Patrick Jagoda and Jennifer Malkowski

Introduction: American Game Studies

In 2017, the American game designer Momo Pixel released the single-player, browser-based game *Hair Nah*. In this game, you play as Aeva, a Black woman taking trips to locations that include Osaka, Havana, and the Santa Monica Pier. As you move through levels on your journey—taking a taxi ride, traversing airport security, sitting on an airplane—you must slap away increasingly aggressive white hands that reach into the frame to touch your hair. Though *Hair Nah* taps into the genre of a casual button-mashing game, this interactive experience also explores the topic of microaggressions via unwanted hair touching. If you slap away enough hands on your travels, you reach a screen welcoming you to your destination with the message "YOU WIN!" but the caveat, "The game is over, but this experience isn't. This is an issue that black women face daily. So a note to those who do it STOP THAT SHIT."

How did video games move from a medium oriented toward adolescent male consumers and characterized by violent actions, such as shooting or fighting, to one that could also accommodate a playfully serious and cathartic exploration of a Black woman defending herself against racist bodily intrusions? Though video games still privilege violent mechanics and are far from diverse, especially in terms of designers and developers in the industry, the early twenty-first century has seen an expansion of the form of, and the culture surrounding, games. This has included a proliferation of game genres: puzzle-platformers (hybrids that combine spatial or cognitive puzzles with jumps across platforms as in *Super Mario Bros.* [Nintendo, 1983]); survival horror games (action-adventure games in which the player must persist in a threatening environment without adequate resources);

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time loop games (games that repeat a set period of time and encourage experimentation in the mode of the film *Groundhog Day* [Harold Ramis, 1993]); battle royale games (online multiplayer games in which players explore and gather resources while striving to be the final survivor), etc. And beyond entertainment, the variety of audiences addressed by digital games becomes apparent through terms such as *artgames*, *indie games*, *serious games*, *casual games*, *gamification*, *citizen science games*, and *esports*. Gradually, video games have also foregrounded the experiences of people of color, queer and trans folks, and other marginalized creators. Overall, video games have gone from their peripheral position as fun experiments created by mostly white, male, and cis computer engineers on machines intended for military and academic applications, to novelty arcade machines that might appear at pizza parlors, to an enormous worldwide industry that has surpassed the book, film, and music industries, now including an estimated 3 billion gamers worldwide (Newzoo 2021).

While the United States is no longer the top video game market (China is), it has played an important part in the emergence, imagining, and culture of games, especially video games. This special issue explores the intersection of two academic fields: game studies and American studies. In preparing this special issue, we as coeditors have sought to explore the contributions of American studies—its methods, its worldview—to the interdisciplinary constellation of game studies through essays that pull from both of these fields. In preparing its introduction, we attempt to speak to multiple audiences, most especially readers of *American Literature* who may be new to game studies and scholars of game studies who may be new to this journal or the field of American studies. Ahead, we begin with some writing on game studies' evolution that seeks to introduce this area of inquiry to readers in the former group, and to frame our particular perspective on it for readers in the latter group. Our second section looks more closely at the "American" in American studies and in this issue's heuristic category of "American game studies." Finally, we conclude by previewing and framing the seven essays ahead.

"Versus": A Brief History of Game Studies, a Fruitfully Combative Field

While game studies is among the youngest academic disciplines and most visibly focuses on video games, the lineage of intellectual engagement with games is longer and broader than the formal field's short history might indicate. A social interest in games—as metaphors, forms, and applied tools—dates back to such coordinates as

