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The Joystick in the Garden: Video Games, American Studies, and Politics

Mahshid Mayar and Stefan Schubert

- ¹ In *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), Leo Marx launched an inquiry into how the United States had labored to sustain an old, whitewashed, Edenic image of the “New World” and how this image stood at odds with relentless waves of technological advances that have helped define modern America: at once reveling in *and* battling the clutches of the machine. At its core, *The Machine in the Garden* probed the nation’s centuries-long coming-to-terms with the imbricated complex of desire, progress, and unapologetic industrialization that had defined much of white American history. In such a reading, we agree with Marx that the variety of ways in which the machine and the garden coexist “presents a problem that ultimately belongs not to art but to politics” (365). And yet, having come a long way from the “myth-and-symbol” school’s reading of the United States as both primal and pristine, we continue today to deal not only with the machine’s omnipresence in US society and culture but also with its ensuing political implications for American studies (especially when practiced outside the United States). It goes without saying that the politics of this omnipresence have sensitized generations of Americanists to both the spaces that old and new machines have occupied in the already overcrowded “garden” (that has been kept alive by the labor of some for the benefit of others) and to how their presence constantly demands a reordering of the ways in which the “garden” is occupied (but also exploited) by its human and nonhuman inhabitants. In our twenty-first-century sense, we further concede that both the machine—be it hyperscale servers that belong to a handful of Internet moguls, military-grade drones, or handheld joysticks—and the machinations of politics and populism—be it the flaws and the failings of democratic elections, the fraught afterlives of institutional racism and segregation, the algorithmic landscapes of social media, or the struggle over the idea of “America”—have survived and thrived. In effect, today it is the garden that hangs thinly as the backdrop against which the machine looms large. In sum, in contemporary discourses generated through such

timely interventions as critical environmental studies, technological images and metaphors often seem more fitting to describe the United States than do natural ones, and if images of the “garden” are still evoked, it is usually to lament its decay.

- 2 In this light, the focus of the present special issue is on the domineering presence of one of the most prevalent and present of machines, that is, the joystick (but also the gamepad, the personal computer, the game console, and so on) in the garden (in private quarters, at schools, in e-sports events, etc.). Whether played on PCs, laptops, gaming consoles, handheld devices, mobile phones, or tablets, video games are the most popular and most commercially successful form of entertainment in the United States (and globally)—not least because of the general trend toward unprecedented gamification in commercial, industrial, and educational domains. Given this context, recent scholarship has begun to map the affinities between video games and American studies as a productive site of scholarly exploration (cf., e.g., Pöhlmann; Mayar; Wills). Thus, building on vigorous lines of research from the past few years, this issue suggests a particular framework in which the two areas can be most productively brought together, namely, the cross-fertilization between video games and the nexus of politics, popular culture, and populism. Taking our lead from Marx’s work, we believe that the complexities with which video games as a particular technology have influenced American culture are best studied in relation to “society” and “politics” (365), highlighting an interconnected understanding of popular culture, society, politics, and history that lies at the core of American studies.¹
- 3 In other words, we propose to probe into video-game culture by analyzing games’ politics, understanding them as part of popular culture, and examining their entanglement in populist discourse. We therefore suggest to attend to a number of pressing questions, such as: What does the popularity of video games as a prime cultural “text” (in the widest sense of the term) in the past half-century evince regarding its (and indeed *our*) politics? What, in other words, does a high-tech medium and the lucrative industry it has generated reveal about how we (re)define, practice, and mark the shape of individual and collective views and values in a century of blurred boundaries such as the twenty-first? In turn, in what ways do video games—textualities imagined by people and coded via machines to be ultimately played with by people—embrace or eschew, reflect or deflect these same views and values? Ultimately, what do video games do to us Americanists as we labor to make sense of what the subject of our study has become since the inception of the industry? As we pose and strive to answer these questions, the urgent point of contention is not whether games are political. It is, rather, to investigate the ways politics has made itself omnipresent yet often invisible in games. How exactly, in other words, are games political or populist? And, ultimately, how does digital games’ evident popularity affect the ways they are political or populist?
- 4 To tackle such questions, we suggest to conceptualize the “political” dimensions of video games along three lines of inquiry: (1) politics *in* the ludic: a game’s direct engagement with historical or sociopolitical themes, for instance through the representation of historical events or political agendas and ideologies; (2) politics *of* the ludic: the larger cultural and political reception of video games, such as the debates about depictions of violence and war in games or controversies like the anti-feminist “gamergate”; and (3) ludic politics: the “textual politics” and ideologies of games themselves, e.g. how they relate to questions of power, difference (“race,” class,

gender, sexuality, [dis]ability, etc.), representation, and related concerns both in their ludic and in their narrative elements. Of course, these different dimensions frequently intersect with and qualify each other, and specific games can “do politics” in more than one of these ways. Accordingly, we suggest that analyses of video games should also strive to investigate multiples of these dimensions and to connect them to each other in the process, as the contributions to this special issue do.

