Tara Fickle
Christopher B. Patterson

Introduction

Asia / Games \ America

In the opening sketch of *Saturday Night Live* on October 25, 2019, host and musical guest Chance the Rapper reprised his role as "Laz," a basketball reporter asked to cover unfamiliar sports: in this case, a video game tournament.[1] The sketch finds Laz baffled by the *League of Legends* esport he witnesses, having mistakenly assumed it "was going to be a basketball game with NBA legends. This is . . . not that" (figure I.1). The SNL audience, too, is meant to share Laz's disbelief not only that playing video games can be considered a sport but also that anyone would actually want to watch and report on it. Nearly breaking character and erupting into laughter, Laz quips, "I did not know this was a thing. I guess esports is what white and Asian kids have been doing while Black kids were inventing hip-hop." After being surprised by yet another unfamiliar sight—a "geeky" Asian esports player (played by Bowen Yang) relentlessly pursued by a group of admiring "e-girls"—Laz says, his face in shock, "what I just saw was so unexpected that my brain went into a Tom Hanks in *Saving Private Ryan* mode." After

I.1. Chance the Rapper as "Laz," on *Saturday Night Live*. Image courtesy of NBC.

a wakeful headshake, he then deadpans: "Lazlo Holmes, coming to you live from the upside down."

We begin with this offbeat anecdote of Black and Asian pop cultural dynamics as a means of playing with and exploring how game worlds appear to the "real world"—in particular, through the "upside-down" depiction of Asian male esports stars and the "e-girls" (a sometimes derogatory term aimed at female gamers) who desire them. During a period of escalating Cold War political tensions and ongoing racisms against Asians as robotic, geeky, economic aggressors, the game world that might see esports players as objects of heterosexual desire certainly can appear upside down (even more upside down in this case, as the actor playing the esports star, Bowen Yang, publicly identifies as gay). Whereas in a previous skit, Laz appeared baffled by the rules of hockey, where he saw "lots of white dudes on skates running into each other at full speed," here it is less the game itself that confuses Laz than the nerdiness, bizarreness, and foreignness of the culture surrounding it. Hence, Laz refuses to read the esports players' names aloud and derides the tournament as "League of Legos."

In seeing esports as an "upside-down" world, the *Saturday Night Live* sketch humorously encapsulates the tangle of social anxieties, affects, and political meanings that video games represent as a medium often represented through Asian racializations. The skit's association of "white and Asian kids" with video games and "Black kids" with "inventing hip-hop" reestablishes the "normal world" of devalued Asian masculinity (and serves

as a self-referential joke, considering Chance's own hip-hop success). The skit places front and center the imagined associations of video games not only as a "white and Asian" cultural practice, but as an invention comparable to the association of "Black kids" and the invention of hip-hop, both recent global medias produced through transnational routes—in the case of video games, the transpacific flows between "Asian kids" in Asia and "white kids" in America. Figured as both "model minorities" and "forever foreigners," Asian American racializations trace the tangled flows that video games represent. Chance, a successful rapper himself, reiterates tropes about Asian Americans as "honorary whites," yet in doing so he also points to how the emergence of gaming technology and game cultures has been made possible by material and imperial routes across the transpacific, creating hybrid and transnational forms of play, community, and spectatorship. Embedded within his remark is a point about racial privilege—about which groups have better widespread access to technology, to computers, to digital literacies, and to the means necessary to play games in the first place.[2] As Mary Yu Danico and Linda Trinh Vo have shown, gaming cultures among youth often respond to a lack of acceptance in "real sports," pushing Asian American youth to foster alternative communities in PC rooms, arcades, and online forums.[3] Though Black youth have remained visible in some esports (particularly in fighting game communities), Chance's sketch-breaking line, "I guess esports is what white and Asian kids have been doing while Black kids were inventing hip-hop," still delivers an unsettling truth nested within his Black masculine bravado: that the divergent pathways of youthful play route some racialized communities into physical and traditional sports, and others into the mental and futuristic realm of esports.

If video games are the terrain on which esports is played, then the perceived merging of nerdiness with foreignness marks the culture of video games as itself a blend of Asia and America, a mixture that invokes at least three racial anxieties: (1) the economic and affective anxieties of "yellow peril," (2) the disgust and disdain for racial mixture, miscegenation, and fetish, and (3) the privilege and power of new media technology as limited to particular populations in North America, alongside the exploitation and unfreedoms of many who manufacture and program such technology in Asia (an oft-overlooked piece of the puzzle that is likewise absent in the sketch). The world of gaming thus feels upside down not merely because it turns Asian geeks into desired celebrities, but because its logics expose and thus threaten the normalized racial boundaries of Asia and America. The upside-down world

of games displays the anxieties that have defined the Asia/America geopolitical relationship since at least the end of the nineteenth century: the fear of an America invaded by, indebted to, mixed with, and mastered by Asians, whose gamelike advantage has always been depicted through technological and gamelike prowess.

Made in Asia/America is the first edited collection to explore this upside-down world, the way its logics, flows, and intimate relations orbit the social anxieties and racializations of Asia/America. By recognizing the various ways that Asia, America, and games have been historically entangled, this collection sees games as not merely reflecting or refracting given national racializations but also offering other ways of imagining otherness; hence, games can help us understand the racial and geopolitical assumptions that are present when we talk about Asia, America, and Asian America. This collection's contributors explore the medium of games through the rich and historical transpacific intimacies that video games trace. If the connection between video games and Asia/America resembles a world that is upside down, then how might these relations invert, expose, or exceed our own racial, gendered, and national gravity?