nineteenth-century Prussian war games or *Kriegsspiel*, mid-twentieth-century research in economic game theory and American wargaming simulations during the Cold War, and the emergence of the serious games movement with Clark C. Abt's book *Serious Games* (1970). An interest in games and play was already a feature of early work in computer science following World War II, including Claude E. Shannon's important paper "Programming a Computer for Playing Chess" (1949) and Alan Turing's (1950) "imitation game" concept that became central to artificial intelligence research. In the social sciences, games were a central organizing principle in classic books such as Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's cultural history of play *Homo Ludens* (1938), sociologist Roger Caillois's formalist study *Man, Play and Games* (1961), and Marshall McLuhan's media studies classic *Understanding Media* (1964), which includes a chapter about games and culture. Finally, games have played a central role in the humanities and the arts. Analog games were key to some of the most important concepts in twentieth-century critical theory, including Sigmund Freud's (1920) "fort-da" game, Clifford Geertz's (1973) "deep play," and Jacques Derrida's (1966) "free play." Similarly, games have influenced twentieth-century art movements, including the Situationist International's use of "play" as a guiding principle and the Fluxus collective's creation of actual games and "events scores," as in the work of artists such as George Maciunas, Yoko Ono, and Ben Patterson.

For all of these precursors, the interdisciplinary field of game studies, with an emphasis on video games, did not begin to emerge until the 1990s and 2000s—about four decades after the creation of the earliest (noncommercial) video games in the 1950s and about two decades after the rise of the commercial industry with the arcade era and the first wave of console gaming in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Game studies grew out of a vibrant cultural studies that had been expanding for several decades and the simultaneous advent of new media studies. Key institutional development occurred during this period, including the beginning of games-specific journals, such as *Board Game Studies* (1998) and *Game Studies* (2001), as well as the establishment of organizations, such as the Digital Games Research Association (2003) and Games for Change (2004).

As a fledgling field, game studies began with a debate, which arguably became more of a foundational myth than the divisive intellectual showdown it is often misremembered to have been. Nevertheless, this alleged rift signals competing energies that shaped the field early on and previews the approximately decennial schisms that would continue to structure it. All academic fields weather periods of sharp

ideological disputes—ranging in tone from collegial disagreements to blood feuds—but it feels as if there is something special about the way these have defined game studies. Perhaps our chosen objects of inquiry reflect our natural penchant for competitive, often-binary contests (as in the fighting game genre, early games like *Spacewar!* [1962, Steve Russell] and *Pong* [1972, Atari], and resonant with the medium's Cold War origins). But if that is the case, then our frequent engagement with such contests as *play* may cast our skirmishes in a different light and set us up to learn well from our opponents, ultimately strengthening both sides. Game studies—seen through the lens of its performances of competition, whether serious or playful—can function as a metagame.

This first debate's groundwork was laid through some of the earliest humanistic writing focused on games and its origins in fields such as theater and performance studies and literary studies; it included Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* (1991), Janet H. Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997), and Espen J. Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997). Each of these important works began with a focus on the formalistic properties and poetics of computational and interactive works, including video games. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, numerous scholars—such as Markku Eskelinen (2001), Gonzalo Frasca (2003), and Jesper Juul (1998)—sought to define game studies as its own field. In distinction to the scholarship of Laurel, Murray, and Aarseth, which they characterized as *narratology* and saw as inflected by literary criticism, these writers posited a new field of *ludology*. This field deemphasized concepts derived from print literature or theatrical performance in favor of a medium-specific vocabulary for games. Terms such as *rules*, *mechanics*, *challenges*, and *objectives* dominated over analysis of *narrative*, *character*, or *text*. Though ludology attended to all games, there was a growing interest in digital games during this period, including the precise aesthetic qualities of digital works. This focus on the newer media of computer games and video games, which was shared by narratologists, included attention to a game's procedural dynamics, navigable spaces, elements of participatory play, possibilities for dynamic decision-making, and more.

