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Postcolonialism, Orientalism, and Video Games
Guest edited by Souvik Mukherjee and Zahra Rizvi

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Editor-in-Chief: Vít Šisler

Associate Editor: Anders Ackfeldt

Guest Editors: Souvik Mukherjee, Zahra Rizvi

Graphic Designer: Richard Alexander

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Article:**Theoretical and Methodological Framework for Studying Video Games and Orientalism****Vít Šisler***Abstract*

This article proposes a theoretical and methodological framework for studying orientalism and representation in video games, grounded in information science, communication studies, game studies, and cultural studies. Utilizing the approaches of critical transculturalism, game production studies, and a newly refined concept of gameenvironments, the proposed framework understands video games as hybrid cultural artifacts existing within interconnected technical, socio-cultural, political, economic, and religious spheres. It examines games on three levels: as computational systems encompassing procedural, narrative, and audiovisual layers; as designed by authors encoding worldviews and ideas; and as dynamically interpreted by players. Encompassing the contexts influencing design and reception, this framework enables nuanced analysis of how games perpetuate or challenge orientalist discourses. Methodologically, it integrates techniques from across disciplines to study games' components, creators, audiences, and wider environments. Using Arab and Iranian gaming cultures as an example, this article highlights applying the framework to local productions negotiating global media flows and political constraints. Overall, it aims to offer an expansive and multifaceted toolkit for researching orientalism, representation, and identity construction in video games.

Keywords

video games; orientalism; video game analysis; Middle East

Introduction

In February 2021, a US video game company Highwire Games announced they were developing *Six Days in Fallujah*, a “tactical shooter” game that “recreates true stories of Marines, Soldiers, and Iraqi civilians” from the Iraq War (Elassar 2021). The video game is set in the Second Battle of Fallujah, one of the deadliest battles of the war, which resulted in over eight hundred civilian casualties (Marqusee 2005). According to the developers, both US soldiers and Iraqi civilians participated in the game’s development and it will use gameplay and documentary interviews to portray these events with “authenticity and respect” (Highwire Games 2021).

The announcement of the game’s release sparked controversy and drew widespread criticism, particularly by civilian survivors and veterans of the Iraq war. For example, Najla Bassim Abdulelah, who grew up during the war, expressed concerns about taking a real-life event, in which people suffered and died, and turning it into a game. “I am disgusted that this is something that will be producing profit when people like me suffered the consequences of this war and will have to watch people play it for fun,” she told CNN (Elassar 2021).

By the same token, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the largest US Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization, criticized the game for “contributing to an ongoing culture of generalized, racist, and dehumanizing portrayals of Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern cultures across all entertainment.” CAIR also called on major video game companies not to host or digitally distribute the game (Allison 2021).

The game has not been released at the time of writing this article, yet it poignantly illustrates the complex relationship between video games, politics, popular culture, contemporary history, identity, and the entertainment industry. More importantly, it demonstrates how video games dealing with real-world events, places, and people construct virtual representations of the latter that matter, especially to those directly concerned, and shape the perception and evaluation of these events (Pötzsch and Šisler 2019). In

our increasingly interconnected world, virtual representations constructed by video games constitute an important part of the global public sphere (Khamis and Šisler 2010).

The controversy surrounding *Six Days in Fallujah* is not new to the Middle East nor to video games. In 2003, the Lebanese Hezbollah Central Internet Bureau accused American video games of misrepresenting the Middle East and inciting hatred towards Arabs:

The problem behind these electronic games, especially those designed for computers, is that most of them are foreign made, especially American. Therefore, they bear enormous false understandings and habituate teenagers to violence, hatred and grudges. In addition, some enfold humiliation to many of our Islamic and Arab countries, where battles are running in these Arab countries, the dead are Arab soldiers, whereas the hero who kills them is—the player himself—an American. (Lebanese Hezbollah Central Internet Bureau, Special Force 2003)

In a response to the alleged misrepresentations, Hezbollah published an action game called *Special Force (Al-Qūwwat al-khāsa)* in 2003. This first-person shooter game dealt with a military conflict between Hezbollah and the Israeli Defense Forces and the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from Lebanon in 2000. According to its developers, the game was “based on reality” and should be “educational for future generations” (Special Force 2003). The game was not only a novel media asset in Hezbollah propaganda campaigns, but also served as a recruitment tool for the movement and commemoration of fallen soldiers (Machin and Suleiman 2006). Similar to *Six Days in Fallujah*, *Special Force* was widely criticized in global gaming and mainstream media and sparked debates about the capability of video games to portray history and war accurately, as well as the boundaries between entertainment and propaganda (Wakin 2003).

Despite the examples mentioned above, many believe video games are capable of transmitting complex and emotionally-loaded human

experiences, even those related to displacement, conflict, and war. In November 2017, the Austrian studio Causa Creations released a game called *Path Out*. The developers describe it as an “autobiographical adventure” that allows players to relive the journey of Abdullah Karam, a young Syrian artist who escaped the civil war (Causa Creations 2017). The artist himself participated in the design process and the game recalls his life. It begins with Abdullah’s decision to leave Syria when he turned 18, as staying would have resulted in his being conscripted into the war and being forced to fight his own relatives (Cox 2017). Most of the gameplay documents the perilous journey from his hometown Hama to the Turkish border through the war-torn Aleppo province (Causa Creations 2017).

Path Out received critical acclaim and won numerous international awards. Beyond providing a “playable” diary and serious commentary on the drastic events, it also contains humor and sarcasm. As Abdullah Karam says: “The jokes and the humor were important because they reflect the Syrian humor we’ve developed over decades to escape the dire reality of life and cope with the hardships we face” (Chan 2017). He states that developing the game brought him a sense of catharsis, while critics have called the game “an eye-opening experience” (Evans-Thirlwell 2017; see also BBC 2017).

The three snapshots that open this theoretical article offer a glimpse of the complex topic of video games and representation of the Middle East in particular, and video games and orientalism in general. In these examples, we can see video games being used as a documentary, propaganda, a recruitment tool, and an autobiographical diary, while simultaneously being “entertainment.” As Eric Zimmerman (2013) argues in his *Manifesto for a Ludic Century*, the 20th century was the century of information, where the moving image was the dominant cultural form. Personal storytelling, news reporting, epic cultural narratives, or political propaganda—“all were expressed most powerfully through film and video” (2013). According to Zimmerman, the rise of the moving image is tightly bound to the rise of information since “film and video as media represent linear, non-interactive information that is accessed by a viewer” (2013). On the contrary, the 21st century will be defined by games, where game-like experiences replace linear

media:

Media and culture in the Ludic Century is increasingly systemic, modular, customizable, and participatory. Games embody all of these characteristics in a very direct sense. Increasingly, the ways that people spend their leisure time and consume art, design, and entertainment will be games—or experiences very much like games. (Zimmerman 2013)

Indeed, video games have become massively popular with rapidly increasing economic relevance. The global video game market generated a total revenue of \$180.3 billion in 2021, which is more than the film, TV, and digital music industries combined (Wijman 2021). Simultaneously, video games constitute an increasingly important form of cultural production, showing a growing diversity of genres, cultures, and worldviews. Over three billion players globally spend an average of eight hours per week playing games (Limelight 2021). Video games can be found on every continent and appeal to one of the widest demographics imaginable (Wolf 2015, 15). In this context, Reichmuth and Werning (2006, 47) argued that video games exhibit strong popular appeal and economic relevance and have “a profound impact on the collective imaginary although this ‘passive’ knowledge is seldom accepted as culturally relevant.” This deficit of acceptance is partly due to the fact that video games “lack cultural prestige and scientific coverage” (Reichmuth and Werning 2006, 47).

Since 2006, the situation has changed significantly, with the then nascent field of game studies having grown steadily over the last two decades. Initially devoted to exploring the aesthetic, cultural, and communicative aspects of video games (Aarseth 2001), game studies firmly entrenched themselves within media and communication research (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2008; Mäyrä 2008; Lankoski and Björk 2015). Today, game studies focus on a broad array of topics, ranging for example from video games’ psychological and social aspects (Daniel and Garry 2018; Kowert and Quandt 2015), to game production studies (Sotamaa and Švelch 2021), video game design (Fullerton 2019), feminist and queer studies (Malkowski and

Russworm 2017; Ruberg and Shaw 2017), historical game studies (Lorber and Zimmermann 2020; Chapman 2016), religious game studies (Šisler, Radde-Antweiler, and Zeiler 2018; Campbell and Grieve 2014), or postcolonial game studies (Hammar et al. 2021; Mukherjee 2017). Particularly relevant to this article are the three latter strands of video game research: historical game studies, religious game studies, and postcolonial game studies.

According to Chapman (2016), historical video games constitute “one of the most successful forms” of popular history through which the past is engaged. Many mainstream, successful video games deal with real historical events and places, contributing to the ways history is conveyed, experienced, and understood (McCall 2016). As Rosenstone (2006, 12) notes, albeit in the context of film studies, “for every person who reads a book on a historical topic [...] many millions of people are likely to encounter that same past on the screen.” This observation applies to historical video games too, given their increasing popularity and reach (Chapman 2016). Although there exists considerable debate about the quality and depth of the representation of history in popular media in general (Erl1 2011; Rosenstone 2006), and video games in particular (Hammar 2019), the representation of the past in these games affects a society’s historical awareness (Kolek et al. 2021). This is particularly relevant to the topics of orientalism in video games and the representation of the Middle East, whose history and culture is oftentimes schematized in US and European mainstream media and popular culture (Said 1994; Mukherjee 2016).

In a nutshell, Said’s (1994) concept of orientalism is a critique of the Western construction of the “Orient” as a place of mystery and exoticism. In his seminal work, Said (1994) explores the discourse and practice of orientalism in literature, academia, and politics, exposing its role in perpetuating colonialism and imperialism. He highlights how the people of the “Orient” were often perceived as irrational and incapable of logic, with the accompanying assumption that the opposite traits were considered Western. Said’s work aims to undermine orientalism’s influence on how the West perceives and interacts with the East, shedding light on the often unquestioned assumptions about Eastern civilizations and the interconnected system of institutions, policies,

narratives, and ideas that perpetuate the above-mentioned schematizations. The concept of orientalism is used to study video games by analyzing the representation of Asian people or cultures in a negative or inaccurate light, often relying on stereotyping and schematizations (Šisler 2008, 2014a, 2018b; Mukherjee 2016; Hammar 2023). This can lead to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and the propagation of an idealized or distorted image of the East within video games, as shown in the examples mentioned above. Oftentimes, the schematizations and stereotyping are connected to the representation of Eastern religions and spiritual beliefs.

Campbell and Grieve (2014, 2) argue that video games are an important site for exploration into the “intersection of religion and contemporary culture that helps us understand what religion is, does, and means in a changing contemporary society.” According to them, just like films helped to illuminate and expose the religiosity of the 20th century, video games “now depict the religious within the twenty-first century” (2014). Similarly to real historical narratives and places, many video games use real religions and belief systems in order to construct believable worlds, systems of ethics, or appealing narratives (Šisler, Radde-Antweiler, and Zeiler 2018). Regarding this article, the field of religious game studies is important for investigations on how Islam and Muslims are represented in mainstream Arab and American video games and how we can study religious representations on the level of video games’ rule systems.

Finally, regarding video games and postcolonial studies, we recently saw the emergence of a new debate on this topic, which has, for a long time, been neglected in game studies. As Mukherjee (2017) puts it in his seminal work *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*:

Videogames have been analyzed from many perspectives in Humanities thinking and in recent years, a closer engagement with issues relating to gender, race, and diversity is in evidence. Despite early depictions of colonization in videogames, such as Sid Meier’s *Colonization* (Meier 1994) or Microsoft’s *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios 1997), there has been very little scholarship if

any at all on postcolonial perspectives on gaming in the now almost two decades of game studies research. (Mukherjee 2017, 2)

Although Mukherjee (2017, 9) acknowledges that many of the themes of postcolonialism (such as orientalism, empire, cartography, hybridity, and identity) have been addressed separately, the link between video games and postcolonialism has not been thoroughly examined. He offers a timely and important summary of the fragmented research and pinpoints the theoretical background necessary for any future endeavors in that direction. Regarding this thesis, the field of postcolonial game studies is important for the study of the growing diversity in the global video game industry and the emergence of new regional video game developers.

Although the field of video game studies has expanded significantly, some of the points raised by Reichmuth and Werning in 2006 are still relevant today. Video games tend to be considered less relevant in cultural discourse and thus are less frequently subjected to media critique (Reichmuth and Werning 2006, 47). As Sotamaa and Švelch (2021, 9) note, while the field of game studies has developed quickly in the past two decades, “the study of the video game industry and different modes of video game production have been mostly dismissed by game studies scholars.” This is particularly relevant when it comes to video game development, consumption, and circulation outside the traditionally recognized centers of the video game industry and culture.

While video games are a quintessentially global technology—with game consumption, production and related practices taking place in virtually every country in the world today—“they have been received, created and even played differently in different regions, because cultural and national context impact the circulation and meaning of games in myriad ways” (Penix-Tadsen 2019, 6). In other words, the video game ecology is shaped through countless “local situations that collectively enact the global” (Apperley 2010, 18). At the same time, the study of video games has, until recently, predominantly focused on the traditional centers of video game scholarship: the United States, Western Europe, South Korea, and Japan (Penix-Tadsen 2019). The proliferation of video games in other regions and the role they play in the

local culture, economy, and politics have remained understudied (for notable exceptions see Švelch 2018; Penix-Tadsen 2019; Mukherjee 2017). Yet, as Huntemann and Aslinger point out, location impacts video games in several important ways:

Local, national, regional, transnational, and translocal perspectives can add new levels of complexity to how we assess and experience the formal, textual, and representational content of games; discourses and practices of game development, distribution, policy, ratings, and censorship; historical, geographic, spatial, linguistic, racial, ethnic, and domestic contexts that influence design, hardware and software production; and embodied and networked play practices. (Huntemann and Aslinger 2013, 2)

The Middle East is one of the fastest-growing gaming markets in the world. This growth is driven by the region's young, fast-growing population of active gamers, a high penetration of smartphones and the internet, and an increasing supply of localized content by regional and global game publishers (Sharma 2020). In the Arab world in particular, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt are among the top game markets, with Saudi Arabia ranked as the 19th-largest gaming market globally in terms of revenue, at around \$837 million (Tashkandi 2021). As a result, Arab and Iranian video game development and gaming cultures are shaped simultaneously by global cultural flows and distinct geographical locales.