We deliberately speak of "Asia/America" rather than "Asia and America" or "Asian America," using the solidus to signal how games slide along elements of Asia, America, and Asian America through what David Palumbo-Liu calls a "dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement."[4] We also strategically use the term to unsettle zero-sum logics of place—which would insist that any globally circulating product is either "Made in Asia" or "Made in America"—and to emphasize the dynamic transpacific processes whereby games are "made": as a function of labor and of "nonhuman" resource production, bearing the traces of imperial history as pursuits of intellectual creative classes, and as artifacts and conduits of ideology. We also hope to recognize how our worlds are often made through the effects of narrative, history, art, and indeed, games. While narratives *about* games can make gaming into a pathologizing practice, games themselves make games into practices of interaction and self-reflection. In writing about performance art, Dorinne Kondo argues that being conscious of "making" helps both creators and scholars understand world making (rather than worldbuilding) as acts of transformation that affect our material world. For Kondo, world making "is always collaborative, in relation with other people, abstract forces, objects, and materials that are themselves imbued with potentiality."[5] This emphasis on making rather than building has also become popular among independent game designers, who

often prefer to be called "game makers" rather than game programmers or game designers as a way to highlight the many creative roles of game making and to disrupt "the production paradigms of the larger game industry."[6] In centering how games are made and where games come from, we ultimately mean to explore how video games make and remake our communities, our selves, and our worlds.

Video Games Have Always Been Asian/American

Since the unexpected rise of Japanese arcade games like *Space Invaders* (1978), *Pac-Man* (1980), and *Donkey Kong* (1981), and the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System (which debuted in the United States in 1985), video games have been associated with Japanese media products rooted in post–World War II Japanese aesthetics. Since this time, Asia as a whole has become the manufacturing home for video game hardware, the primary site of e-waste disposal in the never-ending cycle of innovation and obsolescence, the center of game innovation and the birthplace of most game genres, and the largest reliable resource of consumers. Today, nearly half of all game players reside in Asia. South Korea remains the capital of esports, and Asian and Asian North American players are some of its best-known stars. In game development, South and East Asian employees are well represented in certain sectors of Silicon Valley (but not, as we discuss in our designer roundtables, as industry creatives) and in outsourced game production sites across Asia. And, providing the narrative grist of these material nexuses, games have been central to the racialization of Asians, as early Chinese immigrants to the United States in the late 1800s were cast as gambling addicts, and stereotypes of Asian inscrutability in characters like Charlie Chan or Fu Manchu often presumed that Asians were cold, calculating, and strategic foreign entities who saw the world itself as a game to be won.

The history of Asian/American racialization offers fundamental but contradictory discourses about Asians as simultaneously hypercompetitive and unplayful, as "cheaters" and uncreative rule-followers, offering both models and warnings of what games can do. The immediate association of Asian/Americans with gaming cultures has bred new forms of techno-orientalism, which, as David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu point out, involves "imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse."[7] Intertwined with these paradoxical

discourses of Asian racializations in and around games are notions of games as gateways for non-Asians to enter a "digital Asia" whose aesthetics and forms are firmly intertwined with Japanese gaming industries, thus allowing non-Asian subjects to inhabit "Asianness" as a form of virtual identity tourism.[8] Indeed, some of the most influential theoretical work in game studies hails from Asian and Asian Americanist scholarship: Lisa Nakamura on "virtual tourism," "cybertypes," and the "gamic model minority"; Wendy Chun on the (white) "console cowboy" who exercises "control" over (Asian) media, Koichi Iwabuchi on Japanese companies seeking to neutralize the "cultural odor" of their exported products (the process whereby Japanese games are rendered into both global *and* local commodities), and more.[9] In our previous books, we built off the work of these scholars to see games as a "ludo-orientalist" medium, as Tara wrote, "wherein the design, marketing, and rhetoric of games shape how Asians as well as East-West relations are imagined,"[10] and as an "Asiatic" medium, as Chris wrote, to characterize games for their "forms, spaces, and personages that many players will find similar to Asia, but that are never exclusively Asian, or are obscured from any other recognizable racial genre."[11] Following the ideas and conversations of our previous work, this collection engages in the labor, as many collections do, of recognizing and bringing together a transdisciplinary field that has thus far felt scattered and diffuse.

Given the proliferation in games of so many racial stereotypes and fantasies, *Made in Asia/America* considers whether the shift to a digital, interactive medium—the transition from "stereotypes" to "cybertypes," or "orientalism" to "techno-orientalism"[12]—has constituted a novel phenomenon or is simply further evidence of how, as Nakamura pointed out in 1995, racial thinking is easily encoded into digital media through its supposed absence.[13] As a "strategy of representational containment," orientalism clearly continues to shape the production and reception of "exotic" game settings and characters.[14] It provides the aesthetic template for combining, as Souvik Mukherjee points out in this collection, the "misty" with the "mystical," and a retrograde cast of endlessly recycled samurai, ninjas, and geisha girls alongside a handful of more "empowered" yet hypersexualized female fighters; hordes of nonplayer character (NPC) "natives"; and, as Takeo Rivera writes in this collection, Asian sidekicks who function as "adjacent" in ways that have long shaped Asian/Americans' perceived proximate or "honorary" relationship to whiteness.[15]

The association of the digital itself with East Asianness—what Wendy Chun dubs "high-tech orientalism"—has become such a staple of science fiction media that even when Asians are not directly represented, their racial forms remain starkly visible in settings (as in *Blade Runner*) and in Eastern spiritualist tropes (as in *Star Wars*). In video games, yellow peril stereotypes and caricatures peaceably coexist alongside model minority ones and are often present without direct representation of Asian bodies but emerge through settings, mechanics, and game logics.[16] So, too, such racializations are often disguised because they don't reference or name Asian bodies, countries, or spaces directly but, rather, reference racial difference through digital objects, aesthetic forms, and Asiatic styles. When they are explicitly present, Asian racializations are further obscured in games as they connote positive rather than negative feelings of pleasure, fun, silliness, cuteness, and masculine heroism. Yet anti-Asian racialization has often been entangled with positive feelings, what Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan in 1972 famously called "racist love,"[17] a term that Leslie Bow revisited in 2021 to explore "how the Asian American reduction to type masquerades as racial knowledge while operating as a fetishistic pleasure."[18] As Bow and many Asian American authors stress, racist love does not necessarily read as anti-Asian (and can even be voiced as "pro-Asian"), yet it still builds from and perpetuates a virulent antagonism against peoples from Asia through typing, commodifying, fetishizing, and foreignizing. Finally, familiar racialized narratives about Asians continue to circulate in discourses *about* games, including assumptions about Asian bodies' dexterity and singular affinity for gaming—what Todd Harper and Tripathy in this volume call the "myth of Asian Hands." To state that "video games have always been Asian/American" or that they are "Made in Asia/America" is not a claim to ownership but a refusal of the ways games and games discourses have obscured, erased, and distracted from the racializations that have been ever present within them.