Though the narratology versus ludology debate looms largest in game studies, other schisms in the field followed, mapping new possibilities in terms of both methods and research areas. An important methodological divide that crystallized in the 2000s was that between *proceduralism* and *anti-proceduralism* (or *play-centrism*). On the one

hand, proceduralism, as introduced by Murray and elaborated by Ian Bogost (2007), focuses on the ways that games use rules and algorithmic processes to communicate meanings. In a formalistic mode, proceduralism asks scholars to analyze games via the systems that constitute games—interrelated and changeable components such as rules; objectives; textual, visual, or audio information; and mechanics—and often reveal their underlying ideologies. On the other hand, anti-proceduralism or play-centrism, as elaborated by scholars such as Miguel Sicart (2011), focuses on how players play games instead of on the games themselves. From this perspective, player experience and experimentation, as it manifests in culture, matters more than the underlying code or structure of a game. Though Sicart characterizes this as a disagreement, both proceduralist and play-centric scholarship have introduced a greater range of methods to game studies.

With the emergence of anti-proceduralism, we see the binary debates of the field productively pushing game studies to follow the path of other disciplines in the arts and humanities, such as literary studies or film studies: to expand from a hyperfocus on The Text to a more substantive engagement with its larger context. Anti-proceduralism called for an examination of the range of audience experiences of games—notably the commercial entertainment medium most likely to produce radically different experiences of the same text, because of its highly interactive and variable, often multiplayer, nature. In turn, a strong current of industry studies emerged within the discipline to examine the material and commercial context of games' production and consumption. Work on esports has delved into the organized and highly monetized world of gaming competition. And a critical mass of scholars has engaged with the vast universe of video game paratexts online, researching everything from fan subcultures of specific franchises to game-based art to the booming business of livestreaming one's own gameplay via platforms like Twitch.

The retreading of other disciplines' intellectual paths occurred again in the 2010s when a new debate came to the fore, carrying with it shadows of game studies' previous narratology versus ludology rift. The 2010s divide was between computational and representational approaches to game studies. A computational approach unfolded through subfields such as code, software, and platform studies that attended to the technical dimensions of video games by writers such as Nick Montfort and Bogost (2009), and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (2009). The approach made a sometimes-implicit, sometimes-explicit claim about what aspects of games were most important (hardware, software)

and what type of knowledge and training scholars should possess to optimally study video games (computational). A representational approach—which sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly positioned itself against the computational—sought a larger platform for questions about identity (including across lines of race, gender, sexuality, and class) and representation, in games themselves and in the industries and cultures that produce and contain them. This latter approach has been adopted by numerous scholars including Shira Chess (2020), Mia Consalvo (2012), Anna Everett (2009), Tara Fickle (2019), Kishonna L. Gray (2020), Patrick Jagoda (2020), Carly A. Kocurek (2015), Soraya Murray (2018), Lisa Nakamura (2002), Laine Nooney (2013), Adrienne Shaw (2015), Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm (2017), Christopher B. Patterson (2020), Amanda Phillips (2020), and Bo Ruberg (2019). As with other fields before it, game studies was now being called to examine the inclusions and exclusions at work not only in its texts but also within the academic discipline itself, and to see the familiar ways these have privileged white men as characters, players, and scholars. At the same time, those doing computational work pushed researchers interested in representation to stay accountable to the medium-specificity of video games, to acquire new knowledge and skills enabling that approach, and, in the process, to discover new implications of how representation works in this computational medium. Once again, the field's cyclical return to binary contests was far from a zero-sum game, advancing research in complex ways and in multiple directions.

To be clear, even as there are genuine disagreements in game studies, they might be conceptualized at best as organizing heuristics and at worst as oversimplifications. Some of the most compelling scholarship within game studies today is not so clear cut. There are scholars who have analyzed games with balanced and interanimating approaches to narrative and gameplay, procedure and play, and technical and representational dimensions—including scholars listed above as emblematizing only one side of a debate. More than many other fields, game studies encourages ongoing discussions between theorists and designers, formalists and historians, and empiricists and artists who approach games from different perspectives. Even as polemics and differences persist, game studies in the early 2020s has become a more vibrant field that attends to the political dimensions of ludic forms, as well as the ways that games reproduce, animate, and challenge patterns within broader cultures.