As the above-mentioned examples illustrate, video games play an increasingly important role in contemporary Arab and Iranian cultures, their economies and politics. They are intertwined with local identity, history and international relations on the levels of production, consumption and regulation. As Cueto (2014) emphasizes, any technology should be understood as “an arena contested by a wide variety of individuals, institutions and actors and through complex local processes of reception, rejection, adaptation and hybridization.” The Arab and Iranian game development and gaming cultures constitute a complex, heterogeneous space where a multitude of actors and agendas coexist; ranging from independent artists pursuing their visions to global

companies searching for new markets, state and religious authorities setting political agendas, and local gamers trying to get their hands on the latest products of the entertainment industry. These actors' aims and motivations simultaneously reinforce, overlap, and contradict each other, creating a highly contested media environment, where individual agency and state regulation continue to shape media and communication practices.

This article stems from my previous research on the complex spaces of video game development and gaming cultures in the Arab world and Iran (Šisler et al. 2023; Šisler 2013b; 2014b; 2018b) and on orientalism in video games (Šisler 2008; 2013a; 2014a; 2018a). Yet, in this article I do not summarize the content of my previous research but aim to formulate a theoretical and methodological framework for studying orientalism in video games, using the case study of the Arab world and Iran as an illustrative example of how to analyze the cultural and national contexts that shape the ways in which video games are designed, played, and regulated. Methodologically, the proposed framework stems from information science, communication studies, game studies, and cultural studies. It utilizes the theoretical frameworks of critical transculturalism (Kraidy 2005), game production studies (Sotamaa and Švelch 2021), the artifactual approach to game studies (Sotamaa 2016), and gamevironments (House 2020; Hammar 2020; Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe, and Zeiler 2014) in order to explore the disjunctive and heterogenous spaces of Arab and Iranian video games. Simultaneously, the proposed theoretical and methodological framework contributes to the nascent field of “cultural ludology,” which focuses on the analysis of video games “attending to the myriad ways culture is incorporated into game mechanics, but at the same time recognizes the signifying potential of the cultural environment in which games are created, designed, manufactured, purchased, played and otherwise put to use” (Penix-Tadsen 2016, 3).

The theoretical and methodological framework I propose in this article is formulated after more than a decade of research. It stems from the content analysis of more than one hundred and fifty video games in Arabic, English, and Persian; qualitative in-depth interviews with more than thirty Arab and Iranian video game developers; fieldwork in Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Qatar,

Iran, and the United Arab Emirates; and a quantitative social network analysis of gaming magazines' and players' groups pages on Facebook. The framework should allow for research that enables us to capture the heterogeneous nature and complexity of different national and regional conditions. Before discussing the proposed framework in detail, I have to make a few comments on the terms “the Middle East” and “the Arab world.”

First, I am fully aware of the problematic use of the term “the Middle East” as an umbrella term. The region usually labeled as the Middle East is geographically, historically, culturally, sociopolitically, and economically diverse and multifaceted. The countries of Western Asia and North Africa that are put together on the map as the Middle East neither constitute a continental landmass nor are they sufficiently bound together by any unifying characteristics (Amanat 2011, 2). Yet, as much as the term Middle East denotes a “virtual space,” it might be a useful analytical construct for certain aspects of video game studies, particularly as it corresponds with the representational politics of US and European video games. The latter oftentimes conflate ethnically and religiously diverse groups of people into a few schematizing images. Therefore, I use the term when speaking about in-game representations and schematizations. At the same time, there are many studies that use the term “the Middle East” while referring to various aspects of Arab and Iranian gaming cultures and game development in particular; or to media landscapes and regulatory frameworks in general (e.g. Sharma 2020; Clément 2019; Cederskoog 2012; Kasmiya 2010; Zakaria, Stanton, and Sarkar-Barney 2003). Simultaneously, many video game developers I interviewed used the term as well. Therefore, I too use the term when quoting authors and sources who themselves use it. Nevertheless, when I refer to my own research, I try to use the terms “the Arab world” and “Iran,” clearly indicating where the empirical data and findings of my research originated.

Second, for the purpose of this article, I use the term “Arab world” to refer to countries that are members of the Arab League of Nations and speak Arabic as their official language (Šisler 2011; Abdulla 2007). By no means does this imply that the Arab world is a homogenous bloc. Despite the fact that the majority of Arab countries share the same language, culture, religion,

and history, there are significant variances in political and cultural ideology among Arab audiences (Amin 2007, x). As such, I am aware of the analytical risk of subsuming the diverse national video game industries and markets into one framework. At the same time, the regulatory frameworks and historical and social conditions in many Arab countries manifest significant overlaps (Šisler et al. 2023). Therefore, I use the term “the Arab world” when referring to the broader frame of my research, yet I situate my findings to concrete Arab countries and places whenever possible.

Theoretical Grounding of the Framework

Video games as dynamic systems of information representation: the perspective of information science

The proposed framework is theoretically grounded in information science: a multidisciplinary field of study (Bates 1999) focused, in its broadest sense, on the collection, storage, retrieval and use of information (Saracevic 2009; Anderson 2012; Dillon 2012). In particular, information science is concerned both with “recordable information and knowledge” and the “technologies and related services that facilitate their management and use” (Saracevic 2009, 2570). While exploring the interactions of people with information and its underlying technologies, information science transcends disciplinary boundaries (Dillon 2012). The highly networked and increasingly complex information ecologies emerging in the 21st century simultaneously require and foster creative and critical capacities for engaging with information (Anderson 2012). Information science in the 21st century thus needs to reflect the new ways of working with and using information that will most likely continue to emerge; including dynamic, informal forms of communication such as video games.

Video games have already been researched from various perspectives within information science (Squire 2008; Buchtová 2014; Lee, Clarke, and Kim 2015; Kolek 2020). In their systematic work, Lee, Clarke, and Kim (2015) have identified four areas of research on video games within the domain of information science. The first research area focuses on using and building

collections of games in libraries (e.g. Levine 2006; Nicholson 2008) and the preservation and archiving of games (e.g. McDonough et al. 2010; Winget and Sampson 2011; Lowood et al. 2009). The second research area deals with video game players: their typology, characteristics, motivations, and the effects on their game behaviors and preferences (e.g. Schuurman et al. 2008; Bartle 2004; 2014). The third research area perceives video games as information spaces and explores how various game elements affect the learning experience and how players search for in-game information and share it with other players (e.g. Harviainen and Savolainen 2014; Whippley 2011; Nardi 2008). Finally, the fourth research area deals with information behavior, in particular with information sharing and the effects of demographics and player characteristics on information behavior (e.g. Adams 2005; 2009; Martin 2012 Getomer, Okimoto, and Cleaver 2012). Furthermore, regarding video games and information behavior, Buchtová (2014) explored knowledge acquisition, engagement and the creation of mental models within video game use. Similarly, Kolek (2020) has investigated whether video games are able to affect players' attitudes and information behavior towards depicted historical topics in games over the short and long term.

While formulating the theoretical framework, in accordance with Buchtová (2014, 8), I perceive video games as “dynamic systems of information representation” that can provide additional representational aspects when compared to other media:

In particular they [video games] can attribute sound and visual characteristics to specific details, portray interrelations of its subsystems and simulate its behavior in various situations. For this reason they might facilitate understanding of complex data in such information systems. (Buchtová 2014, 8)

Video games are able to represent information in new forms, some of which are unique to that particular media format:

They can depict spatial information (through game space and spatial relation of different objects), visualize relations of different objects

(dimensions, interconnections, spatial relations), distinguish objects and categories of objects by assigning specific attributes to them (audio-visual representation, interaction behavior), simulate system behavior (game rules, interaction responses, instant feedback), and control emotions (narration, immersive elements, audiovisual design and representation). (Buchtová 2014, 13)

Beyond their function as a medium representing information, video games provide players with information facilitating, or even enabling, further play (Kolek 2020). From the information science perspective, video games are systems that require players to seek and process information in order to proceed further in a game story or to accomplish a game's objectives. This process is highly related to information literacy, that is, "the intellectual process of recognizing the need for information to solve a problem or issue regardless of the setting" (Martin 2012, 268). Typically, video games introduce their basic mechanics and features to their players, but they do not necessarily explain advanced gameplay strategies. Thus, in order to gain expertise or to master a particular game, "players use and refine their skills in information seeking, processing and acquisition" (Kolek 2020, 18).

The proposed methodological framework expands our knowledge of video games as information spaces and players' information behavior, that is, in the third and fourth areas of research according to Lee, Clarke, and Kim's (2015) classification outlined above. Importantly, video games in the Arab world and Iran, as well as in other areas perceived as "Orient," are not consumed and developed in isolation but result from and feed back into myriads of intercultural exchanges and global cultural flows, opening up possibilities for hybridization and cultural cross-pollination.

Video games as hybrid media texts: the critical transculturalism perspective

The methodological framework's second theoretical anchor lies in the critical transculturalism approach introduced by Kraidy (2005), particularly in his notion of hybrid media texts. Kraidy argues that hybridity is "the cultural logic of globalization" (2005, xii) and proposes critical transculturalism as

a new international communication framework with issues of hybridity at its core. It is a framework that conveys “a synthetic notion of culture and a dynamic understanding of relations between cultures” (2005, vii). As such, critical transculturalism is at once “an engagement with hybridity as a discursive formation, a framework for international communication theory, and an agenda for research” (2005, vii).

As Kraidy argues, hybridity is not a unitary concept but rather “an association of ideas, concepts, and themes that at once reinforce and contradict each other” (2005, vi). Being an “emergent phenomenon that eludes easy classification,” hybridity poses a challenge to empirical research on media and to analyses of media texts (2005, viii). As such, it is imperative to situate every analysis of hybridity “in a specific context where the conditions that shape hybridities are addressed” (2005, vi). In other words, the concept of hybridity must be “operationalized” in case studies where structural elements ought to be explained (2005, viii).

Within the proposed framework and in my previous works, I analyze video games in the Arab world and Iran precisely as “hybrid media texts” that result from industry practices such as “coproduction, format adaptation, and localization” (2005, xi). By doing so, I anchor my research in the concrete case studies of translocal video game development and consumption in the Arab world and Iran. As Kraidy (2005, 6) posits, the boundaries between “domestic” and “foreign” cultural influences are not always clearly demarcated. Hybrid media texts reflect the existence of a variety of historical, economic, and cultural forces whose “enmeshments with one another are as manifest at the local, national, and regional levels as they are visible globally” (2005, 6).

In this context, Appadurai (1990) argues that the global cultural economy has to be viewed as a “complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models” (1990, 296). He proposes a framework for exploring such disjunctures that analyzes the relationship between five dimensions of global cultural flow: ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, finanscaples, and ideoscaples. By “ethnoscaples”

Appadurai (1990, 297) means the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live, particularly “persons and groups that deal with the realities of having to move,” for example, migrant workers, refugees, or immigrants. Second, “technoscapes” denote the global configuration of technology and its moves across previously impervious boundaries. As Appadurai (1990, 297) notes, the odd distribution of technologies, and thus the peculiarities of the technoscape, are increasingly driven “not by any obvious economies of scale, of political control, or of market rationality, but of increasingly complex relationships between money flows, political possibilities and the availability of both low- and highly-skilled labor” (1990, 297). Third, “mediascapes” refer both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information, as well as to the images of the world created by these media. Thus, the mediascapes provide large, complex repertoires of images and narratives to viewers throughout the world. These are spaces where “the world of commodities and the world of ‘news’ and politics are profoundly mixed” (Appadurai 1990, 299). This observation is particularly relevant to the analysis of video games in the Middle East. As Appadurai notes:

The lines between the “realistic” and the fictional landscapes they [the audience] see are blurred, so that the further away these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct “imagined worlds” which are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other “imagined world.” (Appadurai 1990, 299)

Similar to other mediascapes, video games tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, which “can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live,” while simultaneously helping “to constitute narratives of the ‘other’” (Appadurai 1990, 299). As I have argued elsewhere (Šisler 2011; 2008), video games constitute such images and narratives that convey possible notions of religious, national, or other identities, as well as enable virtual encounters with simulations of other cultures. Nevertheless, video games’ text is never static and its perceptions

differ based on players' concrete situatedness and experience (Sicart 2011; Uricchio 2011) and on player choices within the game world. Here, the Kraidy's (2005) concept of critical transculturalism moves center stage, as it acknowledges the viewer's situatedness and agency. Whereas cultural imperialism (Schiller 1969; Tunstall 1977) focuses on the production and distribution stages of the media communication process and cultural pluralism (Appadurai 1990; Featherstone 1994; King 1991) emphasizes message–text and reception, critical transculturalism takes a more integrative approach that “considers the active links between production, text, and reception in the moment of cultural reproduction” (Kraidy 2005, 149). Building upon the encoding–decoding approach to communication (Hall 1990), Kraidy focuses on power in intercultural relations by integrating both agency and structure in international communication analysis:

Critical transculturalism takes a synthetic view of culture, unlike cultural imperialism's holistic premise and cultural pluralism's view of culture as a merely pluralistic entity. Whereas in cultural imperialism agency is located in the global structure of capitalism, and in cultural pluralism agency is found in local individuals or communities studied contextually, critical transculturalism considers that social practice, acting translocally and intercontextually, is the site of agency. (Kraidy 2005, 149)

Utilizing the critical transculturalism framework, the proposed framework should enable situate video games in their societal environment in order to “disentangle various links, processes, and effects between communication practices and social, political, and economic forces” (Kraidy 2005, 7). These aspects of video game development are, albeit from a different angle, also the subject of a nascent field: game production studies.