As we discuss with the twenty Asian/American game designers in this volume's roundtables, discourses of game players and designers additionally re-present familiar racialized dynamics of Asian invisibility and hypervisibility, wherein, as Dean Chan wrote in 2009, Asian/American workers in games industries are "both hyper-visible and out of sight."[19] As has long been the case with the US census and other national data, Asian Americans are simply disregarded as statistically insignificant in most quantitative and qualitative research on video game play patterns.[20] However, the few sources

that do take up Asian American play suggest that Asian Americans are the *most likely* to play video games, and, like Black and Latin/x groups, remain overrepresented as players, but underrepresented as designers.[21] Many of the Asian/American designers and artists in this volume speak to the way that white supremacies in the US gaming industry are evidenced through the presumed association of Asians with programming work rather than narrative or other "creative" forms of design. The designers in this collection, situated in places like Shanghai, Manila, and Hawai'i, provide insights on the multiple ways games are racialized within a range of geopolitical contexts, even as they remind us that, on a global scale, only 25 percent of the global game market is in North America, while about half remains in Asia.[22] Whether we are talking about the international or the domestic context, we agree with games scholar Adrienne Shaw that representation (in the liberal multiculturalist sense of pluralism and diversity) should not be our primary yardstick for evaluating games, as it too often flattens the complex relationships between representation and other factors that shape audience reception and player motivation.[23] Many of our designers, for example, speak to the way that the North American and European game industry has in recent years sought to appeal to the CJK (China, Japan, and Korea) player base through a very different set of racial tropes and narratives that exceed traditional US rubrics for "good" and "bad" representations.

While Asianness has been omnipresent yet obscured in the ways that games are made, innovated on, and played, it has remained nearly invisible in academic game studies discourses. Asianness in games has remained, as Rachael Hutchinson argues in this collection, the elephant in game studies conference rooms, and those who wish to discuss Asianness in games (as we've experienced in multiple venues) often find themselves the spoilsport of the game studies magic circle. As one Asian American conference attendee put it to us, "Asian fetishes are the social lubricant that has allowed game studies to flourish." The erasure of Asianness vis-à-vis eroticization, and the friction it produces, feel especially apropos for an academic field that is absorbed in ideas of pleasure and play. Similarly, if we understand games as an Asiatic media, they too position players (as well as games scholars) within an analogous position of implicit domination, sovereignty, and agency over techno-orientalized worlds. To win a game can thus follow a similar logic of understanding, analyzing, and theorizing a game: the ability to master an Asian technological space. Given that, as Tan Hoang Nguyen writes, Asian/American subjects (specifically men) are already culturally relegated to a

"bottom position" in an East/West hierarchy, the positioning of North Americans as the playing subjects who desire and extract pleasure from Asiatic media reinforces the way that games, as Nguyen emphasizes of sexually explicit material more broadly, "are instrumental in shaping how we think about what is normal, natural, and possible."[24] In game studies, this naturalized—and *de*sexualized—intellectual form of subjection is evident when scholars write about games that have gone through laborious processes of translation, localization, and remarketing for North American audiences as if they are simply universal (i.e., Western) products whose historical origins and context are in need of little more than parenthetical acknowledgment, *or* when a particular game's Asia–North America relations are denied as having anything to do with colonialism, orientalism, or other structures of power.

The problem we trace in this collection is not just that the "cultural odorlessness" that Iwabuchi identified in Japanese products has been overwhelmingly successful in "deodorizing" games of their creative and manufacturing origins, but that game scholars rarely even consider Asian/American theorists of popular culture like Iwabuchi, Hiroki Azuma, Chen Kuan-hsing, or Christine Yano as relevant to their studies.[25] While this indifference is certainly not exclusive to game studies, it exercises an especially troubling form of epistemic violence in a field entrusted with studying video games, an Asiatic cultural phenomenon that has become a dominating force in reflecting transpacific geopolitics and in shaping Asian/American racializations.[26] In game studies discourses where Asianness has become nearly meaningless and Asian/American theorists irrelevant, orientalist readings of games frequently blur with the orientalism of the games themselves.[27] For the writers and designers in this collection, the forms of Asian racializations in games deserve to be seen as complex and dynamic expressions that can reveal the continuous colonial biases and violences embedded within North American and European game audiences. As Souvik Mukherjee writes in this collection, such racializations have been reproduced within specific contexts in Asia—and at times are even self-orientalized/internalized as a secondary marketing technique.

The ahistorical emptying out of Asianness in many game cultures is inextricable from the circulation of global capital in a neoliberal age. Yet the point that many of our contributors compellingly drive home is that this absence must be understood also as a racial issue, not epiphenomenal to but constitutive of such flows. As Naoko Shibusawa has argued, including histories of Asian racialization in studies of racial capitalism is crucial for

"an understanding of US labor and immigration history, and history of US empire—particularly the master's tool of capitalist divide-and-conquer."[28] Similarly, micha cárdenas has urged scholars to "decolonize the digital by understanding the communicative capacities of digital technologies as an outcome of the settler colonial socioeconomic support structure of the United States."[29] Video games have emerged as a powerful node at this intersection between the need to revisit histories of empire in Asia and the need to decolonize the digital. In the next section, we tackle the persistent issue of empire, race, and colonialism in game studies, and subsequent attempts to combat it, by noting the looping insularity of the field in the way that video games, masked as they are as commodities made *for* us (the academic Global North "us," as well as the "US" of the United States), are ultimately made and remade through game studies as being *about* us.