Why "American" Game Studies?

In exploring "American game studies" in 2022, this volume emerges in the long wake of the structuring binaries we have outlined in game studies' history, and our contributors demonstrate the generative influence of the field's periodic schisms. By pairing game studies with American studies in this special issue, we hoped to gather work from an already interdisciplinary field (game studies) inflected with the broad methodological sweep of another arguably even more interdisciplinary field (American studies). The intention is not to claim games as originally, essentially, or primarily "American," whether specific to the United States or more capaciously understood according to transnational approaches. Instead, this special issue is an experiment that brings together the methods and orientations of two fields that have often intersected only in implicit ways. In relation to game studies, we find especially important American studies' strong lineages to and from cultural studies, critical race and ethnic studies, Asian American studies, Black studies, Indigenous studies, Latinx studies, gender studies, queer studies, disability studies, and transnational theory—many of which appear in force in the essays that follow. Through a grounding in American studies, we wanted to draw on the aggressive heterogeneity and creativity of this field—its penchant for expansive, rather than divisive, thinking.

Like game studies, American studies has its own history/mythology of epic schisms, including the foundational "text versus context" rift in its midcentury youth. Leo Marx (1999: 40), an early influence in the field during this period, reflects on this rift with useful implications for game studies:

> [In the 1950s] practitioners of New Criticism were seen—and saw themselves—as specialists in precise textual analysis . . . whereas the Americanists were known as practitioners of the contextual (or historicist) approach . . . Text versus context: the extent, seriousness, and comprehensiveness of this archetypal division was then—still is—oversimplified and exaggerated. Nonetheless, the close formalist study of texts as if they had an autonomous existence . . . was greatly enlightening to apprentice Americanists. But of course there was no reason, logical or pedagogical, to assume that such a formalist method was irreconcilable with the study of the interplay between literary works and their social and cultural contexts.

"Text versus context" parallels "narratology versus ludology"—not in a direct analogy of terms but in the anxieties that scholars trained in

earlier disciplines often bring to the formation of new ones. Those moments of formation are characterized by fundamental questions: Whose training matters most? What established methodology best applies? The interdisciplinary growing pains align whether it is literature and theater scholars facing off with computer scientists about how to write about *Tomb Raider* (1996, Core Design) or New Criticism's practitioners of close reading disagreeing with cultural historians on the ideal methodological approach to analyzing a Jonathan Edwards sermon. Alongside such similarities in field debates, there are also notable differences between the disciplinary histories of American studies and game studies. For example, the fields have seen varied approaches to national divides. Though game studies has been US-centric in a number of ways, it has never introduced the type of sharp divide that persisted, for several decades, between American and British literature in English departments.

As Marx notes, text and context are stronger when coexisting and synthesizing in a field's scholarship—and so it became in American studies, even as text and context's earlier clash inflated into legend. This has been true of the binary terms of game studies' debates, as well. American studies today, from our vantage and in an ideal form, favors an intellectual climate where such debates do not resolve with one side "winning" and dominating future discourse. Rather the field has supported the proliferation of multiple branches of inquiry—intermingling, in their best versions, as they mature. We admire this inclusive approach and we see it on display, in an exemplary manner, in our contributors' writing for this special issue.

The most troubled concept in the history of American studies is the "American" itself and the notion of this category as internally coherent and inherently significant. Haunted by a Cold War ethos of American exceptionalism and a tendency toward US-centrism within the broader category of America, the field nuanced this titular term in the late twentieth century through anti-racist, feminist, queer, Indigenous, and working-class critiques of its previous conception of "American" and through a sharp turn toward a more transnational approach (Radway 1999; Fisher Fishkin 2005). American studies' current best practices of questioning US-centrism and framing US works in a transnational context are deeply appropriate to game studies, as the United States is not the global leader in video game development, manufacture, or consumption—in contrast to some other popular culture industries. For example, some of the earliest and most successful video game hardware and software developers were Japanese,