- 5 In this sense, our explicit focus on politics in video games primarily entails a conceptual and methodological shift, while simultaneously connecting with many previous studies of video games that investigate questions or issues that invariably touch on politics, even if they do not necessarily use that terminology. Among the most prominent such topics are postcolonialism, imperialism, and the Global South (cf. Mukherjee; Dyer-Witheford and Peuter; Penix-Tadsen), race and racism (cf. Murray; Everett and Watkins; Malkowski and Russworm), gender, sexuality, and queerness (cf. Cote; Ruberg and Shaw; Ruberg), class (cf. Woodcock), history (cf. Chapman; Wainwright; Whalen and Taylor), citizenship (cf. Neys and Jansz; Hoofd), and (in)justice (cf. Gray and Leonard), as well as a focus on specific genres, such as military (cf. Huntemann and Payne) or science-fiction games (cf. Higgins)—to name just some of the areas of study that, we believe, can profit from being brought into an even more explicit dialog with American-studies investigations of video-game politics.
- 6 On a more foundational level, probing the complexities of how games can be understood as political also substantiates efforts to counter claims that they are decidedly not political—or that they *should* not be. Within popular discourse about video games of the last few years, a number of developers have claimed that their products are not political or that “including politics” in video games harms the business (cf. Chalk; Phillips), just as some players have insisted that politics (or, at least, certain forms of politics) should be “kept out of” video games (cf. Pfister). Some of the aforementioned video-game scholarship has engaged with these phenomena already, which saves us from elaborating: a) how almost every video game can be understood to be political to some extent; b) how it is impossible not to do politics in games and how the intention to do so invariably leads to a certain (usually reactionary) kind of politics; and c) how much of a position of privilege it is not to ‘want’ to have to deal with politics (in games or in any other context).²
- 7 Beyond affirming that video games are, indeed, political, a focus on the *specific* dimensions in which they are also uncovers the cultural work that is done by such debates and discussions, which ultimately say less about video games themselves and more about the cultures in which these arguments become visible. In reference to the terminology proposed above, some video games might thus try to avoid politics in the ludic (e.g., choose a fantastic setting so that they do not have to make claims to present a particular historical period “accurately”) but cannot help but express ludic politics (e.g., in what and who they do and do not represent, and how exactly they do that visually, narratively, etc.)—and the discourse around such issues, the debate whether video games are political, then becomes part of the politics of the ludic.
- 8 Understood this way, the vast majority of video games emerge as potentially significant cultural artifacts to be examined for their entanglements with politics. For instance, in simulations such as *Populous* (1989), the *Civilization* series (1991-), or the *Democracy* series (2005-), players need to manipulate large in-game populations to maintain their (political or religious) power. Narrative-driven role-playing and first-person shooter

games ranging from *BioShock* (2007-) or *Fallout* (1997-) to the *Far Cry* (2004-) universe, on the other hand, situate players within game worlds shaped by the rise of populist factions and ask them to consider tough choices about supporting or undermining fictional uprisings or movements. Additionally, indie-game productions such as *Papers, Please* (2013) expose players to the daily consequences and (emotional and psychological) costs of restrictive policies against human migration while disabling them from the possibility to heroically alter the game world. As a medium, video games thus display a wide array of possible engagements with urgent political questions, necessitating a closer look from an American-studies perspective.