Playing with Ourselves: On Game Studies

The meat of this book was written and edited during the anti-Asian rhetorics of COVID-19, when we were both engaged in virtual book tours for our previous books on video games, often presenting them together. As we felt the blunt mechanisms of yellow peril discourse through everyday invocations and on every news source, we also felt its background hum within game studies spaces, as we witnessed scholars engage with media from Asia as if they had been created solely for English-speaking, North American, majority-white audiences. Our attempts to root out these issues publicly was often met with suspicion and disregard, and the virtual chats during our book talks, on more than one occasion, became spaces of masked ridicule. Difficult as these engagements were, they also helped us in understanding the presumptions that many games studies scholars bring to what a game studies book is supposed to do: that game studies texts are ultimately *about* games and how we play them, and that games are exceptional forms of media, so that to do game studies is ultimately not to do literary studies, new media studies, critical ethnic studies, or other disciplinary modes.

The protective attitudes we faced during our book talks were rooted in game studies before video games even came along. The "founding fathers" of modern game studies, Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) and French sociologist Roger Caillois (1913–78), characterized games by naming their boundaries: games were playful rather than serious; had "no material interest"; and were

further divided from the social and political world through a "magic circle."[30] Similarly, Bernard Suits's foundational game studies text, *The Grasshopper* (1978), has been revisited in game studies to define "a game" by naming its negation as erotic play, so that the pleasures, passions, and desires in games could not be confused with sexual pleasures and erotic desires.[31] In the 1990s and early 2000s, game studies scholars would go even further in the enclosure of games by naming *video games* as a particularly novel and exceptional media unlike games found in poetry, parlors, stagecraft, and sports (all games that Huizinga and Caillois wrote about). In turn, scholars focusing on the social impacts of games (Lisa Nakamura, Henry Jenkins, and others) were overshadowed by an insular debate within game studies itself, known today as *the narratology/ludology debate*, which centered on the underwhelming binary question "Are video games more narrative (like books, films, television), or more ludic (like games and sports)?" However, the greatest impact of the narratology/ludology debates was not in their disagreements about what games are (narratives vs. games), or how to study them (humanities vs. social sciences), but in their implicit *agreements* about the importance of the debates itself: that deciding what video games *are* is of paramount importance, that games in themselves are exceptional either because they give "player agency" (says narratology) or because they offer virtual spaces outside politics and identity (says ludology). Seen as the founding discursive argument of game studies, the narratology/ludology debate can be characterized as a binary rivalry that calcified the insular inquiries of game studies while also obscuring this insularity through the appearance of competing sides.

In the 2010s, game studies began a second life, where its discourses turned toward a critical cultural studies mode that spotlighted difference in the field while revealing how game studies texts had featured a consistent reinscription of a default whiteness, straightness, and maleness as ideal players, characters, and creative designers.[32] Many of these thinkers' works became spotlighted during and after the #GamerGate scandals in 2014, when feminist game journalists were attacked, harassed, and doxed by self-identified gamers in response to a perceived contamination of video games by feminists and other "social justice warriors." As Soraya Murray has argued, #GamerGate was a "paradigmatic irruption" of the hidden identity politics within gaming (as the territory of men).[33] The afterlife of #GamerGate has, though, for good reason, drawn many game studies discourses further inward in attempts to understand how the toxicity of #GamerGate drew on dominant academic discourses of games as exceptional media outside the "petty politics" of identity, representation,

colonialism, and feminism.[34] Our previous work has contributed to this conversation by joining other scholars in focusing on the problem(atic)s of the field, and in demonstrating the forms of ahistoricity that the field perpetuates by theorizing play as a universal and transhistorical phenomenon.[35]

At the time of writing, many anthologies and books have made fantastic headway in terms of critical cultural studies (*Gaming at the Edge*, *On Video Games*), racial and social justice (*Gaming Representation*, *Woke Gaming*), queerness (*Queer Game Studies*, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*), and eco-criticism (*Playing Nature*). Despite these boundary-breaking texts, game studies has yet to be recognized as a theoretically generative field that can offer new frameworks for understanding trenchant and urgent issues like the carceral state, refugee migrations, settler colonial logics, or permanent war, and the study of games rarely appears in texts situated in media studies, ethnic studies, or other interdisciplinary fields.[36] Though we can partially blame this absence on the stigmatization of games as violent and adolescent objects, we also find that defensive positions and insular debates in games studies have kept the study of video games far more concerned with the game industry and gaming cultures than in understanding the incredible and often unseen impact of games across the globe.[37] The fact that the narratology/ludology debate has been so field-defining for game studies *and* that nearly all our colleagues outside game studies have never even heard of this debate should be all the impetus we need to reimagine how we study games, why we do it, and who our studies are for.

On Practice: Interaction

If game studies is a field itself defined by a medium so closely tied to Asia in its innovations, player base, and manufacturing, then any collection spotlighting these relations must not only refuse the calls toward formal, political, and geographical boundaries, but, like Kirby sucking in a bad guy, must be able to create something new with every encounter, must be able to reform and expand, must allow new forms of interaction. In curating and organizing this collection, we thus sought to answer the inescapable questions "What is a video game?" or "What is play?" not with universalizing definitions (or what Eve Sedgwick might call "strong theories") but through the insistence on an editorial practice that invites *interaction*. While terms like *collaboration* and *coalition* are usually associated with building desired outcomes (political move-

ments, communities), we find ourselves attracted to interaction as a curatorial and editorial practice due to its ambiguity and ambivalence concerning exactly *what* we make together. Like the excitement and hesitancy we might feel when starting up a new video game, interaction as praxis can feel ambiguous and ambivalent, creative and curious, voyaging and wayward. As a form of *making* rather than *building*, interaction ventures into risk and anarchy rather than preplanned blueprints or algorithms (to use micha cárdenas's sense of algorithmic analysis as a political artistic practice).[38] Put simply, this collection takes up the challenge of no longer using games to write *about* games but to instead seek out what games *make*, to explore how game making is also world making.