including Nintendo, Sega, Konami, Namco (later Bandai Namco), and Square Co. (later Square Enix). And since 2010, the Asia-Pacific region has produced the most revenue for the industry (47 percent in 2017 compared to 13 percent from the United States), with mainland China as the medium's biggest profit center (Prato, Feijoo, and Simon 2014; Patterson 2020: 7). As Patterson (2020: cover copy) argues, video games are "an inherently Asian commodity: its hardware is assembled in Asia; its most talented e-sports players are of Asian origin; Nintendo, Sony, and Sega have defined and dominated the genre."

Interestingly, many video game players in the United States likely have little sense that their nation does not, in fact, broadly dominate the market and culture of the medium, because video games' national origins are often purposefully obscured. Game studios all over the world use localization processes to tailor their finished products for different national markets. Localization largely happens through translating on-screen text and re-recording speech in the target country's language, but it can also involve removing images or thematic elements that violate that country's laws or cultural mores. And so, many games developed in the industry hub of Japan, for example, will have shed the most obvious markers of their Japanese origins by the time a US player is starting them up, mouse or controller or phone in hand (games in the *Mario* franchise [1981–present, Nintendo] may be the most familiar example). Comparing video games to another popular entertainment industry, film, in this context illustrates the psychological and cultural impact of localization. Filmgoers in the United States seeing a live-action film produced outside of the United States will usually get many indications of its foreign origin—first and foremost a spoken language other than English with subtitles or dubbing, or at least performers speaking differently accented English (saving, perhaps, some Canadian productions). Less common in film (though somewhat common in television) is the medium's more invasive version of localization: the full-on US remake. So when a given filmgoer's annual movie consumption includes, say, 95 percent movies with English spoken in American accents, that filmgoer has an accurate sense that their film consumption is US-dominated (though they may miss the way US studios' big-budget releases are no longer really made for the United States, catering more than ever to the more lucrative international market). Not so for the US gamer, who may be unknowingly immersed in content from Japan, England, Poland, Australia, and other leading centers for development.

In the years to come, a growing and increasingly transnational video game culture is likely to complicate persisting assumptions about a US-centric video game industry. It is our intention, then, to frame "American game studies" here not as an unexamined default for game studies, but as a site in this issue of purposeful, culturally specific, and transnationally expanded inquiry that draws on American studies' methods.

An Essay Itinerary

This special issue of *American Literature* explores the intersections of American and game studies through a range of literary, historical, and cultural works, but primarily through a careful medium-specific and cultural attention to video games. The collected essays raise larger questions that include the following: How does game studies contribute to an expanded understanding of the United States, the Americas, and American interactions around the world? What role do games play in nation building and perceptions of national and border cultures? How do categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability influence the work of game designers and players in our time? How have representations in video games shaped broader American discourses about identity, especially in the early twenty-first century? How is worldbuilding in games influenced by racialized national imaginaries? How does attention to genres such as visual novels reveal a US-centrism that ignores the substantial production and consumption of video games across Asia? How do historical methods and historiographical approaches help us analyze video games that attempt to produce counterhistories of marginalized peoples? How have games grappled or failed to grapple with America's colonial and genocidal history relative to Indigenous peoples?

We begin with an essay that directly tackles the aforementioned positions of America and Asia in video game industries and cultures: Christopher B. Patterson's "Making Queer Asiatic Worlds: Performance and Racial Interaction in North American Visual Novels." Patterson concentrates on what he defines as a deeply "Asiatic" video game genre, the visual novel: text- and characterization-heavy interactive digital narratives, with a prominent history of erotic content and, generally, a manga/anime visual aesthetic. Patterson uses this genre to expose the binary of Asia and America in relation to video games as limiting and illusory. Making the case that "transpacific game studies" is essential to navigating this largely Asian/American hybrid medium,