Video games as results of economic, cultural, and political structures: the game production studies perspective

Sotamaa and Švelch (2021, 8) define game production studies as a “critical reflection of video game production” that uncovers “the economic, cultural,

and political structures that influence the final form of games.” As both authors argue, the global video game industry has witnessed significant changes over the past decade. Game developers and publishers have moved from producing independent games and material goods to providing constantly updated digital services (Sotamaa and Karppi 2010; Švelch 2019). Simultaneously, digital distribution platforms, accessible development tools, and new audiences spawn “informal game development practices” (Keogh 2019) that turn game production into “a process that is both inherently global and intensely localized” (Sotamaa and Švelch 2021, 8).

As a result, today’s video game production modes vary locally and regionally. They are platform-specific, apply several different funding and business models, and involve a variety of different actors (Sotamaa and Švelch 2021, 9). Therefore, game production studies must “consider these tensions and conflicts between individual developers’ agency and the social and economic conditions within which this agency is embedded” (Sotamaa and Švelch 2021, 13). Game production studies’ specific perspective thus “emphasizes the cultural, economic, political, and social circumstances in which games are created and the production cultures associated with video game development” (Sotamaa and Švelch 2021, 11).

One of the methodological framework’s uses was analyzing how local and regional video game production cultures in the Arab world and Iran interact with the global game industry. Games are never created in a vacuum but “they are shaped by networks of human and non-human actors that are dependent on historical and cultural contexts” (Sotamaa and Švelch 2021, 14). Thus, the video game development and gaming cultures in the Arab world and Iran need to be interpreted in connection with situated contexts and larger discussions around the global video game industry. Despite the multifaceted nature of the local gaming scenes in the region, most developers face challenges connected to political instability, economic uncertainty, lack of foreign investment, missing know-how, and fragmented gaming communities. In this respect, the Arab and Iranian video game industries seem to follow several characteristics common to the gamevironments of the global south, including a shared set of historical obstacles and affordances and a dual governmental role of

ensorship and support (Penix-Tadsen 2019, 12–13). This approach can be valid for similar research endeavors focusing on different regions.

Video games as material, software, and cultural artifacts: the game studies perspective

The proposed methodological framework's fourth theoretical grounding lies naturally in the field of game studies that I have already briefly discussed above. Video games have specific properties that differentiate them from other media. Among the multiple scholarly approaches on how to conceptually study video games, I would like to bring attention to the Sotamaa's (2016) concept, which describes video games primarily as artifacts. This approach can be roughly characterized in three parts, each highlighting a different key aspect of contemporary video games:

First, the history of video games highlights the importance of approaching video games as *material artifacts*. Second, studying video games as *software artifacts* sheds light on the very “digitality” of these games and highlights the role of procedural rules in the meaning-making process. Finally, games need to be examined as *cultural artifacts* that carry embedded meanings and ideas and are socially shaped in production and use. (Sotamaa 2016, 3)

By integrating the aforementioned perspectives, Sotamaa (2016, 3) coins the term “artifactual approach” for the study of video games. This approach suits video games' multifaceted character, since they contain audiovisual elements, narratives, game mechanics, rule systems, and para-textual materials: all of which shape the way games are played and their content consumed. In particular, game mechanics and rule systems operated by a computer are specific properties unique to video games. Sicart (2008) defines game mechanics as “methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state.” They can be invoked by any agent, be it a human or a part of the computer system, emphasizing the fact that video games are software whose rule systems are defined by code. Designing specific game mechanics for particular games is a crucial part of the game design and development

process. Similar or identical game mechanics typically define games' genres (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2008).

Game mechanics are often, but not necessarily, designed to overcome challenges, looking for specific transitions of the game state. Designers create the basic mechanics for the player correlating the central challenges of the game with the set of mechanics useful for overcoming them. (Sicart 2008)

Rule systems are another fundamental property of video games. Rather than creating representations per se, software authors such as game designers write code that enforces rules to generate representations (Sotamaa 2016; Bogost 2007). Games are thus typically simulations and/or models of experience and our interaction with them is governed by their rule systems embedded in the code. This has led many authors to take "a procedural approach" to the study of video games, focusing mostly on their rule systems and rule-based representations (Bogost 2007; Frasca 2004). Bogost (2007) claimed that games have a unique property of communicating persuasive messages through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures. Similarly, Brathwaite and Sharp (2010, 317) proposed that graphics and other representational game elements merely articulate mechanics in specific contexts, but that "they are not the game. The rules are."

Nevertheless, the argument that it is primarily the system of rules and mechanics that conveys the game's message is highly problematic. As Sicart (2011) puts it, this understanding of games "fosters the idea that to design ethical or political experiences through games is to codify arguments in the game system." In other words, this model takes away the importance of play and players in the configuration of the ludic experience (Sicart 2011). I agree here with Sicart and argue that rule systems-based games enable various explorations of the game world and immersion. However, it is the narrative and visual elements combined with the rules and game mechanics that convey the games' message, enable immersion in the game world, and allow critical engagement with the games' content (Šisler et al. 2022). Therefore, I utilize

the concept of gameenvironments, outlined below, which integrates all the layers and elements of video games and cultures surrounding them into one overarching framework.

Video games as gameenvironments: integrating the four approaches

The proposed framework's last theoretical grounding, gameenvironments, builds upon all of the four above-mentioned perspectives. Gameenvironments, introduced by Radde-Antweiler, Waltmathe, and Zeiler (2014), is a theoretical and analytical frame based on an actor-centered approach that integrates the analysis of video games as digital artifacts with the broader cultural and social context in which these games are produced and consumed. It comprises the two following levels:

(1) The technical environment of video games and gamers: This level concerns the game itself. It involves analyzing the game in relation to textual and audiovisual narratives, interactivity options, game mechanics, rule systems, in-game performance, game production and design, and gamer-generated content.

(2) The socio-cultural environments of video games and gaming: As shown above, video gaming is an integral part of today's mediatized world. On the flip side, cultural and other environments influence video games' construction and design as well as the gaming experience. Thus, this level of gameenvironments involves the analysis of the social, political, and religious context as well as national regulations and policies related to video game production and consumption. (Radde-Antweiler, Waltmathe, and Zeiler 2014)

As a whole, gameenvironments are a theoretical and analytical concept that maintains the cultural, political, religious and social aspects of game content while still taking "the performative aspects and ludic interaction into account" (Radde-Antweiler, Waltmathe and Zeiler 2014, 8). There exist a significant number of other theoretical approaches to studying video games anchored in the field of game studies, such as Fernández-Vara (2019), Lankoski and Björk (2015), Consalvo and Dutton (2006), Salen and Zimmerman (2004),

or Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek (2004). I have chosen the concept of gameenvironments specifically because it systematically and in an overarching manner builds upon all the four approaches mentioned above, while simultaneously integrating religion and communication of values into its analytical framework. Within the proposed framework, I amend this approach using other game studies' methodological toolkits where suitable (see below).

It is important to note that the original concept of gameenvironments, as conceived by Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler (2014), disregarded to a large extent the significance of the economy in video game production and consumption. There have been attempts to bridge this gap and analyze the 21st century video game industry through the lens of political economy, aiming at integrating this perspective with the analytical framework of gameenvironments (e.g. House 2020; Hammar 2020). Given the economy and global financial flows make up an important part of any analysis of Arab and Iranian gaming cultures and video game development, for the proposed methodological framework I use this newer, refined concept of gameenvironments (see Figure 1) to enrich the already mentioned perspectives of information science, critical transculturalism, game production studies, and game studies in order to analyze the heterogenous regional and translocal hybrid mediascapes of video games, linking them to the sites of their consumption and production.

(4) Social, cultural, political and economical context

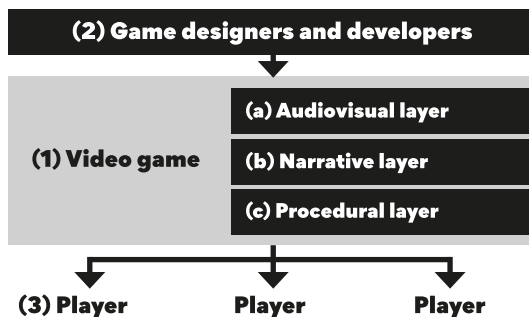


Figure 1. Refined concept of gameenvironments encompassing different layers of video game research.

Firstly, within the refined concept of game environments, I consider (1) video game as a computational and cultural artifact existing within three intertwined layers:

- (a) The audiovisual layer represents the aesthetics of the game, such as graphics, sound, art styles, and atmospheric elements. This allows games to be considered as works of art embodying specific aesthetic values.
- (b) The narrative layer incorporates the game's storyline, characters, world-building and overall message. This reflects how games can act as storytelling mediums, mirroring the narratives we encounter in literature or film.
- (c) The procedural layer is the rules and mechanics that define the game's functionality and interaction. This reflects how games are systems defined by computational processes and algorithms.

Secondly, I acknowledge (2) the game designers and developers as authors. They are responsible for the creation and implementation of the aforementioned layers. They encode their views, ideas, and messages into the game, influencing the cultural artifact that the game becomes.

Thirdly, I consider (3) the players as the recipients of the game: their interpretations, reactions, and experiences add a dynamic and personal layer to the analysis. Each player may interpret the game differently, with multiple playthroughs providing different insights, narratives, and end results. In other words, this acknowledges that the process of playing a game is an individualized experience, as every player brings their own context, understanding, and approach to the gameplay.

Lastly, I examine (4) the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which games are designed, developed, and consumed. This includes aspects such as market trends, cultural appropriateness, societal norms and values, political factors, economic availability, and influences on the game's development and reception.

This refined concept of gameenvironments enables us to understand video games as comprehensive, multi-dimensional systems existing in and influenced by diverse spheres of life. The aim is to see the video game not just as a product or an artifact, but as a complex interplay of narratives, aesthetics, rules, designs, interpretations, and societal contexts.

Methodological Grounding of the Framework

The proposed theoretical and methodological framework for studying video games and orientalism connects a number of different possible research endeavors and as such it might employ a robust combination of diverse research methods. These methods are detailed in a number of other works, hence the following text serves primarily as a summative overview, linking the individual methods conceptually together. The structure of the description of methods corresponds to the refined concept of gameenvironments as outlined above.

Video game

There exist a number of methodological approaches for how to conduct video game analysis. They all have their pros and cons (Trattner 2018; Lankoski and Björk 2015; Consalvo and Dutton 2006). Yet there is no single method universally accepted in the field of game studies (see Šisler, Radde-Antweiler, Zeiler 2018). The method chosen for any video game content analysis has to be fundamentally guided by the research questions and research aim of the particular project. In most of my research that dealt with video game analysis, I focused on video games' representational layers as outlined by the refined gameenvironments concept: the audiovisual, narrative, and procedural layers. The analysis of individual games can be complemented by the textual analysis of accompanying materials, such as booklets, promotional materials, or individual games' websites, in cases where these materials are available and relevant for the research aims.

Audiovisual Layer

Studying the audiovisual layer of video games requires a combination of research methods drawn from game studies, media studies, film studies, and musicology. In shot-by-shot analysis (Ryan and Lenos 2012; Machin and Suleiman 2006), every individual shot is examined and detailed to gain a deeper understanding of the game. This includes the framing, camera movements, setting, lighting, color, positioning of characters or objects, and any other visual elements. Shot-by-shot analysis also covers audio components like dialogue, music, ambient sound, sound effects, and silence. In connection to the narrative layer, a shot-by-shot analysis can be used to understand how storytelling is visually and auditorily conveyed. The method focuses on how the combination of these elements create mood, develop characters, or advance the plot. Aesthetic analysis (Arnheim 1974) can be utilized to explore the visual design of the game, focusing on elements such as color schemes, texture, character and environment design, and cinematography. Finally, sound analysis (Collins 2008) can help us explore the impact of music, sound effects, and voice acting on the gaming experience, while analysis of voice localization (Al-Batineh and Alawneh 2022) can reveal the adaptation strategies of local video game developers.

Narrative Layer

An exploration of the narrative layer of video games can utilize a broad array of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Content analysis (Lankoski and Björk 2015) can be employed to systematically analyze the game's story, dialogue, symbols, and other narrative elements, providing insight into its themes and structures. Discourse analysis (Machin and Suleiman 2006; Trattner 2018; van Dijk 2001; Wodak 2001) can reveal how language is used within the game to produce meaning and create relationships between characters. Semiotic analysis (Pérez-Latorre, Oliva, and Besalú 2017) allows researchers to unravel the systems of signs and symbols that make up a game's narrative and how they contribute to its overall meaning. Finally, ludonarrative studies can explore the interplay between the game's narrative and its mechanics (Bogost 2007; Jenkins 2004).

Procedural Layer

Analyzing the procedural layers of video games, which refers to the rules systems that guide interaction and create gameplay, can be approached from several perspectives. Game code analysis (Mateas 2009) supports understanding how the game's rules are programmed. Although the code might typically not be accessible to the researchers and the analysis requires a technical understanding of software design and programming, it can reveal decisions about game mechanics and possibilities for player action. Gameplay analysis (Aarseth 2003) allows for the study of how rules shape play experiences; this can involve direct observation of players, video capture of gameplay, or autoethnographic methodologies. Experimenting with different gameplay strategies can also yield insights into the game's procedural logics. Finally, comparative analysis (Swalwell 2007) of different versions of a game, or different games within a genre, can help understand the evolution, standardization, or deviation of certain game mechanics.

In my own research, I utilized Petri Net Modelling (Šisler 2018a) for analysis of the procedural layer. In a nutshell, Petri Net Modelling can be used for analyzing and designing discrete event systems. It can be applied to many different areas; including the design and analysis of software applications and video games (Natkin and Vega 2003). In the case of video game rule-system analysis, Petri Net Modelling enables the graphical representation of actions players can take during the game and their possible outcomes using a formally defined structure. From a formal point of view, Petri Net Modelling can be used to model complex game rule-systems in a way that allows for methodological falsification (Šisler 2017).