Our use of interaction is inspired by video games as a form of interactive media that, according to Adrienne Shaw, can stage communal, enjoyable, and even intimate activities that also "[do] not necessitate identification."[39] Interaction is not about seeing others as political allies or as tools for a particular and timely issue (as useful and important as this is) but about feeling the responsibility of being in relation with others. In games, interaction is less about the end results and more about the (pedagogical) experience: it is the chime noise we make when we approach another player in *Journey*; it is the attack we make on a dungeon with three random teammates (any of whom could rush in early or suddenly go afk [away from keyboard]); it is getting cornered by an opponent and not knowing whether they will shoot you, spare you, squat you, or break out in dance. It is in these gamic senses of curious play that we see the interactions of our project as ultimately a crucial form of acting with and on the world. In interaction, political aims, analytic methods, and keyword definitions are not methodically controlled, but invoke unforeseeable frictions and generate new frameworks for our gathering, thereby inviting multiple publics into the world we make together. As Dorinne Kondo writes of the theater, interactivity can be world making through the copresence of "affecting and being affected by each other," though it can also lead to the uncertain outcomes of "forming temporary communities" or "exclusionary affective violence."[40] Through its ambiguity, interactivity challenges the normative approaches of identity, empathy, or deference, which risk, as the poet Solmaz Sharif eloquently puts it, "the absolute and unhindered continuance of what is."[41] Instead, interactivity risks the possibility of change: the strengthening, dismantling, and transitioning into something new.

During the four years we worked on this collection (2019–23), we sought to practice interaction in our roles as writers, editors, curators, and organizers.

First, we wrote the call for papers in a way that refused the insular looping back to well-trodden and often orientalist theorizations of play by asking our potential contributors to explore more relational inquiries, such as:

- How do games combat facile discussions of racial and other forms of diversity, discourses that are key to justifying and sustaining forms of inequality that radiate beyond the domestic to the global, and that hence are also questions of empire?
- How do we make arguments about games that expose imperial networks and build on antiracist projects without merely demanding more representation/inclusion from game companies who have historically and continually participated in networks of empire and racialization?
- How do we see meritocratic myths of gaming as anonymous level playing fields within what C. L. R. James called the historical boundaries and lines of colonial and radical sportsmanship?[42]
- How might the lines that limn the experimental play of magic circles reframe our understanding of academic (discip)lines, cultural line(age)s, and, of course, color lines?

We have anchored these inquiries through traditions in critical race and ethnic studies that draw attention to racial difference in forms of representation as well as in the formal resemblances of race, as ludic qualities of racial form,[43] or as "Asiatic" and "virtual other."[44] Indeed, we seek to center Asia/America in this study not by dividing race in games from the fetishizations of code, algorithm, and platform but by allowing these ideas to change our work so we can better understand formal, mechanical, and other resemblances of difference at work in games.

Second, during our feedback and editorial sessions, we challenged our contributors not to follow the conventions of an individual scholarly chapter with long essays that sought to capture a subfield for new readers. Instead, we advocated for short chapters (less than six thousand words) to allow space for a greater diversity of ideas and contexts. We then encouraged contributors to read each other's work so that chapters built on each other and also provided comparisons to better distinguish their diversity of theoretical standpoints, their positions within academia (as graduate students, and as junior, midcareer, and senior scholars), their types of game analyses, and their disciplinary conventions (almost none of them come from an Asian American studies or game studies department). We also encouraged contributors not to envision their

chapters as necessarily academic in the sense of emphasizing an argument and providing proof for it. Instead, we encouraged playful experimentation and argumentative shifts, yielding essays like Edmond Y. Chang's "Gaming while Asian" (chapter 1), a chapter that merges academic writing with auto-theory within a "choose your own adventure" interactive story. We also sought to disrupt our own positions of authority as the collection's editors by asking for feedback from our contributors for this very introduction, while this collection's coda was not even planned in the first full draft but was inspired by our readings of the chapters and particularly by roundtable 5. In a sense, our editorial efforts attempted to produce this book as interaction manifest.

Third, we sought to disrupt the insularity of game studies by inviting a diverse array of game makers into the collection who identified as Asian/North American and as marginalized (as neurodiverse, queer, transgender, or nonbinary; as Indigenous, mixed white, Latinx, and Arab; as lacking formal education; as non–Native English–speaking; and as living outside North America). We hosted five roundtables of four game makers each, and sought to understand the textured, global understandings of race depicted in many of their games. We conducted these roundtables over Zoom in the spring of 2021, during a global pandemic, when the playful space of games provided opportunities to reflect on the increasingly serious (and increasingly anti-Asian) world punctuated by unexpected moments of connection and community, in many cases facilitated by video games. When finished, we decided not to bunch these roundtables into a separate section of the book but instead to use them as framing devices to begin each section, as we hoped to break the reader out of a consistent disciplinary context by hearing the experiences of game makers whose own contexts vary widely (Tokyo, New York, Hawai'i, Hong Kong, Toronto, Shanghai, Manila, Houston). The roundtables thus operate less as guided interviews and more as spaces of interactive play, seen by Ian Bogost as a space that "guarantees neither meaningful expression nor meaningful persuasion, but it sets the stage for both."[45] By introducing each set of chapters, these roundtables blur the lines between guest and host, interviewer and interviewee, researcher and participant, game scholar and game maker (many of our contributors, like us, are both), and set the stage for our understanding of games through interactive conversations among Asian/American peoples.

Finally, we have attempted to practice deep, critical interactions by organizing and hosting an ongoing panel series at the annual Association

of Asian American Studies conference (AAAS), an enriching critical ethnic studies space that has unfortunately had little concern for gaming as a medium. In 2018, we hosted the first-ever panel focused on game studies at AAAS, which featured one editor (Chris) alongside three of the contributors to this volume (Takeo Rivera, Miyoko Conley, Edmond Chang). We had a very small audience, yet those who came expressed gratitude to us for hosting such a rarely explored theme in Asian American studies. We followed this up year after year, interacting with more scholars featured in this collection (Rachael Hutchinson, Haneul Lee, Huan He, Gerald A. Voorhees, Anthony Dominguez), as well as game makers (Robert Yang, Marina Kittaka). By bringing together these scholars and game makers year after year, we were able to deepen our engagement with them and with each other, offering discussions, feedback, and collaborative plans to create a collection that can span and expand what an edited collection can do. The results were not only in this collection, but in events outside academia, such as the 2021 #StopAsianHateJam Game Jam organized on itch.io by Chris and the contributors Mike Ren Yi, Pamela Punzalan, and Melos Han Tani.