- 9 In order to tease out the complexities at the heart of this investment in the politicality of video games, the medium can conceptually and methodologically be understood as part of popular culture—which, as John Street argues, in turn “has to be understood as part of our politics” (4). Video games have become part of contemporary convergence cultures as they effectively combine narrative, audiovisual, haptic, and ludic elements all in one. In assuming this stance, we do not labor under the illusion that playing video games is not a highly personal practice. Indeed, in acknowledging the personal aspect of the ludic, we encounter a whole new terrain of understanding the political and the popular as they bring together the lived, the ludic, and the politically loaded. As popular products, video games are thus ensnared in political questions of identity, power, and representation. Moreover, they simultaneously reflect such discourses and are shaped by them. At the same time, video games get politicized as soon as they are marketed on this or that platform; regulated, censored, or promoted by this or that state apparatus; played, modified, and replayed by this or that gamer community; talked about by politicians; and so on. As Christopher A. Paul has pointed out, to analyze video games “requires reaching beyond the games themselves to examine how they are discussed by those who play them and those who *do not*” (99; emphasis added). Much can be gained, then, in understanding video games as part of (an always already political) popular culture, for instance in the similarities of discourses about politics in media like film or TV (cf., e.g., Zimmer and Leggett), and in analyzing video games as pop-cultural artifacts for their pleasures, their complexities and ambiguities, and their entanglement in capitalist market economics (cf. Jenkins et al.).
- 10 Furthermore, particularly in the present moment, this interplay of the popular and the political in video games is especially visible in the context of different incarnations and manifestations of populism. These may refer both to a “political populism” that “claim[s] that it represents the people” and to a “cultural populism” that alleges that “popular culture expresses the wishes and desires of the people” (Street 17). Conceived of as political, popular, and/or populist, video games can be understood to prompt player communities to explore the scope of their individual or collective experiences of the ludic as well as to emulate, question, and develop social practices and cultural norms within game environments that register ideological, political, and popular trends. On the one hand, as Ouellette and Thompson argue, playing can become “a surrogate and/or analog for citizenship” in the politically charged post-9/11 US culture (48). On the other hand, with the revival of populism around the globe in recent years, the popular increasingly connotes an authoritarian, anti-democratic, and anti-pluralist form of (identity) politics to pose similar questions about citizenship and belonging in American culture. In particular, the populist assertion to represent “the true interests of the people” functions as an assertion of popularity yet also envisions that “silent majority” in narrow and exclusionary forms. The surging academic interest in

populism in recent years (cf., e.g., Müller; Dietze and Roth; Weyland and Madrid) thus forms another promising angle to be connected to scholarship on video games as well.

- 11 In sum, agreeing with but also stepping beyond positions that endorse the cross-fertilization of video games and American studies, we contend that mapping their many exchanges through the lens of politics, popular culture, and populism is a particularly timely and, indeed, necessary inquiry. To analyze a game for its politics should not be something that can be “tacked on” to an existing analysis; instead, it should form the central conceptual anchor for many of our interests. In turn, not considering the politics of a particular game would risk misunderstanding its cultural significance and relevance.³ In this light, and as an inherently interdisciplinary field, it is certainly true that American studies and the diverse set of tools it provides in order to critically engage with the popular are particularly well-suited to exploring video games as popular mass-consumer products and as cultural artifacts that can simultaneously become sites of hegemony *and* of refuge from (or even resistance to) it. At the same time, as an interactive medium that builds on nonlinearity and spontaneity, video games productively challenge paradigms of cultural studies that are partially influential in American studies, for instance by questioning notions of (“active” or “passive”) consumption, dissolving strict separations between production and reception, and complicating our understanding of how certain pleasures may fuel popularity. Consequently, games can provide space for reflections on contemporary political, economic, and social dynamics and open novel inquiries into the study of American culture(s), including political and populist movements. As we make the case in this special issue, just as there are undeniable affinities between American popular culture, populism, and politics, similar links can be mapped through the lens of critical game studies.

In This Issue

- 12 As the following eight essays demonstrate in various ways, the present issue aims at exploring the confluence of politics, populism, and popular culture in video game cultures in order to sharpen our understanding of contemporary US culture and to map the interconnectedness of American studies and games in the commerce of disciplines and textualities. Each article uses slightly different understandings of politics and puts varying emphases on the different dimensions we outlined above—a conscious choice that we believe will highlight the productivity of understanding the nexus of politics, popular culture, and populism broadly and of bringing individual case studies into conversation with each other. The contributions in this issue therefore showcase the potential insights gained from studying video games and/in American studies by attending to the frictions at the heart of an industry that is at once uncomfortable with its political capacity and in denial of it. In effect, together, they shed light on what Muriel and Crawford identify as “video game culture, video games in culture, and video games as culture” (5).
- 13 Sascha Pöhlmann opens this special issue with his contribution on “Ludic Populism and Its Unpopular Subversion,” taking up many of the concerns we have outlined so far by tackling the question of what exactly we mean when we say that video games are political. He proposes a fruitful framework through which we can make sense of games as both political and populist, by analyzing how a game might imagine or construct the