Game designers and developers

Investigating the role of game designers and developers in the creation process of video games might require an amalgamation of research methods that span from sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. Ethnographic techniques, such as autoethnography (Abbas 2018; 2019; Dorias 2018; Ismail 2015), participant observation and in-depth interviews (Flick 2006; Hopf 2004), can

be employed to gain insights into developers' practices, motivators, decision-making processes, and challenges during game design and development. Document analysis (O'Donnell 2014) of design documents, scripts, concept arts, storyboards, and development logs can provide a detailed understanding of the game's evolution throughout the development process. Analyses of post-mortems, public presentations, and developer commentary (Newman 2012) can further illuminate the intentions, design philosophies, and larger cultural-industrial contexts that impact game production.

The method I often used for the research on video game designers and developers is qualitative in-depth interviews (Flick 2006; Hopf 2004). In line with Aupers, Schaap, and de Wildt (2018, 153), I utilize an in-depth interview as a "semi-structured conversation between the researcher and a particular research subject in which the former taps into the life-world of the latter." The overarching goal is to gain insight into the experiences, motivations and worldviews of the interviewee (Boeije 2010; Kelle 2005). During my research, I conducted interviews with a large number of Arab and Iranian video game developers. The interviewees were selected and contacted differently in different places, based on the local political and social situation. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, English, and Persian. Most of the interviews were recorded, although some interviewees asked me specifically not to record the interview and keep their identity anonymous; in such cases the interview followed the same structure, and I took notes. The interviews were translated into English (if not recorded in English directly), transcribed, and analyzed (Kelle 2005), using the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998, Kelle 2005). The interviews were conducted face-to-face, typically in the developers' game studios. Most of the interviews were further amended by additional online interviews via Skype or email. The final texts were sent to all interviewees for editing and approval.

Players

Investigating video game players requires a focus on the reception, consumption, and influence of games in the lives of players. Surveys (Al-Batineh and Alawneh 2022; Consalvo and Dutton 2006) can be utilized to

gather broad statistical data about play habits, preferred game genres, attitudes towards games and other general trends. Semi-structured interviews (Alfaraj 2019) and in-depth interviews (Aupers, Schaap and de Wildt 2018) provide more detailed and nuanced perspectives on individual players' experiences, motivations, and interpretive practices. Ethnographic techniques (Tawil-Souri 2007; Taylor 2006), such as participant observation and fieldwork in gaming communities and online forums, enable researchers to study social dynamics, group norms, and cultural practices of players within their natural gaming contexts. Players' in-game behavior analysis (Moura, Seif el-Nasr, and Shaw 2011) and analysis of player telemetry and gameplay logs (Drachen et al. 2012) also provide valuable data on player behavior, choices, and performance in the game. Finally, social network analysis (Al-Rawi and Consalvo 2019) offers insight into the nature of the players' groups on social networking sites and the connections they have with other online groups and communities.

Beyond the methods described above, in my research I use a quantitative social network analysis of various gaming sites. This method might be useful for research of user-generated content since it analyzes the similarities, differences, and overlaps between the audiences of various social network gaming pages. In particular, I use a qualitative method, Normalized Social Distance, developed by Šlerka and Schmid (2013) and refined by Šlerka and Šisler (2018). In a nutshell, Normalized Social Distance is a formally defined method for calculating the distance between social groups based on intentional stances expressed through group members' activities on social networking sites — for example likes given by Facebook page users. The resulting number indicates how “far” or “close” the audiences of distinct websites are to one another. Normalized Social Distance is based on McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook's (2001) concept of homophily in social networks and Cilibrasi and Vitányi's (2010) concept of normalized Web distance.

Social, cultural, political, and economical context

The examination of the socio-cultural, political, and economic context of video game production and consumption involves drawing from a vast array of research methods across disciplines. A socio-cultural analysis of games

can encompass ethnographic studies (Taylor 2006), observing the cultural impact of games within specific communities or societies, or analysis of usage of games by state actors (Ibahrine 2015) that reflects cultural systems, values, and identities. Political economy approaches (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009) can be used to study the industrial dynamics, market trends, labor issues, business strategies, and regulatory frameworks within the game industry. Discourse analysis (Kerr 2006) can be applied to media texts, politician's speeches, and online discussions to study how games and the act of playing are discussed and represented in public debates, potentially uncovering underlying power relations and ideological positions. Finally, historical analysis (Lowood 2009) can help trace the evolution of gaming cultures, technological advancements, industry growth or decline, shifting market demands, and political regulations over time.

In my own research on orientalism and video games, I have conducted fieldwork in Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Qatar, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. The aim of the fieldwork was primarily exploratory and fundamental research: acquisition of local video games, magazines, and promotional materials; establishing contacts with local video game developers and producers; recording initial sets of interviews; and mapping the local gaming scenes and familiarizing myself with them. In most cases, I stayed over a longer period of several months at individual places, typically studying the language at local universities or pursuing other research. I also traveled to different places beyond the country's capital and larger cities. In several cases, I conducted more fieldwork visits to the same place over a time span of several years. This "place-based research" (Castillo and Puri 2016) was accompanied by online research, in which I analyzed gaming websites, forums, magazines, player communities, and developers' professional networks using an ethnographic method for the study of gameenvironments (Grieve 2018).

Although fieldwork as a research method was established a long time ago in the humanities (particularly in anthropology, cultural studies, and area studies), it is still not commonly acknowledged or discussed in other fields. As Castillo and Puri (2016) put it:

In our experience, it is quite typical that the methods that humanities-based fieldwork emerges from and forges, the decision points along the way, remain largely invisible or backstage or appear only in brief allusions onstage. Many of our field-based conversations do not show up explicitly in our writing yet nonetheless infuse and transform the entire project. (Castillo and Puri 2016, 12)

This fieldwork fundamentally shaped my research, particularly in its initial phases, and to a large extent set my research agenda. As Pandian (2015, 16) argues, the significance of such fieldwork is the “chance to confront and engage the open-ended unfinished nature of life, to follow things as they happen, to fold the uncertainty and vulnerability of living relations into the very substance of our intellectual work.” Fieldwork, in contrast to the researcher secluded in a library, relies on immersion. It requires “the researcher to navigate a cultural space dense with meanings and to register its resistances, debates, and active subjectivities. Such encounters jolt one out of complacency. Interruption is part of the point” (Castillo and Puri 2016, 12).

This “place-based research” (Castillo and Puri 2016) was shaped primarily by the local and temporary political situation and social contacts that I acquired both beforehand and during my stay. In many places, particularly in countries with tight control over their media production and—or in authoritarian regimes, the local developers were concerned about talking to a foreign academic and allowing me to visit their studio. The establishment of trust, oftentimes through a third-party mutual contact, was necessary in such cases. In other instances, local game developers were keen to showcase their work and talk about it. Mostly, after establishing initial contacts and a presence in the local game development scene, new developers and studios were much easier to acquire through a network of already existing contacts. Given the contested nature of game production and consumption in many of the countries mentioned above, I strived to conduct my fieldwork as sensitively as possible: with ethical guidelines and protection of my respondents in mind (Holmes 2016). Every piece of material I published or shared was approved by the respective respondents beforehand and was in line with established research ethical guidelines and regulations.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, I tried to formulate a concise theoretical and methodological framework for studying video games and orientalism. The formulation of the framework was fundamentally shaped by my decades long research on video game development and gaming cultures in Iran and the Arab world. The proposed framework is theoretically grounded in information science, communication studies, game studies, and cultural studies. It utilizes the approaches of critical transculturalism (Kraidy 2005), game production studies (Sotamaa and Švelch 2021), the artifactual approach to game studies (Sotamaa 2016), while linking all these approaches together within a newly refined concept of gameenvironments (Radde-Antweiler, Waltmathe, and Zeiler 2014). From the methodological point of view, the proposed framework allows integration of methods for studying video games as computational and cultural artifacts, including audiovisual, narrative, and procedural layers; investigating video game developers and designers; researching players; and analyzing the broader social, cultural, political and economical contexts, in which video games are produced and consumed.

Albeit this article focuses mainly on theoretical and methodological issues of studying video games and orientalism, I have already used the framework for analyzing and discussing racial, ethnical, and religious stereotypes and schematizations and their consequences for identity construction and cultural dialogue in video games. At the same time, there exist a number of scholars dealing with the same topic, hailing from various disciplines and backgrounds.

Pioneering research in the field has focused on analysis of the symbolic and ideological dimensions of in-game representational politics related to the Middle East. In one of the very first research papers on the topic, Marashi (2001) outlined the stereotypical modes of representation of Arabs in combat video games focusing on the Arab–Israeli conflict. Reichmuth and Werning (2006) have described the exploitation of things Oriental, topoi, in selected genres of Western video games. I (Šisler 2008) have conducted an introductory analysis of how mainstream European and American games construct the representation of Arabs or Muslims; particularly in the framework of “digital

Orientalism.” Höglund (2008), Kavoori (2008), and Keogh (2012) have discussed in-game representation of the Middle East as found in US action games; namely in relation to “War on Terror” discourse. More recently, Clément (2019) builds on existing research and analyzes new examples of schematization of the Middle East, Arabs, and Muslims in video games, while Alfaraj (2019) investigates how the issue of representation is perceived by Arab gamers.

Taking a different tack, Tawil-Souri (2007) has presented an ethnographic account of how Palestinian children play, comment, and make sense of Arab video games. My own research has analyzed how identity is constructed and communicated to players in Arab (Šisler 2008; 2014b) and Iranian (Šisler 2013a; 2017) games; and how Palestine is envisioned, and its representation constructed, through the procedural rhetoric of Arab and Iranian video games (Šisler 2009). In a different vein, Shaw (2010) has provided an audience reception study aimed at critically evaluating how Arab gamers identify with virtual Arab in-game characters. Ibahrine (2015) analyzes the interplay between video games and their applications by state and non-state actors in the US and the Middle East, focusing on games developed for different objectives such as recruiting, training, mobilizing, and constructing identities and counter-identities. More recently, Clément (2019) presents an exploratory framework for understanding video game practices in the Middle East, discussing, among other, the context of local video game production and audience perception. Finally, Al-Batineh and Alawneh (2022) investigate the current localization practices used in the Arabic video game market and Arab gamers’ response to localized video games.

Regarding Middle Eastern gamers and video game audiences, Al-Rawi and Consalvo (2019) examine social media engagement among online gaming communities in the Middle East by investigating the data taken from Twitter and Facebook. From a different viewpoint, Alfaraj (2019) presents a systematic analysis of interview data from Arab-identifying players to learn how they make sense of the current state of lacking Arab representations in video games.

I have opened this article with three snapshots from different video games. These images illustrate the complex, multifaceted topic of emerging gaming cultures and game development in the Arab world and Iran in particular, and orientalism in video games in general. I would like to conclude this introduction symbolically with another game. This game is *Bury me, my Love* which was developed in 2017 by Pixel Hunt, an independent video games studio based in Paris. Similarly to *Path Out*, mentioned above, *Bury me, my Love* is inspired by real events from the Syrian civil war and the subsequent humanitarian and migration crisis. The game tells the story of Syrian refugee Nour and her husband Majd as Nour undertakes a perilous journey to safety. As the authors say:

The title of the story-driven interactive fiction comes from the Syrian goodbye phrase that roughly means “Take care, and don’t even think about dying before I do.” This phrase takes on a deeper meaning as players take on the role of Majd, who is forced to stay behind and is only able to communicate with his wife through their smartphones. (ICO 2017)

The gameplay consists merely of reading instant messages and choosing response options. The players’ task is to help Nour overcome the hardships she will encounter, and the story has several endings, depending on players’ decisions and the unpredictable events of the journey. The game is played in real-time, with messages arriving in intermittent intervals, which further adds to the feeling of realism, immersion, and emotional attachment. The game won several awards and was critically praised; particularly for its emphasis on love and hope “in the face of rising darkness” (Meer 2019). In a way similar to *Path Out*, *Bury me, my Love* humanizes the stories behind the news and creates a space for reflection.

The example of *Bury me, my Love* manifests the potential video games have to foster deeper understanding, connect people and cultures, and help us reflect on the world we live in. Yet, before utilizing this potential, we have to be able to understand what role video games play in different communities around the world; how they are produced and consumed in the age of global

cultural flows; and what images of reality, including schematizations and misrepresentations of other cultures and places, they create, perpetuate, and reproduce. The theoretical and methodological framework proposed in this article is a step enabling deeper and systematic further research in that direction.

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Article:**A Psychoanalysis of Player Unknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG) in the Context of India 2020–2021****Achintya Debnath***Abstract*

This article is based on field surveys and interviews among mobile users. It provides a heuristic framework for understanding the dynamics of violent content, recent issues regarding banning PUBG (player unknown's battlegrounds) video games, and the complex characteristics of its perspectives. More precisely, it brings up an explanation and relation between violence and certain video games primarily focused on mobile user gamers who play PUBG (or Free Fire or both). Furthermore, this study throws light on the hot debate of banning PUBG in India in 2020–21 and the context of oversimplified assumptions behind its ban. The entire frame of this article is based on individual interviews of mobile users and their thoughts and experiences on the matter. For this purpose, fifty interviews have been conducted among gamers—players who play PUBG, Free Fire, or both. Furthermore, this research will contribute to the video game debate that has been going on regarding the relation between violence and games which started as early as the 1970s (Kowert and Quandt 2021).