Our decision to build an anthology on the concept of Asian/American gaming was a daunting endeavor, as we hoped to avoid merely providing a synthesis of the fields of Asian American studies and game studies, but rather to reflect the multiple interests, disciplines, and publics that our contributors bring to this work. Often this meant disagreements about what games are or what they do, or what Asian Americans are or what they do. Together, these chapters don't represent a particular set of racialized bodies or an "authentic" or stable "Asian American gamer" subjectivity, or even a common set of game definitions, analytics, or play practices. Rather, the interactions that form this book reveal what Kandice Chuh might call the necessary tracing of processes of racialization, where Asia/America marks not an identity within the American empowerment empire but a historically contested and dynamic site that can offer various interactive, coalitional, and collaborative gestures.[46] By signaling an unconstrained, nonregulated form of diversity, interaction acknowledges our reliance on others not as objects of study but as contaminants that change our own views. As Anna Tsing writes, such contamination can signal not death or degradation, but a "transformation through encounter" that threatens the impulses to remain "self-contained."[47] Chandan Reddy similarly argues that analyses of race can bring a "genuine openness" to traditional methods of producing knowledge, and can refuse nationalist and institutional racial discourses through an ambiguity that is

also "an effect of being contaminated."[48] We thus see interaction as a form of ambiguous contamination that can keep fields like game studies critical, animated, broad, and impactful.

Without interaction, discourses tend to become self-contained. Influenced by critical thinkers of race and empire, this book seeks not to close off lanes of identity or borders of nationality, but to leave ourselves open to encounter, to embrace the receptivity of our Asian/American positions, and to become contaminated by the intimacies, frictions, turbulences, and erotics of working through and beside difference. In other words, rather than attempt to restabilize studies of games with solid ground, this collection embraces the upside-down quirkiness of games that can overturn our everyday categories of race, nation, queerness, and Asia America itself.

Overview of Chapters

> The experience we call a game is created by the interaction between different rules, but the rules themselves aren't the game, the interaction is!
> —Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Video Game Zinesters*

Our interactive approach to editing this collection has led us to understand games as contested sites where meanings of Asia and America are negotiated and produced, a view that scholars in our anthology develop from the interdisciplinary foundations of Asian American studies, Asian studies, transpacific studies, gender studies, cinema studies, and postcolonial studies. In this gamelike setup, the conventions of these fields provide the rules that stage our interactions. Each chapter not only considers games and Asia/America but also pushes at the very boundaries and definitions of both by focusing on how games reimagine otherness through examples of personal relations to games (Chang), Blerd (Black and nerd) cultures (Dominguez), the human-animal ontologies of visual novels (Conley), the biracial representations of empire (Moore), the forms of ludic protests under pandemic (Lee), and many more.

Part 1, "Gaming Orientalism," works to enhance and expand the frameworks of Asian American studies and game studies to produce new theoretical variations, focusing on forms of (techno-)orientalism (Chang), "Asiatic" queerness (Patterson), and "Model Minority Mediation" (Rivera). The section opens with an eclectic roundtable featuring Minh Le, the creator of

Counter-Strike; the games writer Matthew Seiji Burns; the fighting game champion Patrick Miller; and the indie game maker Emperatriz Ung. Our discussion asks how games, despite their lack of Asian American representation, operate as hybrid Asian/American aesthetic and mechanical products that allow Asian Americans themselves to feel at home in gaming. In the proceeding chapter, "Gaming while Asian," Edmond Chang revisits these points through a "choose your own adventure" style, welcoming the reader to game the chapter itself as a way to "inhabit the possible and imagine the impossible." Christopher B. Patterson's "The Asiatic and the Anti-Asian Pandemic: On *Paradise Killer*" considers the meanings and impacts of his previously coined term "the Asiatic" during the COVID-19 pandemic, when discourses of Asian people were becoming far more serious than playful and anti-Asian violence had risen in some contexts to seemingly unprecedented levels. The section ends with Takeo Rivera's "Asian, Adjacent: Utopian Longing and Model Minority Mediation in *Disco Elysium*," which focuses on the character Kim Kitsuragi, who, as "Asian, adjacent," does not represent a particular ethnic background but performs as a "model minority superego to a whiteness characterized principally by failure and ruin."

Part 2, "Playable Bodies," follows the first section of theoretical framing with a focus on queered experiences of bodies within video games, within game making, and in the processes of manufacture. It begins with a roundtable that features the game makers Naomi Clark (creator of *Consentacle*), Sisi Jiang (creator of *LIONKILLER*), Domini Gee (creator of *Camera Anima*), and Toby Đỗ (creator of *Grass Mud Horse*), who discuss racial representation in games from the perspective of the North American industry, noting how pernicious racist stereotypes of Asians as "below-the-line" rather than "creative" workers get exacerbated by racist presumptions of Asian American designers' perpetual foreignness and their connection to a monolithic Asian "mothership." The chapters follow this conversation by considering how bodies appear in games and games discourses as geopolitical entities. Keita Moore's chapter, "Playable Deniability: Biracial Representation and the Politics of Play in *Metal Gear Solid*," considers how the biracialism of *Metal Gear Solid*'s "Solid Snake" provides an Asian American representation that blunts critiques of global militarism by depicting Japan as a space entirely set apart "from the conflicts of the Cold War and Pax Americana." Thereafter, Yasheng She's "Designing the Global Body: Japan's Postwar Modernity in *Death Stranding*," considers the white body of Sam in the 2019 game *Death Stranding* as it moves through sublime postapocalyptic (and

ostensibly American) atmospheres, as well as its "fidgety movements" that, through the Asiatic medium of this Japanese-designed game, objectifies the American white body "as a mechanical marvel." Finally, Prabhash Ranjan Tripathy's "The Trophy called 'Asian Hands': On the Mythical Proficiency of Asian Gamers" follows the discourse of "Asian hands" as it circulates within fighting game communities as "trophies, something to be possessed only via defeating," and as codifying the (white) Western player not as mere "hands" but as creative force.