Patterson examines the potential of Asiatic visual novels produced in North America to do reparative cultural work. These games aspire to create queer and anti-racist worlds, but they do so unevenly in a manner that maps onto the racial identities of their creators, with queer Asian/American designer Brianna Lei's *Butterfly Soup* (2017) as best realizing the genre's utopic promise. This game is read against *Doki Doki Literature Club* (2017, Dan Salvato), *Analogue: A Hate Story* (2012, Christine Love), and *Heaven Will Be Mine* (2018, Aevee Bee). As Patterson aptly puts it, "If games make the boundaries of Asia and America irrelevant, visual novels explore this irrelevance through Asiatic *irreverence*."

From the recent ludic imagining of queer and anti-racist utopias, Bo Ruberg pulls us back several decades to a more harrowing period of queer history with "The Mystery of the Missing AIDS Crisis: A Comparative Reading of *Caper in the Castro* and *Murder on Main Street*." Struck by the seeming absence of HIV/AIDS from video games, despite the AIDS crisis coinciding with a period of booming game development, Ruberg takes a magnifying glass to 1988's *Caper in the Castro* (C. M. Ralph)—often recognized as the first LGBTQ video game—and its "straight" remake *Murder on Main Street* (1989, C. M. Ralph). Their investigation deftly reveals the absent presence of HIV/AIDS in *both* versions of this point-and-click detective game. Asking on one level if the AIDS crisis was really missing from video game representations in the 1980s and 1990s, Ruberg is also asking: has the AIDS crisis, and its ties to the queer community, been a persistent influence on games as a medium, despite the rarity of its explicit depiction? And more broadly still: in what ways do seemingly absent cultural topics haunt video games more subtly?

While Ruberg looks for the AIDS crisis in game history, Josef Nguyen expresses relief that a certain gay character did not appear. In "Reconsidering Lost Opportunities for Diverse Representation," Nguyen closely examines an offhand statement from game producer David Mullich about his *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* (1995, Cyberdreams Interactive Entertainment). Mullich recalled in a 2012 interview that in adapting *I Have No Mouth* from a 1967 Harlan Ellison story, the development team erased the backstory of one character, Benny, and may have thus created, "a lost opportunity to write a story about someone struggling with the challenges of being homosexual." To really spin out the "contingent possibility" of representation that this statement (and, indeed, this genre of "lost opportunity" statements) evokes, Nguyen journeys analytically through fan studies,

Deleuzian theory, speculative fiction studies, and queer game studies. Productive detours through the production and reception history of *Tomb Raider* and through Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) bring readers back to *I Have No Mouth* powerfully and ask them to think more deeply about the often-insidious implications of regret or longing for these "lost opportunities for diverse representation" in early game history.

From the lost histories and foreclosures of representation in games under neoliberalism in Ruberg and Nguyen's essays, we turn to an even earlier history of games in American economic game theory, which precedes the emergence of video games. In "The Game Theory of Sex," Arthur Z. Wang considers the role of game metaphors and forms across US society. Specifically, this essay focuses on the relationship between economic game theory and sexual game metaphors in American culture that occur in self-help books, song lyrics, and other types of cultural works. The essay does not engage in a mere application of game theory to sex or to relationality, an analytical move that economics itself might engage in, but instead it constructs a cultural history that is organized through game form. As a central aesthetic case, Wang focuses on Lydia Davis's economic microfictions, such as the story "Go Away" (1997), as game theoretical models that operate via modes such as fictionality, antinarrativity, and self-fulfilling prophecy. The essay proposes that the cultural history of sexual games might contribute to a fuller account of the connections between game theory and contemporary gamification that make games a component of business, education, health, job training, and other domains.