notion of ‘the people’ as a unified, homogeneous group—or in how far it might resist or otherwise counter such a construction. Pöhlmann considers this line of inquiry in a number of genres, particularly in strategy games (like *Civilization V* and *Democracy 3*) and first-person shooters (among them *Just Cause 3* and *Far Cry 4*), some of which reveal populism’s profound vacuity, as it is emptied of the very “population,” the human demographics, on which it relies in order to promote its political views. His article thus both proposes a particular conceptualization of politicality in video games and probes into the ambiguities with which a number of AAA games comment on and at times work against their own imagination of “the people,” particularly via gameplay elements that amount to a ludic critique of populism.

- 14 From this wider take on what ludic populism and politics look like, we move to a number of case studies that investigate political questions in particular games. To begin, John Wills’s “‘Ain’t the American Dream Grand’: Satirical Play in Rockstar’s *Grand Theft Auto V*” examines the exceptionally popular and commercially successful fifth entry in the *GTA* series for the multiple ways in which it engages with the myth of the American Dream on the level of narrative. While Wills’s analysis examines the extent to which stories of the American Dream are always also political, the game further adds to this an explicit interest in providing social and political commentary and criticism of contemporary US culture. To scrutinize these dimensions, Wills employs the concept of “satirical play” to point out where, and how, in the game’s narrative and ludic elements satire and politics meet. Ultimately, his analysis reveals how *Grand Theft Auto V* features effective satirical criticism of especially US consumer culture while also undermining its own efforts through moments of ludonarrative dissonance and through gameplay elements that afford a type of capitalistic play that runs counter to the game’s narrative ambitions.
- 15 Next, Esther Wright discusses Rockstar’s other prominent franchise in her article “Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption*, and Narratives of ‘Progress.’” As games of the Western genre that are intrinsically bound up with the frontier myth, the *Red Dead Redemption* series, in Wright’s reading, peddles narratives of progress, development, and civilization. This becomes evident within the narrative worlds that the games evoke, yet going a step further, Wright also examines how Rockstar positions itself as a brand (and how it has accordingly marketed the *Red Dead Redemption* games) by building on progress and offering “authentic” as well as critical engagements with US history. While the company likes to stylize itself as progressive in this sense, its use of tropes of progress are invariably connected to the fraught history of colonialism and white supremacy—complications that neither the games’ narrative presentation nor the company’s marketing strategies seem to be fully aware of. Wright’s contribution thus points out how political questions woven into the games also appear in their paratextual material, demonstrating the eerie parallels between Rockstar’s efforts to evoke a particular story of the past within the games and the company’s attempts to fashion a narrative of its own brand history.
- 16 Sören Schoppmeier looks at another prominent AAA franchise by focusing on questions of race, history, and surveillance in his contribution “Legible Bodies and the Ghosts of American History: On Racialized Surveillance in Ubisoft’s *Watch Dogs* Videogames.” While technologies of surveillance are omnipresent in these games and have already been discussed in previous scholarship, Schoppmeier adds a key historical dimension by tracing the racialization of surveillance throughout US history in his study of *Watch*

Dogs. Through the lenses of critical race theory and science and technology studies, he establishes how intertwined the histories of race and surveillance are, which allows him to carefully scrutinize how these elements are featured in the games' plot, fictional worlds, visual presentation, and gameplay. Consequently, Schoppmeier points out how there is a kind of whitewashing at work in how the racialized aspects of (the history of) surveillance are often neglected in the games while, at the same time, they do feature characters that embody these very histories. The ambiguity with which matters of race are treated in the games is in line with other pop-cultural representations, and in this sense, Schoppmeier's analysis explores the ideological consequences of a publisher apparently trying to avoid politics by embracing "universalism" and "colorblindness."