Part 3, "Localizing Empire," widens the issues of the body to consider space and regional histories, exploring how games, as an entertainment media that emerged during the Cold War, were made possible by manufacturing routes that include extractive mining in Africa, processing factories in Malaysia and southern China, and innovations in Japan. The section begins with a conversation among designers who work and/or focus on "non-American" contexts: Joe Yizhou Xu in Shanghai, Paraluman (Luna) Javier in Manila, Christian Kealoha Miller in Hilo, Hawai'i, and Lien B. Tran, who develops games aimed at audiences in the Global South. The chapters that follow ask how games can be reread to reveal how empire, capitalism, and racialization operate in seemingly "odorless" or apolitical games. Rachael Hutchinson's "Colonial Moments in Japanese Video Games: A Multidirectional Perspective" insists that theories and histories of Japan are crucial to understanding games, not only because the country is a central producer/creator but also because of its "double colonial legacy" as a colonial power in Asia and as a neocolony (or a subempire) of the United States after World War II. Similarly, Souvik Mukherjee's "The Video Game Version of the Indian Subcontinent: The Exotic and the Colonized" asks how "local" South Asian games from India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka have responded to categories of "Global South" and "Third World" even as they have gone "largely unheeded in the global discourses on videogames." Finally, Gerald Voorhees and Matthew Jungsuk Howard's "High-Tech Orientalism in Play: Performing South Koreanness in Esports" refocuses theories of techno-orientalism from China and Japan to South Korea to explore how South Korean Asian masculinity has been reconceived as a fetishized object, one that emanates from the neoliberal masculinities of esports.

Part 4, "Inhabiting the Asiatic," responds to many of the previous sections' critiques by considering the ways players and game makers inhabit Asiatic medias to transform, parody, and queer the traditional and imperial conventions of games and dominant gaming cultures. It opens with the game

makers Robert Yang (creator of *Radiator 2*), Dietrich Squinkifer (Squinky) (creator of *Dominique Pamplemousse*), Rachel Li (creator of *Hot Pot for One*), and Marina Ayano Kittaka (cocreator of *Even the Ocean*), who reflect on games as opportunities to simulate, or alternately render "unplayable," experiences of disorientation, alienation, and marginalization, especially in regard to racial, queer, and trans elements of play. The chapters that follow continue these inquiries of proximity to and reinhabitations of Asianness. Huan He's "Chinese/Cheating: Procedural Racism in Battle Royale Shooters" traces the racial associations between video game hacking and Chineseness as "part of a longer sociohistorical legacy of Asiatic hacking." Rather than reject cheating as a form of play (or nonplay), He considers "Chinese cheating" as an analytic to understand how cheaters are figured as players unable "to be contained by the virtual borders of any specific game or genre." The next two chapters explore the genre of visual novels, which are ineluctably tethered to aesthetics of anime and are read as Japanese cultural products. Miyoko Conley's "Romancing the Night Away: Queering Animate Hierarchies in *Hatoful Boyfriend* and *Tusks*," considers English-language dating simulations as a parodic form of queer game design to "illustrate how tightly woven race, sexuality, and representations of non-humans are in determining which lives are considered more valuable." Similarly, Sarah Christina Ganzon's "The Fujoshi Trophy and Ridiculously Hot Men: Otome Games and Postfeminist Sensibilities," focuses on romantic visual novels (*otome* games) by exploring how their creators and their fandoms repurpose ("localize," "deterritorialize," or "transcreate") these games to create and contain "postfeminist sensibilities unique to the cultural contexts of their places of origin."

The final section—part 5, "Mobilizing Machines"—continues to understand the Asia/America spectrum within its implicit political and historical separations rooted in histories of militarism, tech, and artistry, and attempts to catalogue the ways that games have not only sought to understand our world, but to make new worlds. The opening roundtable brings together game makers who discuss the social and political impacts of games centered on particular geopolitical and racialized frictions, especially in local acts of protest and community-building. It features Mike Ren Yi (creator of *Yellow Face*), Melos Han-Tani (creator of *All Our Asias*), Yuxin Gao (creator of *Out for Delivery*), and Pamela Punzalan (creator of *Asian Acceptance*). Anthony Dominguez's "Hip-Hop and Fighting Games: Locating the Blerd between New York and Japan" documents the historical rise of Team Spooky, a game stream group who cultivated Blerd (Black and nerd) cultures through community

tournament gatherings of Japanese fighting games within Manhattan's Chinatown Fair Arcade. In so doing, Team Spooky highlights the synthesis of New York City's hip-hop culture, Japanese otaku culture, and the spaces of Chinatown, made possible through "the fusion of physical and digital spaces." Finally, moving from New York to Hong Kong, Haneul Lee's "'This Is What We Do': Hong Kong Protests in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*" catalogues the use of the game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* by Hong Kong protestors during the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak. As Hong Kong media often portrayed protestors as specters of violence, the *kawaii* styles and group settings of *Animal Crossing* allowed protestors to reinvent online space "to perform various modes of protest sheltering from real-life clashes with the Hong Kong riot police," where "antistate activities can exist unsuppressed." Our coda, "Role / Play \ Race," concludes the book by speculating on the world-making potentials of games in providing new ways of understanding race—not just race in games, but in our everyday. We thus conclude the collection by making a case for the study of games based not on the massive economic potential of the industry or the similarly boundless potential of the medium but on understanding games as an inherently political site where race, alongside other configurations of difference and power, is *made* and *remade* through play.