Keywords

video games, PUBG, Free Fire, violence, gamers, mobile users

Introduction

On December 20, 2017 *PUBG* (Lightspeed and Quantum, *PUBG* Corporation 2017), was released. Soon after the release of the *PUBG* (Player Unknown's Battlegrounds) video game, it attracted almost one billion mobile gamers within a very short time (as of March 2021). Then, *PUBG Mobile*, developed by LightSpeed and Quantum Studio and owned by Chinese company Tencent, was released in March 2018 as one of the biggest games in the Indian gaming industry. It quickly took over the market, leaving its rival Battle Royale games like Garena *Free Fire* (111 dots Studio 2017; Mayank 2023a) and *Rules of Survival* (NetEase Games 2017) far behind in player count (Mayank 2023b). Yet the video game is a subject of severe scrutiny for being a violent video game¹. Furthermore, in the context of banning it, many countries such as India have oversimplified the psychoanalysis of violence in video games throughout the year (2020–21). This ban on *PUBG* (2017) sparked genuine concern for many gamers while for others it signaled a political opportunity². However, the ban did not last long and soon it returned and then got banned again³. Hence, the ban on *PUBG* (2017) shows the complex geopolitical issues and the problematic international relations among countries. Regarding the ban on this video game in relation to the geopolitical issue Mayank's statement is worth noting:

¹ Many claim that a video game is simply another piece of violent media that is responsible for corrupting society, however, few people though see a video game as what it truly is, a playable piece of art (since like any piece of art a video game is a form of expression, further, it takes a lot of artists to design characters and environments). Recently, the discussion on morality in video games has started receiving immense attention, particularly with the release of games where the choices have a moral background. Furthermore, Mukherjee pointed out that conflict has always been viewed as an essential element by early theories of video game design and is still the mainstay of most video game research. Early theorists such as Chris Crawford associated in-game conflict with safety or the assumption that "the results of a game are always less harsh than the situations the game models" (Mukherjee 2010).

² As Ferguson (2008) has argued that in the context of the United States, violence in games is a political topic that has the unusual capacity to appeal to voters on both the left and the right, on the grounds of pacifism and religion respectively (Schott 2016). The same is happening in India for instance *PUBG* was not banned because of spreading violence rather it was because of some internal policies that have been taking place due to the India-China controversy.

³ *PUBG*'s newest ban in India comes less than two years after the developer released its self-published India-exclusive version of the mobile game. Alongside the change in publishing, Krafton also made several other changes in *PUBG*'s return to the Indian market. The game would feature heavier censorship from players starting matches clothed to shifting the game's aesthetic into a "virtual training ground" setting. Krafton had also made arrangements to shift *Battlegrounds Mobile India*'s data to Microsoft Azure servers, further distancing itself from Tencent in the region (Ingram 2022).

Though the game received accolades from its users and is still regarded as one of the best battle royale games the cause for concern for the local authorities were the game monetization methods and the location of user data storage. As the developers are based in China, all the user data was stored in a server located there. Therefore, the game was banned on September 2, 2020 along with 117 other Chinese apps. (Mayank 2023b)

The ban on this game came at a time when all gaming platforms were expecting positive growth in the number of users due to the COVID-19 lockdown in the country, which also happens to be *PUBG Mobile*'s biggest market with its 25 percent of users being Indians (Yadav 2020). This makes mobile games also susceptible to problematic and excessive use (Mäyrä and Alha 2021, 116). This is widely prevalent and applicable to *PUBG* and *Free Fire* players, as mobile users quite easily access these games. Just like the PC version, *PUBG Mobile* became instantly popular, especially in India. The game had more than forty million monthly users in July in India alone (Bhushan 2022). So, the ban also came as a shock to professional gamers dedicated to this game who were left jobless resulting in a serious loss to their fan base (Yadav 2020). Nevertheless, this article suggests that violent content and issues in video games such as *PUBG* or *Free Fire* do not affect how people act rather it depends on many primary factors such as perspectives, mental state, the ability to consume facts, et cetera, and also it shows that the governmental ban on *PUBG* is rather political in nature and a consequence of international relation among countries than a simple assumption of preventing violent behavior. Since mobile gaming is arguably the biggest subset of video games currently on the market today (Mäyrä and Alha 2021), this article focuses on mobile users as well as its potential impact on *PUBG* (Lightspeed and Quantum, *PUBG Corporation* 2017) and *Free Fire* (111 dots Studio 2017) players and their behavior.

Generally, it has often been taken for granted that video games are associated with violence, and youth are assumed to be particularly vulnerable to possible negative effects of violent video games because most of them are particularly associated with shooters, such as *PUBG* and *Free Fire*. Both share the

characteristics of violent content, like murder, guns, and many other mature concepts, therefore giving them a bad reputation. Mayank points out that several incidents of kids stealing money from parents started surfacing in different parts of the country (Sengupta 2020). People even started betting money while challenging each other to a match of *PUBG Mobile* (Mayank 2023b). In more extreme cases, physical harm and loss of life (Team G2G 2022a) were also involved after parents started to stop children from playing the game (Mayank 2023b). According to Anderson, there was a significant positive relationship between moral disengagement and aggression among players of violent video games (Anderson 2004). This extension is important because it shows that exposure to violent video games can cause immoral behaviors, especially among people high in moral disengagement (Anderson 2004). Nevertheless, initially in the 1970s when video game play was introduced, the debates about the negative effects of playing video games have been started (Kowert and Quandt 2021). Therefore, the one billion mobile gamers accumulating *PUBG* has revived these concerns, reinvigorating old debates and generating brand new ones in many countries in general and India in particular. To this contrast, my study will be a psychoanalysis understanding of controlling violence through playing the *PUBG* game⁴.

Regarding the debate about the relationship between video games and violence, Rachel Kowert and Thorsten Quandt argued that:

Debates about the relationship between violent video games, aggression, and violent crime continue. In February 2020, the American Psychological Association (APA) released a revision to its 2015 resolution on violent crime and video games. In it, they note that violence is a complex social problem that likely stems from many factors. However, just like in the 2015 release, they conclude that there is not enough evidence to conclude whether or not violent video games directly contribute to aggressive and violent outcomes (Kowert and Quandt 2021, 2).

⁴ As Schott (2016) said, violent behavior largely depends on personal factors, such as difficulties coping with loss or failure or becoming the object of persecution, and being bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others.

Henceforth, the article is rather a continuation of the earlier legacy than a brand new composition of thoughts and its contribution would be, in the field, in the process of evaluation of each individual who plays video games and documenting their own experiences as mobile gamers. This article will trace their game experience and the actual behavior of gamers which is enmeshed within it and will reveal how playing *PUBG* or *Free Fire* affects them. Most of the interviewees are mobile users and school students; they borrow their parents' mobiles whenever they play these games since mobile gaming sessions require less preparation than most other games and can be played anywhere, anytime.

Frans Mäyrä and Kati Alha in their article “Mobile Gaming” (2021) argued that the pervasive character and ease of access of mobile gaming is connected with several social and cultural changes: suddenly, almost everyone seems to own a gaming-capable device, and while there has been a celebration of mobile gaming helping games to “go mainstream,” there have also been concerns (by gamers and nongamers alike) that the associated changes have not all been for the good. They also briefly outline the success story of mobile games, describe the associated developments in the culture of mobile gaming, and highlight several of the relevant debates and research trends of this quickly developing field (Mäyrä and Alha 2021, 107). Regarding the initial development of mobile games, it has been stated that:

The early phases of mobile game design were often focused on the miniaturization and simplification of existing video games, largely due to the limitations of the available computing power, memory, and the restricted user interfaces in small handheld devices. As research and development moved forward, it became more apparent that mobile games could have unique strengths that other gaming platforms could not provide. Our own research group in Tampere, Finland, was taking part in this development in the early 2000s, and it is interesting to reflect on how the early expectations and analyses of the time have come true (or not) during the first two decades of the “mobile era.” (Mäyrä and Alha 2021, 111)

Scholarships for violent video games

There has been no dearth of sophisticated scholarly analysis on the psychological effect of video games such as the extensive initial works of Craig A. Anderson, introduced at the beginning of this century, which largely shows the negative moral disengagement as a consequence of playing video games (Anderson 2004). Whereas, Gareth Schott (2016), Souvik Mukherjee (2010)⁵, and Lavinia McLean and Mark Griffiths (2013) tried to show the intricate complexity of violent video games' ethics and their effect. Though the concept of moral disengagement involves the provision of contexts and pointers that make the player's action more justifiable within the gameplay, however, this notion too cannot be applied universally to all video games (Mukherjee 2010).

Moreover, many recent scholars have shown the artistic effect of video games in their studies and considered them a piece of art. In this contrast, Grant Tavinor (2011) takes one step ahead and argues, that video games are one of the most significant developments in the mass arts of recent times. It might sound too much optimistic, however, it does possess some quality of truth. Therefore, he continues, "in commercial terms, they are now among the most prominent of the mass arts worldwide" (2011). It is clear, that the commercial and cultural success does not exhaust the interest in video games as a mass art phenomenon. Video games are structurally completely different from the previous forms of mass art. The ontology of video games is instanced as a departure from the familiar mass arts of film and popular music. The nature and identity of art can be imposed on video games to understand

⁵ See, for instance, his *Ethical Conflicts and Call of Duty*, where he showed that the ethical conflicts in video games are quite varied and that game affordances and ethics frameworks may deviate from the ones that players may be used to in real life. However, trying to judge player responses to these by referring to a fixed and higher moral order has yielded problematic and incomplete analyses. With the possible increase in the number of sandbox-type games that allow numerous combinations of possibilities and choices, an increase in scenarios of ethical dilemma is very likely and the problem of understanding ethical implications within video games will become more challenging. The way forward would be to recognize that the responses vary according to the player and the total environment within which the choices are made so the analyses need to be carried out on a case-by-case basis rather than by appealing to a higher moral order. As observed earlier, in comparison to a response such as "What must I do?" within the video game scenario (and arguably in life as well) the more preferable response to decision trees formed in cases of ethical dilemma is "What are my capabilities and how can I do my utmost?" Therefore, when the player overcomes a situation of dilemma and makes a choice, a possibility is actualized and an imminent ethics has come into play. (Mukherjee 2010)

the ontological artistic value of video games. The subjective experience of the effect of video games is associated with creativity, expression, and construction. It inherited art and technology simultaneously. The evolution of art dramatically engaged with technology.

So the emotional aura of video games is appealing to a broader perspective. Effectively, the comprehensive effect of video games is carrying a stronger notion of artistic sense in the complex historical process of modernization. Brian Massumi (1995) explains and discusses the philosophy of effects. He elaborates on the metaphysics of affect in his essay where he opined that:

The ability of affect to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself means that affect is itself real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late-capitalist system, infrastructural as a factory. Actually, it is beyond infrastructural; it is everywhere, in effect. Its ability to come second-hand, to switch domains and produce effects across them all, gives it a meta-factorial ubiquity. It is beyond infrastructural. It is transversal. This fact about affect—this matter-of-factness of affect—needs to be taken seriously into account in cultural and theory. (Massumi 1995, 106–107)

Assuming playing video games causes violent behavior simply shows a basic and oversimplified argument. Nevertheless, Miguel Sicart argued that Computer games are complex cultural objects: they have rules guiding behavior, they create game worlds with values at play, and they relate to players who like to explore morals and actions forbidden in society. The ethics of computer games have to take into consideration all these variables (Sicart 2009, 4). Nevertheless, the research on the negative effects of playing violent games has been based on the same theoretical frameworks used to test the impact of exposure to television and movie violence (Arriaga, et al. 2008). However, video game contains specificities of their own. Interactivity, for instance, allows players more active participation in the environment, also requiring higher attention and concentration. Factors like previous experience, perception of control, competence, frustration, competitiveness, involvement,

and sense of presence should also be taken into account (Arriaga, et al. 2008). Furthermore, Sicart argued that players are creative, engaged, ethical agents. Players no longer are passive moral creatures, exposed to unethical content: computer game players reflect, relate, and create with an ethical mind. And the games they play are ethical systems (Sicart 2009, 4).

Mukherjee (2010) points out that virtue ethics is certainly a popular choice among commentators on video game morality. He continued and argued that the experience of playing combat video games causes the player to experience a kind of trauma. However, this trauma is not comparable with that experienced in the real war (or any other real conflict), but rather that the player experiences milder forms of some of the characteristics of war trauma. The symptoms that video game players experience that emulate those experienced by the combatant include disorientation due to a loss of visual markers, fear of injury to their screen self, tension due to ever-present danger, and pressure to protect their comrades. Hence, Mukherjee commented that it is too simplistic to allege that this experience of trauma desensitizes the player. Rather, such an experience increases their awareness of the realities of war and primes the player for the kind of emotions that they might experience in the battle zone: anxiety, tension, fear, loyalty, and guilt. Like the simulations used for training within the military, exposure to such emotional responses better equips the player to prepare coping strategies, but it would be unwise to suggest that killing a figure in a video game would enable a soldier to kill the enemy without any emotional response in the battle zone. It depends on what rhetoric is used in their construction, but, inevitably, our actions depend on our emotional responses to these games (Mukherjee 2010).

To this vibrant scholarship done on the relationship between violence and game, notwithstanding, a significant study has not been done so far on specific games such as *PUBG* or *Free Fire*, precisely in the discourse of mobile users in the recent context of banning *PUBG* in India. Therefore, my analysis is greatly deepened by surveying mobile users and interviewing mobile gamers. As the “perfect” study does not exist in any domain of science, including video game research (Anderson 2004), it is highly unlikely to expect the infallibility of this article or precisely *PUBG* and *Free Fire*’s positive side effects.

Methodology

This research study followed a very basic and simple methodology. Primarily it deals with collecting interviews with mobile gamers and then shifts to the practical experiences of those gamers. For this purpose, I simply went to the various spots where gamers play the games and asked very basic simple questions for this article. The questions are as follow here: (1) When did they start playing the game? (2) How much do they play? (3) Have they ever thought if it is okay to hit or shoot someone in real life? (4) Does *PUBG* or *Free Fire* cause violent behavior? (5) What are the side effects? (6) Their religious affinity, et cetera?

I have generalized their answers into certain categories. For example, if anybody gave a “yes” answer to Questions 3 and 4, I categorized them as negative. In this way, the “no” answer to the same questions is categorized as a positive one. If someone gave a “no” answer with a logical explanation based on keen observation and general experimentation, that is, one’s cognitive ability to comprehensively experience effects, I categorized them as positive and opinionated, whereas the same answer without any logical observation and detailed explanation termed as mostly positive. Furthermore, if someone failed to answer with no experience or observation, I put them in the category of unaware and confused while those who are highly critical about playing video games are considered skeptical and negative answers.

Thirty interviewers out of fifty replied with a positive answer, whereas only six participants out of fifty replied with a negative answer. The other fourteen participants are either confused or have mixed feelings. The total percentage of positive answers is 60 percent whereas 12 percent give negative answers. It means only 12 percent of participants think playing video games causes violent behavior whereas 60 percent was against it, and 28 percent of participant was neither opposed to it nor accepts it. According to these statistics, it is highly unlikely to assume that playing *PUBG* causes violent behavior.