- 17 Grappling with similar questions surrounding an alleged apoliticality in a mainstream title, Stefan Schubert's article "'Liberty for Androids!': Player Choice, Politics, and Populism in *Detroit: Become Human*" focuses on the interplay of race, agency, and populism. Schubert contextualizes the choices that players have to make while journeying through *Detroit: Become Human*'s fictional world as explicitly political ones, encouraging players to develop a "political" mindset when having to consider what they want their characters to do. However, because of the one-dimensional way in which the game imagines (both ludic and narrative) agency and, ringing back to Sascha Pöhlmann's article, how it engages in a populist understanding of "the people," it vastly reduces and misrepresents the complexities of these very matters. In addition, while science fiction is often an outwardly political genre, the whitewashed way in which the game handles matters of race in a speculative setting ultimately leads to reactionary politics rather than to an empathetic embrace of the struggles of a minority group that parts of the game's narrative seems to advocate for. Overall, going beyond the narrower focus of how this is handled in *Detroit: Become Human*, Schubert's contribution highlights how the fundamental ludic elements of choice and agency are indispensable points of contention in any political context.
- 18 Race is also a central focus in Michael Fuchs's article, yet in a very different genre: In "Livin' Da Dream? Playing Black, Illusions of Meritocracy, and Narrative Constraints in Sports Video Game Story Modes," Fuchs explores the career (or story) modes that have become popular in the majority of recent sports games, looking more closely at *Fight Night Champion*, *NBA 2K16*, and *Madden NFL 18* and *19*. In his reading, these modes' narratives perpetuate a notion of the American Dream that stresses that "anyone can make it" (in sports), regardless, in particular, of their skin color. In the games, however, players primarily play as African American characters, complicating this kind of post-racial utopianism—and even more so in cases when white players take control of these black characters. Fuchs critically interrogates the ideology of meritocracy that lies at the core of these imagined narratives and points to moments in which the highly linear stories that the career modes tell neglect or erase the systemic obstacles that black athletes face in the United States. In addition, the article highlights the ways in which the games' interactive elements add to the stories' efforts of pushing the myths of meritocracy, effectively forcing players to virtually perform them.
- 19 Extending this special issue's interest in the politics of video games beyond mainstream titles, Mahshid Mayar's contribution "Feasts of Indifference: Racialization, Affect, and Necropolitics in 1X War Games" looks at the complex of racialization, enmification, necropolitics, and ludic affect in indie and noncommercial games. Making sense of games like *September 12th* and *Muslim Massacre* as "1X war games" for their predominant

focus on only one of the central facets of 4X strategy games, that is, “exterminate,” Mayar contextualizes these games’ representational politics within the overall logic of “necropolitics.” Her analysis establishes how the two titles, while fundamentally different in both their mechanics and politics, both imagine the Muslim Other as the latest addition to an endless list of faceless, yet hyper-racialized, US enemies, both in and out of video games. Stepping closer to the dense interplay of racialization and necropolitics in the 1X gaming landscape, Mayar explores the lethal processes of racial enmification—what she calls a heedless feast of indifference—that hold true for both independent and big-budget games. While racialization through religion is rampant in US popular culture, Mayar’s analysis of how easily it maps onto digital games, even if their particular politics are very different, establishes a conceptual and theoretical frame of reference for ludic politics more generally.

- 20 Finally, Soraya Murray’s article “America is Dead. Long Live America! Political Affect in *Days Gone*” brings this special issue to a close. As Murray contends, in many ways, the postapocalyptic world that *Days Gone* imagines rests on evoking a number of political ideas that can be generalized as conservatively American, such as an embrace of self-reliance and libertarianism, and in these and a number of other regards, the game appears generic. However, Murray instead focuses on a nuanced exploration of what she calls political affect in the game, analyzing how it works as a projection screen for an imagination of US self-reliance and populism that speaks to the nationalistic turn the United States experienced during (and in the aftermaths of) the Trump presidency. The article partly uncovers these dimensions by reading the game’s depictions of landscape as ideological signifiers, yet it also uses insights from affect theory to grasp the ways in which *Days Gone* emanates a particular structure of feeling. In addition to an insightful reading of one specific game, Murray thus also implicitly contributes a particular methodology for “reading politics” in video games more generally, and especially through their affective dynamics, encapsulating this issue’s overall interest in the connections between video games, politics, and American studies.
- 21 Throughout the wealth of ideas and arguments proposed in these works, it is our hope that the readers of *EJAS*, whether interested in American studies, critical game studies, popular culture, or politics, will find the theoretical and methodological insights and the individual analyses put forward in the following articles inspiring. Ideally, brought together in the image of the joystick in the garden, the contributions to this special issue will also be seen as highlighting the many intersections among these at times separate areas of interest.

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NOTES

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2. As Soraya Murray notes in this context, “[e]ven the refusal to engage with identity is a privilege that only a particular segment of the population is able to sustain, through their perceived normativity” (46).
3. Embracing this point of view may also further invigorate the often still predominantly formalistic field of game studies (cf. Bogost).

AUTHORS

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