With "Authentic-Deconstructionist Games and Tragic Historiography in *Assassin's Creed III*," Stephen Joyce steers our issue toward the first in a pair of formative moments in American history, as rendered through twenty-first-century video games. Joyce focuses on the 2012 installment of Ubisoft's bestselling *Assassin's Creed* franchise, a series that offers historical fiction narratives from settings that include the twelfth-century Holy Land, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, and the eighteenth-century Caribbean. *Assassin's Creed III* focuses on the American Revolution. Joyce argues that this game belongs to an "authentic-deconstructionist genre" that explores the ways in which historical knowledge is constructed. In particular, this essay attends to the narrative of an Indigenous protagonist who attempts to defend his tribe from white settlers. The positioning of this narrative within a broader story of national origins undermines its historiographic accomplishment. Nevertheless, Joyce argues that the game and its

downloadable content (DLC) expansions have succeeded in eliciting generative conversations and critical responses regarding the role of Indigenous people during the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Katrina Marks moves us chronologically forward with "'My Whole Life I've Been on the Run': Fugitivity as a Postracial Trope in *Red Dead Redemption 2*." Marks analyzes the titular western game, which had the second most profitable launch of any video game (second only to *Grand Theft Auto V* [2013, Rockstar North]), earning $725 million in its first three days and, as of early 2021, exceeding 36 million units sold (Parijat 2021). Marks turns to critical race and ethnic studies for the concept of "fugitivity," which describes legal and geographic dimensions of policing that surveil, constrain, and endanger racially othered bodies. The essay attends to the narrative, spatial, and kinesthetic qualities of the video game in order to argue that the player becomes aligned with racialized others through a fugitive relationship to space. Despite various representational shortcomings, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018, Rockstar Games) operates as a complex interactive work that invites a player to interrogate the rhetoric and logics of postracialism.

Marks attends to space, mapping, the United States' expanding national borders, and the figures within those borders who are accepted or deemed fugitive. These thematic concerns set the stage for our final essay, Gary Kafer's "Gaming Borders: The Rhetorics of Gamification and National Belonging in *Papers, Please*." Kafer writes expansively about the subgenre of border games, considering the ways in which they bolster or challenge the concepts of borders and national belonging by rendering these through game structure and mechanics. The essay centers on close reading of the most emblematic border game, the disturbing and experimental indie classic *Papers, Please* (2013, Lucas Pope), in which the player takes on the tedious and high-stakes work of a border control agent checking documents. Kafer rhetorically pairs two states of flow: the flow of bodies through borders and the achievement of a flow state in gaming (one that may feel unsettling to attain in *Papers, Please* for players who oppose the ethos of state racism endemic to border security). Moving off-screen, Kafer weaves in the "gamification" of actual border control procedures in the United States. Ultimately, Kafer reveals the key element video games introduce that can offer sharp new insight into the operation and the idea of borders: failure.

Rather than suggesting a unified field of American game studies, this issue seeks to foreground present-day developments at this established intersection and to proliferate new possibilities for the future of

the field. Moving across numerous genres—including visual novels, point-and-click games, AAA blockbuster games from major publishers, and smaller experimental games—the issue showcases the formal range of video games, as well as the wide applicability of methods in and around American studies—including transpacific studies, queer historiography, cultural history, critical race and ethnic studies, and border studies—to all corners of the medium. These genres and approaches are far from exhaustive. For example, game studies has much more to say about genres such as platformers or first-person shooters, phenomena such as citizen science games or esports, and major platforms such as mobile or Twitch livestreaming. Games and video games now encompass a far greater field of possibility than they did in their inaugural decades. Even so, our goal in this issue is to create new bridges between fields that have been in conversation, but would benefit from more intentional and precise connections.

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Jennifer Malkowski is associate professor of film and media studies at Smith College. They are the author of *Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary* (2017), the coeditor of *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (2017), and the coeditor of the book series *Power Play: Games, Politics, Culture* (Duke University Press). Their work has also been published in *Cinema Journal*, *Jump Cut*, *Film Quarterly*, and the edited collections *Unwatchable* and *Queers in American Popular Culture*.

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