My survey includes a diverse group of 50 people coming from different social, religious⁶ (four of them belong to the Muslim community whereas the rest of them are Hindus), and economic backgrounds (two of my participants are extremely rich whereas the rest of them belong to the middle class except two unskilled laborers), as well of different ages. I interviewed 20 school boys and girls (10–17 years old), a PhD scholar (31 years old), four waged laborers (one 23 and another 28 years old), three engineers (29–30 years old), an electrician (30 years old), a government employee, a school teacher, one homeopathy student who is practicing medicine, a professional cricket player, a shopkeeper, two businessmen, a policeman (24 years old), a private tutor, eight unemployed college students as well as pass out–dropout students (24–27 years old), and four random gamers⁷. Bubai Debnath⁸ told me that one of the players had married his *PUBG* squad partner. His friend had not even known the girl whom he married. It all happened while they were playing as a squad team. This girl is not even from Nabadwip, she belongs to Jharkhand⁹. I have come across many similar incidents while interviewing participants. Bubai Debnath stated that:

We play as a squad team among others in the internet. Then one of my friends from the squad gets involved romantically with this girl from Jharkhand without seeing each other. They liked each other so much that they got married after they meet. *PUBG* is the platform where two of them meet for the first time¹⁰.

⁶ Mukherjee (2010) mentions, that discussions on morality are very popular in video-game-related blogs and websites which posit opinions ranging from the description of moral choices in video games as an inadequate feature in game design to reading video game morality in terms of religious views like Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

⁷ I do not know what job those random gamers do because they were too busy playing *PUBG* as a squad team when I met them, they did not even tell me what their names are, however, eventually, one of their friends came and told me all of their names.

⁸ Debnath, Bubai, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, January 20, 2022.

⁹ Debnath, Bubai, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, January 20, 2022.

¹⁰ Debnath, Bubai, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, January 20, 2022.

Three of the participants are my students: Rohan Barman, Dipayan Bhowmick, and Kanchan Pal whom I know very well. All of them said that *PUBG* does not lead players towards violence. Six of my participants, Rajat Debnath, Prosenjit Barman, Prodip Biswas, Lakhi Kanta Das, Tutul Debnath, and Sanjit Chaudhuri are my direct friends from school and college. Two participants belong to my friend circle, meaning, I am not directly friends with them but they are my friends' friends or known relatives of my friends. The rest of them are picked from various spots of playing. These spots include river banks and Ghats, playgrounds and open fields, besides lonely roads, local tee shops–cafés, under tree shades during midday scorching heat. These spots are chosen by the gamers only because these places have better internet speeds than their house respectively. Some of them play *PUBG* in their bedrooms at home. When I ask Prosenjit Barman if playing *PUBG* causes violent behavior? He answered:

Violence has complex roots and origins. Playing *PUBG* is neither the root nor its origin. No game can teach violence. I play only to enjoy it. I don't think I have violent behavior. Violence is not that simple. Only because you play *PUBG* that's why you got violent behavior doesn't make any sense. At least I don't think playing *PUBG* damages our behavior.¹¹

Nevertheless, all of my participants either play *PUBG* or *Free Fire* or both. Many of them were eager to talk to me while others were busy playing the game as I have mentioned about the squad team. Most of those who did give me an interview started playing the game in the year 2018–19. However, some people have started much later. This Thursday (November 10, 2021) evening, I was going to the market when I saw a ten-year-old boy playing *PUBG* in front of the balcony of his home. So I asked him whether he would give me an interview or not. At first, he was scared of me, however, his mother knows my family (and me perhaps) and soon she pursued the child for an interview. Kanchan, the ten-year-old school boy informs me that his mother scolds him if he plays *PUBG* a lot, however, his mother is also

¹¹ Barman, Prosenjit, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG–Free Fire Cause Violent Behavior*, November 8, 2021.

a *PUBG* player. When I asked his mother about the *PUBG* game and if she could give me an interview, she smiled at me (that means no) and told me that she allows her son to play because outdoor playing is too risky, however, she claimed that playing *PUBG* can damage Kanchan's conventional learning abilities because of the so-called violent behavior which is why she scolds him. Kanchan told me:

My mother plays *PUBG* very well. She is like a professional gamer. She plays it a lot. But she scolds me whenever I wanted to play it. However, only in the weekend she says yes for *PUBG*.¹²

This shows a rather complicated issue where a mother believes playing *PUBG* can cause mental disturbances for children, however, it does not affect her. Mother concerning her child's safety is primitive in nature. The game has no immediate concern for the mother. However, here the mother experiences some sort of paradoxical dilemma where she is protecting her child from the game she enjoys playing too.

One of the schoolboy participants, Dipayan Bhowmick, is a professional football player. So when I asked which he liked the most he replied that he liked both games. Then I asked the difference between playing football and *PUBG*¹³. He got confused and said both are enjoyable¹⁴. Also, he said his mother restricted him from playing too many *PUBG* games. His mother has this list of free days when he can play *PUBG* for an hour or two. However, it seems he is fooling his mother because on that day when I interviewed him he was playing *PUBG* though he was not supposed to be, it seemed like a simple enjoyment or an innocent sin for him. These types are prevalent

¹² Pal, Kanchan, interviewed by author. Does Playing *PUBG* Cause Violent Behavior, November 10, 2021.

¹³ Bhowmick, Dipayan, interviewed by author. Does Playing *PUBG* Cause Violent Behavior, November 10, 2021.

¹⁴ It is worthy of mention, Schott pointed out that a soccer player is not physically inhibited from handling the ball or crossing the boundary lines of the pitch as they play. Yet the player seeks to avoid blatantly doing so whenever possible to avoid penalties from a referee and—losing possession of the ball to the opposition. Despite a player's best efforts or intentions, the ball may still make contact with a hand or go out of play momentarily. However, in these moments, when breaches of the rules do occur, there is no guarantee that they will necessarily be upheld or enforced. This is where factors such as sportsmanship, the perspective of players, and the ability of a referee to be in the right place to observe violations come into play (Schott 2016, 29–30).

among schoolboys. While I was interviewing a thirteen-year-old schoolboy, Deb Majumdar, I realized that he was afraid of his mother because his mother forbade him to play the video game. However, he somehow managed to hide it from his mother and told me with a laugh how he was fooling his mother¹⁵. Anyway, he plays it regularly. Amit Debnath said a very interesting phrase while I was interviewing him. He mentioned that:

PUBG helps me on focusing and concentration with my work. Playing *PUBG* also keeps me away from depression and boredom. During the lockdown of Covid19 Pandemic playing *PUBG* is the only thing that keeps me positive.¹⁶

Most of the participants who are over twenty years old disagree with the fact that *PUBG* can cause violent behavior¹⁷. Some of them laughed at the question of whether playing *PUBG* cause violent behavior because for them this is a very stupid question¹⁸. However, all of them agreed with the fact that like any other thing, the video game has also two sides, that is, positive and negative. Lakhi kanta Das depicted that the spread of violence through video games depends upon many primary and key factors such as the mental state of the player, circumstances of the player et cetera, only playing *PUBG* cannot spread violence¹⁹. It is up to us which side we are going to choose. In this context, Gareth Schott opined that the public and political debates that prompt the notion of a relationship between games and violence have not emerged in response to logical events that permit game violence to be considered in dispassionate terms (Schott 2016, 29). Furthermore, as the above survey suggests, children and young people are mostly confused about whether or

¹⁵ Majumdar, Deb, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 11, 2021.

¹⁶ Debnath, Amit, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 12, 2021.

¹⁷ Basak, Sudip, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behaviour*, November 10, 2021. Das, Rakes, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 11, 2021. Barman, Prosenjit, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG-Free Fire Cause Violent Behavior*, November 8, 2021. Mistri, Gopal, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 11, 2021.

¹⁸ Debnath, Suvankar, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent behavior*, November 11, 2021.

¹⁹ Das, Lakhi Kanta, interviewed by author. *Does Playiing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 11, 2021.

not playing video games can damage behavior though there are exceptions. Pushpendu Mondal who is practicing medicine is also quite skeptical about the fact that violent video games cause violent behavior. He told me that:

I have been playing *PUBG* for more than two years. I have never felt angry or gone violent just because I play *PUBG*. It does not lead towards violent at least for me²⁰.

When I asked how much they played the game, some of the teenagers told me that it depended on whether they had a girlfriend or not. However, all of them agreed that playing *PUBG* during the lockdown increased a lot despite them having a girlfriend or not. Many of them started playing *PUBG* or *Free Fire* to get out of boredom during the lockdown. Playing *PUBG* might have a way of expressing personal relational agony, Gopal Mistri, an unskilled laborer, got emotional when I was asking him about the *PUBG–Free Fire* game, and somehow he ended up telling his failed love affair. He said:

I can't get her whom I love. Playing *PUBG* keeps me busy and helps me to forget the pain of her absence in my life. *PUBG* doesn't lead me to violence at all rather keeps me away from pain²¹.

Nevertheless, I interviewed a twenty-year-old teenager Sudip Basak who is a sophomore; surprisingly, he is not the only one who condemned the fact that video game does not promote violence²². More precisely six people gave a negative skeptical approach and confessed that they sometimes got angry causing violent behavior. When I asked him about the violent disturbances he caused, his answer was him being silent and showing me a broken wooden chair²³. So it does fit with Anderson (2004), as he points out that each time people play violent video games, they rehearse aggressive scripts that teach and reinforce vigilance for enemies (i.e., hostile perception bias), aggressive action against others, expectations that others will behave aggressively,

²¹ Mistri, Gopal, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 11, 2021.

²² Basak, Sudip, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behaviour*, November 10, 2021.

²³ Basak, Sudip, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behaviour*, November 10, 2021.

positive attitudes toward the use of violence, and beliefs that violent solutions are effective and appropriate (Anderson 2004), however, my focus will be on the actual discrepancy within this dichotomy rather than agreeing to it²⁴. As many recent scholars on the field such as Souvik Mukherjee opined, it would be unwise to suggest that killing a figure in a video game would enable a soldier to kill the enemy without any emotional response in the battle zone (Mukherjee 2010). Hence, my focus would be rather on the context of controlling violence through *PUBG* than the oversimplified view, that is, *PUBG* causing violence²⁵. As for instance another participant, Prodip Basak, stated:

Playing *PUBG* has many positive outcomes. Gamers can know and learn about names of historical artifacts (various types of guns and battles), historical events and other knowledge by playing the video game. It helps learn many divers and positive elements of the society, reasoning skills, even taught us how to make friends online.²⁶

²⁴ As Sicart (2009) successfully points out, computer games have been a mass media target for a good part of the last two decades. Accusations that games are training devices for teenage serial killers with serious social issues made them a usual suspect in terms of creating a moral panic. One common media argument claims that games lead to violent behavior and desensitization in the face of violence. This has even led certain groups to actively seek legislative restrictions on the distribution of violent computer games. Computer games are now what cinema and rock and roll once were: the bull's eye of morality. This moral panic is a symptom of a larger cultural issue. In our postindustrial societies, we understand and promote computer games as a valuable medium for entertainment, creation, and socialization. Developed and developing societies, from China to the United States, are witnessing the economic and cultural benefits of computer games as a dominant cultural industry. Academia too now focuses on these games as objects of research, validating their importance in the configuration of our cultural landscape. Despite all this interest, we know little to nothing about the ethics of computer games (Sicart 2009, 3).

²⁵ As “videogame playing has been found to help improve perceptual skills and visual attention, [...] visuospatial cognition, [...] and spatial skills,” (see for instance the psychological effects of video games). “Research has explored the impact of videogames on a variety of different levels with a particular focus on learning as it appears that videogames can offer a unique avenue for learning to players. [...] videogames are potentially powerful learning tools because they support multi-sensory, active, experiential, and problem-based learning. They also favor activation of prior knowledge to allow progression within a game and provide immediate feedback thus allowing testing of a hypothesis and immediate learning from ones actions. Videogames can also include opportunities for self-assessment and are often becoming important social learning environments that allow for additional learning from different perspectives. The emergence of videogames as a key learning tool has been highlighted by researchers due to their reinforcement ability, the emphasis on distributed practicing of skills, and the active involvement and motivation of the learner in the task.” (McLean and Griffiths 2013, 121).

²⁶ Basak, Prodip, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 8, 2021.

The context behind the ban on *PUBG*

Now coming to the context behind the banning of the video game; *PUBG* was banned under Section 69A of the *Information Technology Act, 2000* (Mayank 2023b). According to Mayank, the following are the three major reasons behind the ban on *PUBG Mobile* in India: national security concerns, getting children addicted to in-app purchases, and youth committing thefts and acts of violence due to the game. One of the biggest reasons behind the ban of *PUBG Mobile* in India is concerns regarding the data privacy of users. Michael Brandon Ingram stated:

A recent report revealed *Battlegrounds Mobile India* has been banned by the Indian government reportedly citing “national security concerns” once again, due to Tencent’s partial ownership of Krafton. While the Indian government has yet to make a direct confirmation, players in India found as early as Thursday that the game was no longer available on either Android or iOS stores. The delisting was confirmed by Krafton with the studio reportedly “seeking clarification” into the reasoning behind the ban. (Ingram 2022)

Also, the servers of the game are located in China, and it was believed that user data were being stolen and transferred (Mayank 2023b). The central government issued a press release regarding the ban, stating:

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has received many complaints from various sources, including several reports about misuse of some mobile apps available on Android and iOS platforms for stealing and surreptitiously transmitting users’ data in an unauthorized manner to servers which have locations outside India. The compilation of these data, its mining and profiling by elements hostile to national security and defense of India, which ultimately impinges upon the sovereignty and integrity of India, is a matter of very deep and immediate concern which requires emergency measures. (Sayal 2020)

This is the reason that the government of India banned both *PUBG Mobile* and *PUBG Mobile Lite* applications in the country. Both mobile games are developed by Tencent Games, which is situated and registered in China (Arora 2020). However, of the two, only *PUBG Mobile* has a Chinese publisher, Tencent, with its servers majorly based in China. On the other hand, *PUBG* for PC is operated by a Korean publisher, the PUBG Corp. This appears to be the reason why the game is still available on PC, even as it remains banned on mobiles in India (Talwar 2020). According to the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, *PUBG Mobile* has been banned under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, on the grounds that “they are engaged in activities which are prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order” (Talwar 2020).

