framework for Studying Orientalism in Video Games" where he proposes a theoretical and methodological framework of studying Orientalism in video games. Šisler uses examples from Arabic-speaking countries and Iran primarily and features interviews with game developers as well as a robust engagement with existing game production scholarship. Using the compelling concept of "gameenvironments," his essay serves as a useful take-off point to the other essays in the collection. Following Murray's essay, Arkabrata Chaudhury and Arunoday Chaudhuri write about the need to challenge the "Indian mythic" and the way in which gender and Indian history are presented in *Raji*. Chaudhury and Chaudhuri's essay speaks to the concerns raised directly by Murray regarding *Raji* and also those that Šisler's gameenvironments research indicates, albeit in a different and larger context. Moving from an Indian video game to the experience of a popular AAA franchise from the Global North, Animesh Dhara's essay on the reception of *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* in India quite intriguingly presents the scenario of how Americanness is perceived among Indian *GTA* players. Again, keeping the player in mind, Achintya Debnath attempts to analyse the remarkable popularity the battle-royale (an online multiplayer game that combines last-man-standing gameplay with elements of a survival game) game, *PUBG (PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds)* among Indian audiences but through the lens of psychoanalysis.

Adding to the essays, the double issue also contains Xenia Zeiler's review of Souvik Mukherjee's book, *Videogames in the Subcontinent: Development, Culture(s) and Representations* (2023) and Anders Ackerfeld's review of Liz Przybylski's *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and In Between* (2020) provide important insights into game production and culture studies outside the Global North and a theory of research methods that may be useful in games studies research.

The conception of this special issue was specifically born out of a need to redress South Asia's prolonged absence in games studies' discourses and the larger allied scholarship on digital culture, by way of amplifying some of the major and critical issues in the gaming cultures of what is arguably one of the most diverse and populated parts of the globe. Looking back at the rich scholarship in this double issue, the editors hope that the work here is the drop that ripples the ocean of enduring absences in game studies by foregrounding the assemblage of the South-South discourse, to this end, as well as highlighting the global challenges to colonialism and orientalism in understanding narrative cultures, play-cultures, and code.

Like all exercises of care, this double issue is possible only due to the work of everyone who saw its value, devoted their time and collaborative energies, and contributed in its fruition. In this we are eternally grateful to the general editors and the editorial team of *CyberOrient*, and, of course, our reviewers. Vit, Anders, Hana, Paul, Poonam, Mahli-Ann, Souvik Kar, Prabhash, and Keerthi, we owe this one to you all.

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