This collection's conception began with conversations that, like much of our previously published work, focused on the construction of identities like "Asian American" or "gamer" within a ludic logic of "games of representation" (following on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Mark Chiang). In our original call for papers for this collection, we asked writers to show how games could expose the way Asian American identity often names something inessential, rather than a particular authentic or stable subject. However, we soon found that this argument was already of no surprise to Asian American game studies scholars or game makers, and merely provided a reliable rule-set for our interactive engagements to produce ever-expansive ideas about how race and identity are not merely revealed by games but are made anew and push the ways we imagine ourselves. Games make such imagining possible through the affordances of their imagined magic circles—a contested term that for us describes not how games help us escape from "reality" but, rather, how games help us challenge "the real" itself as a magic circle where logics of race and space are taken for granted *as* real. Rather, the real games of race and representation, like the real games of colonization and empire-building (remember that a key stage of British and Russian empire-building in Asia was referred to as the Great Game), do not take place only

when one is "away from keyboard"; they are embedded in all our practices of interactive play. Thus, too, can "the real" be transformed through such play practices. Games trace the social and political anxieties hidden within our play—and so allow us to understand, and work to transform, the racializations of our times.

Notes

1 *Saturday Night Live*, "E-Sports Reporter—SNL."

2 For more on sports and race, we recommend James, *Beyond a Boundary*; Guttmann, *Games and Empires*; and Uperesa, *Gridiron Capital*.

3 Danico and Vo, "'No Lattes Here.'"

4 Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 1.

5 Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 54.

6 Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, 25.

7 Roh, Huang, and Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," 2. Although only one chapter of the 2015 influential *Techno-Orientalism* anthology focused on games—Choe and Kim's influential "Never Stop Playing"—the editors recognized that techno-orientalism was especially resonant in games and other "new media" where "the Asian subject is perceived to be, simultaneously, producer (as cheapened labor), designer (as innovators), and fluent consumer (as subjects that are "one" with the apparatus)" (14).

8 See Nakamura, "Race in/for Cyberspace"; and Goto-Jones, "Playing with Being in Digital Asia."

9 Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 18; Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*.

10 Fickle, *The Race Card*, 3.

11 Patterson, *Open World Empire*, 58.

12 We have chosen not to capitalize *orientalism* because the capitalization suggests a particular culture, region, nation, or state.

13 Nakamura, "Race in/for Cyberspace."

14 Roh, Huang, and Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," 3.

15 For more on this proximity to whiteness, see Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?*

16 The yellow peril stereotype, which first emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a response to Asian (specifically Chinese) labor immigration, characterized Asians as a menacing, consuming, hyperefficient horde. The model minority stereotype, most often associated with the post–World War II years, reworked this logic of unparalleled economic success as attributive of cultural and even genetic traits such as work ethic, meekness, frugality, an affinity for math, etc.

17 Chin and Chan, "Racist Love."

18 Bow, *Racist Love*, 7.

19 D. Chan, "Being Played."

20 Duggan, "Public Debates about Gaming and Gamers."

21 Nielsen, "How Diverse Are Video Gamers," states, "Asian-Americans are even more likely to game (81%), leading all other races and ethnicities; African-Americans are the next most likely (71%)."

22 "Video Game Industry Statistics."

23 Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*.

24 T. H. Nguyen, *A View from the Bottom*, 3.

25 Iwabuchi defines "odorless" or *mukokuseki* as "literally meaning 'something or someone lacking any nationality,' but also implying the erasure of racial or ethnic characteristics or a context" (*Recentering Globalization*, 28).

26 K.-H. Chen's *Asia as Method*, for example, critiques Western theory for seeing Asian scholars as informers rather than theorists.

27 In their 2014 anthology, *Gaming Cultures and Place in Asia-Pacific*, Larissa Hjorth and Dean Chan emphasize that, like Asia/America, "Asia-Pacific" functions as a "geo-political and economic construct" that has the potential to carve out sufficient imaginative space, and thus "any nuanced study of Asia-Pacific game cultures has the capacity to also disrupt and serve as a critique of the residual Techno-Orientalism in many Western approaches" (1).

28 Shibusawa, "Where Is the Reciprocity?," 270.

29 cárdenas, *Poetic Operations*, 16.

30 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 10. Though both Huizinga's and Caillois's texts themselves did not seem opposed to readings of games as impactful on social and political life, game studies discourses have often interpreted them as such. As Fickle writes in *The Race Card*, both Huizinga and Caillois considered the value and novelty of their work "in their assertion that play served a 'cultural' function" (114).

31 Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 42. For more on this critique of Suits, see Patterson, *Open World Empire*, 14.

32 In 2010, Adrienne Shaw criticized games studies for its lack of critical engagement and argued for a "critical cultural study of games" that compelled game scholars to adopt cultural studies modes of critical engagement and reflexivity. See Shaw, "What Is Video Game Culture?"

33 S. Murray, *On Video Games*, 39.

34 Jodi Byrd has argued that game studies has unwittingly contributed to cultural events like #GamerGate in its separations between the "domain of serious and legitimate scholars as opposed to the low theory cultural dabblers who read games as texts" ("Beast of America," 606).

35 See Fickle, *The Race Card*, chap. 4.

36 While works by McKenzie Wark, Alexander Galloway, Colin Milburn, Alenda Chang, and others have attempted to break theoretical ground well outside game studies, their (as well as our own) work on games rarely seems to circulate outside games studies discourses.

37 As Penix-Tadsen (bringing together voices of Thomas Apperley and Chakrabarti et al.) notes, much game scholarship has remained "blind to its own cultural biases," which has led to repeating "'global' histories" that "mostly omit the global south from consideration" (*Video Games and the Global South*, 9).

38 cárdenas sees "algorithmic analysis" as a way "to identify the components and operations that make up the process we are analyzing—to understand them better, where a process can be an artwork, an identity, or a moment of violence" (*Poetic Operations*, 3).

39 Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 86.

40 Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 26.

41 Sharif and Naimon, "Between the Covers Solmaz Sharif Interview."

42 James, *Beyond a Boundary*.

43 See Fickle, *The Race Card*.

44 See Patterson, *Open World Empire*.

45 Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 15.

46 Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, 126.

47 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 8.

48 Reddy, *Freedom with Violence*, 47.