Free-to-play games like *PUBG Mobile* use an in-app or in-game purchase model as an important source of revenue. While *PUBG Mobile* was not the only game with this method of monetization, it also included *Gacha* mechanics (Mayank 2023b). *Gacha* mechanic in a game is also known as a pull method where players get an opportunity to get a reward from an assorted list (Vicente 2020). This is also dubbed as the initial exposure to gambling for young players, which in turn can lead to a habit growing up (Mayank 2023b). An important aspect to note is the in-app purchases in *PUBG Mobile* were usually made in a way which indirectly promoted the next one. The purchase would give variable in-game currency required to purchase a specific item. This made the players think they needed currency to be able to play the game in a complete manner which encouraged them to make another purchase. This method is used not only by *PUBG Mobile* (Benny 2022) but also by most other modern free-to-play games (Mayank 2023b).

With rising popularity of *PUBG Mobile* in the Indian gaming sector, several kids were playing the game together and comparing game statistics with each other. The game became a new medium to show off among kids. With in-game cosmetics, the game started creating disparities among these kids as some were able to purchase them while others were not. Watching other friends paying for in-game items led many youngsters to steal money

from their parents (Mayank 2023b). Several incidents of kids stealing money (Sengupta 2020) from parents started surfacing from different parts of the country. People even started betting money while challenging each other to a match of *PUBG Mobile* (Mayank 2023b). In more extreme cases, physical harm and loss of life (Team G2G 2022a) were also involved after parents started to stop children from playing the game. While the game was banned, a similar game called *Battlegrounds Mobile India* (BGMI) was released only for the Indian market but was banned (Team G2G 2022b) later after it was found to be a similar game leading to the emergence of similar incidents (Banerjee 2022) which caused the Indian authorities to ban *PUBG Mobile*. Therefore, the game was banned on September 2, 2020, along with 117 other Chinese apps. One of the biggest reasons behind the ban of *PUBG Mobile* in India is concerns regarding the data privacy of users. The servers of the game are located in China, and it was believed that user data were being stolen and transferred. (Mayank 2023b)

In the latest attack against Chinese apps, the government of India has now banned 118 new apps, in addition to the ones that it had announced a ban on earlier. Interestingly, the new list also contains applications such as *PUBG Mobile*—a game that enjoys great popularity in India, with thousands of users logging into the application every day (Talwar 2020). The government has announced that it is also banning *PUBG Mobile Nordic Map: Livik*, *PUBG Mobile Lite*, *WeChat Work*, and *WeChat reading*, in addition to the *PUBG Mobile*. However, what's interesting is that among the list of banned apps, the one name that is missing is *PUBG* (Talwar 2020). India banned *PUBG Mobile* following heightened tensions between India and China in late 2020, due to *PUBG Mobile* being published by Chinese gaming juggernaut Tencent. *PUBG* would return to the region with an India-specific version published by Krafton a few months later. Now, however, *PUBG* has once again been banned in India (Ingram 2022).

Conclusion

Since media are deeply related to the way we live our everyday life (Melzer and Happ 2014, 2), we are subjected to be affected in both ways, that is,

positive and negative. Furthermore, digital media are used widely and across all generations. At the same time, a general decrease in altruism, empathy, and charity, as well as an increase in selfishness in our society are recurrently discussed (Melzer and Happ 2014, 2). Some humans are prone to violence; this is a common philosophical truth. Hence from the beginning of the initial days of civilization to the very end of the 20th century, there were ample numbers of wars, battles, and the two great evil wars which had shaken the basis of humanity. All these happened much before the invention of violent video games. Violence is indeed an intimidating, unnecessary though embedded feature of human character (and it is a philosophical truth). Therefore, day by day civilized men tried to condemn violent warfare and tried to stop casualties by forcing laws and regulations. After years of turmoil, civilized humanists are trying to eradicate hundreds of evil effects caused by the gruesome horror of warfare. They turn into more rational ways of thinking like in the other ways where physical punishment acquiring virtual, that is, instead of death sentence or physical torture now people are more dependent on counseling, psychological treatment, et cetera. Even though civilization has grown to a point where violent behavior is no longer an opportunity to express superiority, some people still have the initial urges that their predecessors used to have, that is, thrust for violence and war as their favorite game of manhood. To stop them from violating the rules of humanity, they needed to diverge their energy into another program of new thoughts and a new level of game such as *PUBG* or *Free Fire*. So, these games are rather a divergent phenomenon that can prevent damages than a straight reason for causing damages. Therefore my conclusion is that violent content does not affect how people act rather it depends on many primary factors such as perspectives, mental state, the ability to consume facts, et cetera. Nevertheless, the Governmental ban on *PUBG* is rather geopolitical in nature than the simple assumption of preventing violent behavior. This is why India is developing its own alternatives to *PUBG Mobile* like *Raji: An ancient epic*. According to Karanveer Singh, we will see more and more Indian alternatives pop up as the Indian government is also supporting “Made in India” mobile game hackathons to keep Indians entertained and self-reliant (Arora 2020).

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Comment:**Living the American Dream:
Playlist GTA in the Third World Country****Animesh Dhara***Abstract*

This research critically examines the nexus between video games, specifically the Grand Theft Auto (GTA) series, and the nuanced perceptions of the American Dream among teenagers in developing nations, primarily focusing on India. Situated within the broader exploration of the American Dream across academic disciplines, my qualitative research employs semi-structured interviews and online surveys. Targeting participants aged 13 to 22 with extensive GTA exposure, my purposive sampling strategy ensures diverse perspectives. Thematic analysis of game content, encompassing narratives, characters, and themes, serves as the methodological core. Adopting a case study approach, this study aims to investigate the influence of the GTA game series on teenagers from developing nations, particularly India, and how it shapes their perception of the American Dream.

Keywords

Grand Theft Auto, American Dream, identity formation, cultural perceptions

Introduction

The concept of the American Dream has been a topic of interest in numerous academic disciplines, including cultural studies, sociology, and anthropology. Scholars have argued that the American Dream is a complex and contested idea that reflects the aspirations and values of American society (Hochschild 1996). The American Dream is often associated with material prosperity, upward social mobility, and the pursuit of happiness. However, critics have also argued that the American Dream is an empty myth perpetuating social inequality and reinforcing capitalist ideologies (Krugman 2007). Video games, particularly open-world games like GTA (Grand Theft Auto), have been studied extensively in recent years to explore the relationship between video games and social behavior, cultural values, and identity formation (Yee 2006). Studies have shown that video games can have a significant impact on the perception of social norms, attitudes, and values (Ferguson 2015).

GTA (Grand Theft Auto) is a popular video game series produced by Rockstar Games (formerly Rockstar North) that has gained immense popularity around the world, particularly among teenagers. The game is set in a parody of American cities, allowing players to engage in a range of activities such as stealing cars, shooting, making gangs do illicit activities, going to clubs, dancing, and buying properties. It provides players with a virtual experience of the American Dream which for many teenagers from developing nations is an unattainable dream in reality. Furthermore, the first game of the series is set in a dystopian world where the 1933 Business Plot, a failed coup attempt to overthrow President FDR, succeeded, and a dictator is in power. The game's premise critiques and celebrates consumer culture and controversial mechanisms of postmodern global capitalism. The narrative of the GTA games is often dark and cynical. The American Dream depicted in the game is a pipe dream for many of the characters and the only way to succeed in this world is to break the law or exploit others. (Rockstar Games 1997, 1999, 2003, 2013; Rockstar North 2002, 2004)

This research aims to investigate the influence of Grand Theft Auto on teenagers from developing nations, particularly India. By examining how

these individuals perceive the American Dream, consumer culture, and postmodern global capitalism through the lens of video games, we aim to contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on the intersection of digital media, cultural values, and societal perceptions.

Literature Review

The exploration of the American Dream has been a multifaceted journey shaped by the perspectives of various scholars and critics. In *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped the World*, Jim Cullen (2003) provides a historical lens, tracing the evolution of the American Dream and its profound impact on shaping societal ideals. Lendol Calder (1999), through *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit*, delves into the intricate connections between consumerism and the American Dream, offering insights into how financial practices have influenced the pursuit of this national ideal. Furthermore, Mike Davis (1986), in *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US*, scrutinizes the nexus between politics and the economy, shedding light on how the American Dream can act as both an aspirational force and a constraint within the broader historical context. These scholars collectively contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the American Dream, examining its historical roots, economic underpinnings, and the political dynamics that have shaped its narrative over time. Their works offer a nuanced portrayal, unravelling the complexities inherent in the concept and enriching the literature on the American Dream.

Methodology

The proposed study uses a qualitative research design that employs semi-structured interviews and online surveys. The study involves teenagers of the age group 13 to 22 years who play GTA regularly or have extensively played the game in their childhood. The participants were recruited from schools, colleges, and gaming communities in urban and semi-urban areas in India. The survey link was distributed through various channels, and a predetermined response period was set. The participants were selected

through purposive sampling based on their age, gender, and socioeconomic status. The interviews had been conducted in the participants’ preferred language and were recorded. The data is being transcribed and translated (where necessary). Ethical considerations were paramount, including informed consent, participant anonymity, and confidentiality. The collected data are analyzed using thematic analysis which actually involves analyzing the game content including the narratives, characters, and themes. Limitations, such as potential biases and sample representativeness, were acknowledged. Validation checks were implemented for data accuracy, and the results were presented comprehensively in a report, encompassing visual representations of quantitative data and key themes from qualitative responses. The research has adopted a case study approach to gain a more in-depth understanding of the participants’ experiences with the game.

Playlist: GTA [Grand Theft Auto Universe]

To all Gamers and Game Enthusiasts,
 This google form is sent out to know how do you feel about Playing Video Games and How GTA Universe has made an impact in your Childhood/Teenage life. Take a chance to express how you feel about your Gaming Journey.
 "SO YOU GIVING ME A LECTURE?" ~GTA V



GTA [Grand Theft Auto Universe] to Gaming The American dream.

Questions Responses **46** Settings

G-Form Link- https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSej_LZ4zdnyDHDJGYIScqH_qf7WTpbM29YrzaXIF13RRMsMQ/viewform?usp=sf_llink

Figure 1: Introduction of the Google form sent to the participants as a part of the online survey.

What is the *American Dream* to a teenager from Third World Country, like India

The kind of responses we received through our interviews regarding the perception of the American Dream are vague as well as thought-provoking and genuine at the same time. Since the participants are chosen from varied academic streams and fields, the real meaning of the term *American Dream*

is unknown to the majority. For them, the “American Dream” is a “Dream Big;” “Live Big thing;” a “luxurious life, partying and having fun;” “freedom, equality and opportunity for every Americans;” or just a “shallow fancy pit where you can follow materialism blindly.”

Even GTA V has an achievement named the American Dream that the player can unlock after buying an Apartment and Garage from Dynasty 8 and buying an Insured Vehicle at Los Santos Customs while playing the game.

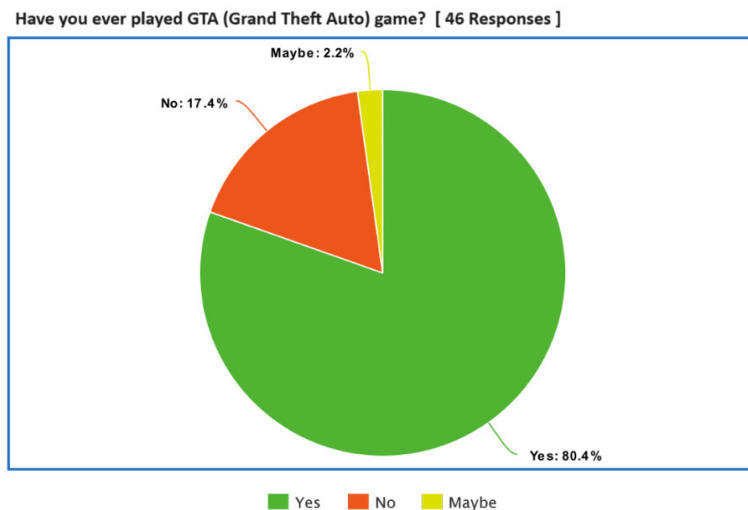


Figure 2: Pie chart depicting the percentage of the participants who have played the GTA game.

Grand Theft Auto (GTA) and American Society

Friend Request is the very first mission in Grand Theft Auto: V. The mission was assigned to the protagonist Michael De Santa by Lester Crest, where Michael De Santa comments, “Hey, I believe this country can still make interesting movies. There’s no better way to define American life than a two-hours plot in which the hero looks good and defeats evil” (Rockstar Games 2013).

In the Grand Theft Auto universe, the majority of the locations used in the games are based on cities and states found in the real-life USA, with the country logically serving as the game series' main setting. Liberty City is based on New York City, Vice City is based on the city of Miami, and San Andreas is based on San Francisco. Also, the names of the cities used are inspired by real-life American cities, like, Los Santos (Los Angeles), San Fierro (San Francisco) and Las Venturas (Las Vegas).

When the question: “Do you think GTA Universe is loosely based on American Society and American Life?” was asked to the participants of our survey, the majority of the Indian teenage gamers answered either “yes” or “somewhat.” One of our participants has written:

I do think that the GTA Universe is largely based on the American Dream, presenting an often-neglected picture of the fallacy of such dreams in the post-modern era. I view it as a not-so-subtle critique of the American Society wherein we witness the mirror American criminal underworld operate explicitly through the gameplay, especially with the protagonist who we see slowly descend into this criminal scene till he reaches the apex of the crime world by the end of the gameplay. It is important to note that this descend is set into play because of the socio-economic pressures and detrimental living conditions under the American society which remains veiled from focus but is highlighted throughout the games with the intrinsic storytelling, especially in the lowest rungs which are populated mostly by non-white immigrants. Hence, the games can be read as the critique of the American society and a mock-satire of the fallacious American Dream that still attracts second/third-world immigrants in hopes of a better life, only to be disappointed after arriving in the USA.

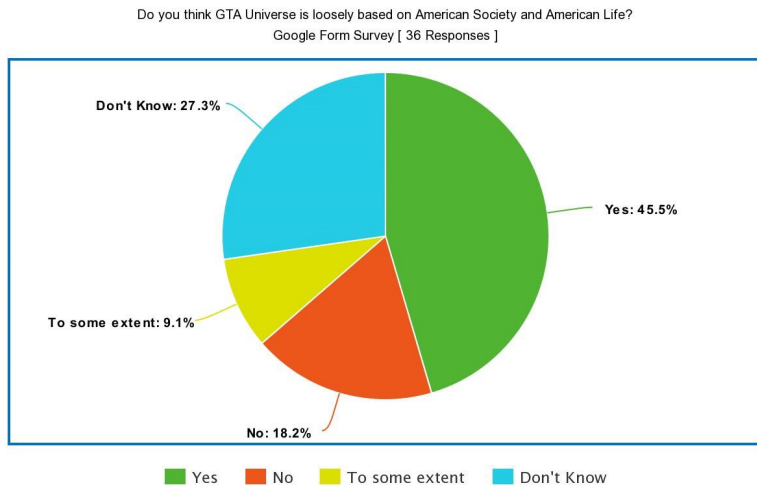


Figure 3: Pie chart representing the data based on 36 participants’ responses to the question: “Do you think GTA Universe is loosely based on American Society and American Life?” According to the pie chart, 45.5% of participants have responded yes to this question.

Grand Theft Auto (GTA) as a Parody or a Serious Satire on American Society

The Grand Theft Auto (GTA) franchise can be seen as a combination of mimicry, parody, and serious satire of American society and lifestyle. On one hand, the game’s developers have taken inspiration from real-life American cities, locations, and events, and recreated them in the game world. This can be seen as a form of mimicry or a copy of real-life American society. On the other hand, the game’s portrayal of violence, crime, and social issues is often done in a satirical and humorous way. This can be seen as a form of parody, or a funny imitation, of American society and its values. At the same time, the game’s satire is often serious and thought-provoking. It often comments on real-world issues such as politics, economics, and social justice.

From the participants supporting the argument that GTA game series is a parody of American Society, the responses given by them are:

Yes, I think Grand Theft Auto (GTA) franchise/universe is based on American society and American Life. First of all the map is based on real places in America, such as New York City, Miami, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas. American society is diverse and complex, composed of people from various racial, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds, which is well represented in these games. From skyscrapers to people living on the streets, we can find them all in this game. The game's portrayal of violence, crime, and social issues such as poverty, racism, and corruption, can be seen on various aspects of American society, out of which gun violence is the most common. Other factors such as the availability of weapons and drugs are also a reference to the American Society and American Life.

And:

The whole concept of the game is based on making fun of its barbaric or rather unruly side. The racist comments, drug dealing, gang wars, murders and armed robberies, etc are involved in this game mocking the major prevailing problems currently America is facing and is actually infamous for. This is why the whole game series can be seen as a form of serious satire, or a critical commentary on American society and its values.

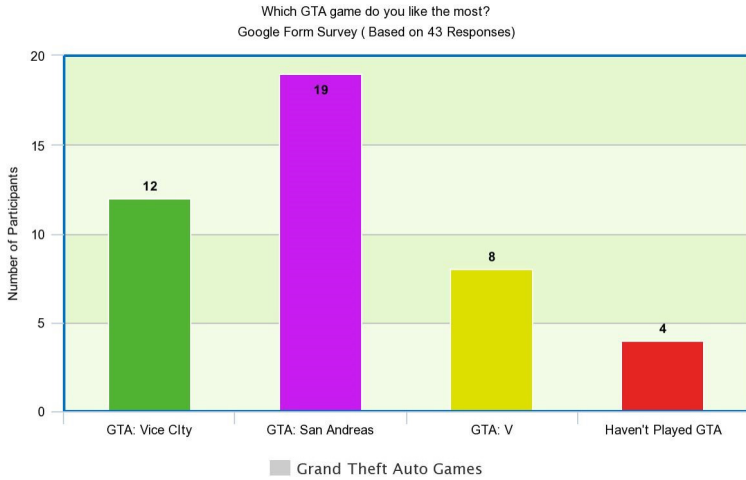


Figure 4: Bar graph representing the data on the number of participants who have played the different GTA games. GTA: San Andreas tops the chart with 19 out of 43 votes.

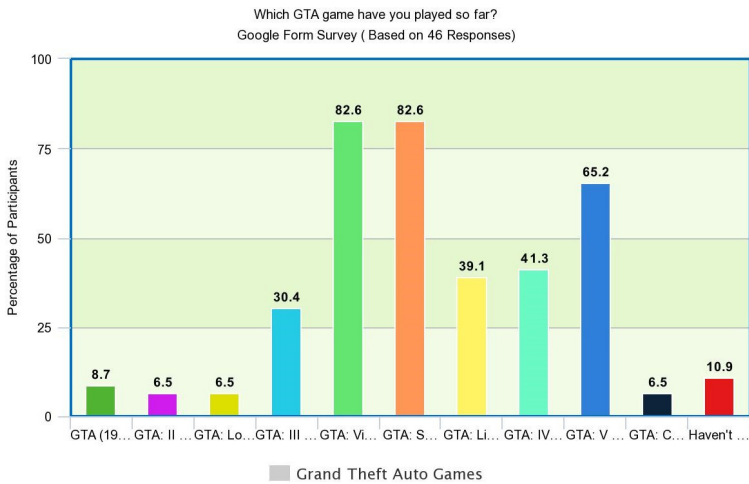


Figure 5: The bar graph shows the data about the popularity of each GTA game they played so far. The red bar depicts 10.9% of the 46 participants who haven't played any GTA games.

Conclusion

The study was conducted to find out the influence of Grand Theft Auto video game series on teenagers from developing nations and their perceptions of the American dream, consumer culture, and postmodern entertainment dynamics in video games. From the collected data set, we can infer that 80.4 percents of the teenage gamers from India (who did participate in our survey and interview sessions) have played GTA in their lifetime. From the long list of GTA game series, GTA: Vice City and GTA: San Andreas top the popularity chart with a whopping 82.6 percents, followed by GTA: V with 65.2 percents. These numbers show the popularity of the Grand Theft Auto game series in India. Since a large number of teenage population is invested in the Grand Theft Auto game series, this automatically demands an in-depth study of the game series, its narratives, themes, game mechanics and their influence on the budding teenage gamers.

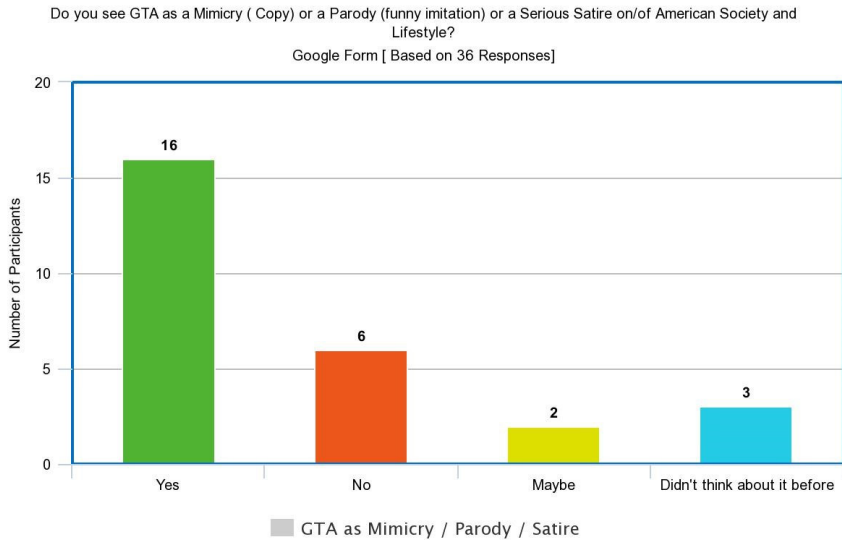


Figure 6: Bar graph representing the number of participants who have perceived GTA as a Mimicry–Parody–Serious Satire on American society and lifestyle and who have not. The responses of a few participants with ‘Maybe’ and ‘Didn’t think about it before’ are also in the bar graph.

The collected responses are sorted on the basis of a “yes or no” binary segregation. The majority of the participants have supported their responses with detailed answers and logic. A few of the participants have chosen not to elaborate on their answers or have opted for “I am not sure” option. Those answers have not been taken into consideration for supporting or defying any arguments. The study delves into the multifaceted nature of the GTA franchise as a mimicry, parody, and serious satire of American society. Participants reflected on the game’s portrayal of violence, crime, and social issues, recognizing elements of mimicry in the recreation of real-life American cities and events. The humour and satire infused into the game’s narrative, despite its serious commentary on issues like racism, and corruption, showcased the developers’ intent to provide entertainment and reflection. The participants echoed the sentiment that GTA is a form of serious satire, offering a critical commentary on the darker aspects of American society. The study’s findings provide a detailed insight into the ways in which a virtual game can shape the worldview and aspirations of teenagers from a third-world country, like India.

Additionally, the research also explores the entertainment dynamics of the game and the role of these dynamics in shaping the participants’ experiences with the game. Overall, the study aims to contribute to understanding the relationship between media consumption, childhood development, self-concept, and identity formation.

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Therefore, I, (author) declare that I hold the rights to the images used in this case study report.

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Review:

Liz Przybylski. 2020. *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and In Between*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Anders Ackfeldt

Abstract

As social media proliferates globally, affecting over half the world's population, ethnographic research must adapt to evolving modes of communication and representation. Liz Przybylski's book *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and In Between* offers an accessible, practical guide to hybrid ethnography spanning both digital and physical spaces. Covering project formulation, research ethics, site selection, data collection, analysis, and writing, the book draws on the author's experience studying hip-hop culture across the United States and Canada. Key strengths highlighted include the continuous focus on ethical considerations and the book's utility for researchers at all stages. The modular chapter design also allows for targeted consultation by researchers. Overall, this timely volume serves as an essential, durable guide for ethnographers navigating an increasingly digitized social landscape where subjects have greater control over self-representation. It receives an enthusiastic recommendation for students and scholars alike.

Keywords

Methods, Hybrid Fieldwork, Hybrid Ethnography, Online, Offline

As of the beginning of 2023, the global social media usage rate stood at almost sixty percent. It is fair to say that social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok affect most of us in some way. For researchers, it might increase accessibility to interlocuters, but it also creates a shift in the control of the descriptions. The “subjects” are no longer passive entities. They have the means and power to present their own stories and perspectives faster and quicker than ever. This development also challenges the researchers’ traditional authority over representation. As the social media age redefines how stories are shared, made, and perceived it becomes crucial for researchers to navigate this new socially connected era. In this ever-hanging landscape, *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and In Between* emerges as a welcomed guide.

Written by Liz Przybylski an interdisciplinary scholar engaged in, among other things, popular music studies focused mainly on hip-hop culture in United States and Canada. When working on her dissertation project she realized she had few sources at hand to guide her work. This prompted her to write this well-timed methods book that stands firm on her experiences, focusing on issues that arise in present-day online and offline research. The book has been written accessibly for researchers. Penned in a straightforward and sharp language across ten snappy chapters, Przybylski gives the reader a hands-on guide to the practicalities of theory-based hybrid research methodology, as well as the tricks of the trade of a seasoned hybrid ethnographer. Each chapter includes brief summaries and up-to-date reading recommendations which adds to the accessibility of the book.

Chapter 1 deals with the basics, presenting hybrid fieldwork and how to formulate research questions. It addresses practical and theoretical aspects and offers strategies for developing projects that incorporate both digital and physical ethnography. In *Chapter 2* the author dives into research ethics, providing essential project design guidance, especially for institutional review board applications. Przybylski also discusses professional standards beyond formal regulations and highlights responsible research conduct. *Chapter 3* deals with research site selection and preparation, recommending researchers to engage in reflexive practices by considering “Where are you?” and “Who are you?” The chapter also includes nifty exercises focusing on specific research

projects. With the table set by the first three chapters, laying out the essential utensils of ethics and preparation, the remaining chapters serve up the main course and deal with the practical ins and outs of conducting fieldwork.

Chapter 4 offers strategies for data collection across online and face-to-face environments and *Chapter 5* suggests methods for interpreting initial experiences and refining research questions. *Chapter 6* focuses on documenting expressive culture, detailing techniques for photo, audio, and video recording, both created by the research and participant-generated. *Chapter 7* shifts focus to the art of conducting interviews and online surveys, whereas *Chapter 8* lays out the analytical process, enriched with insights from Przybylski own field research between the United States and Canada. *Chapter 9* covers the writing process, from analysis to presenting findings. It offers valuable advice on academic publishing and public dissemination. Lastly, *Chapter 10* contains the conclusion. It serves as both a reflection and a guide for staying dexterous as the terrain of fieldwork continually shifts. The design of the book, where each chapter stands as independent units, acknowledges that research is often a non-linear process. It allows readers to jump between chapters, enabling targeted consultation. I have found the exercises sprinkled throughout the book to be especially beneficial for structuring my thoughts regarding the subject matter of each chapter.

One of the book's greatest strengths, which resonates with my own experience when doing hybrid research, is its continuous focus on research ethics from the early chapters and onwards. This underscores the importance of ethical considerations in all stages of the research process, which is particularly relevant in the complex settings of hybrid ethnography.

In conclusion, the book is an essential and practical guide to the rapidly evolving topography of ethnographic research. From my first encounter with this book, it has become my staple recommendation to students at all stages of their academic adventures as well as to my fellow colleagues. It should come as no surprise that I find *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and In Between* to be an invaluable research companion, not least because, as Liz Przybylski writes in the conclusion of the book, "the hybrid field is not going away."