Gaming Orientalism

Part 1

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Mixed Connections

Designer Roundtable #1

FEATURING:

Emperatriz Ung, a Chinese Colombian writer, game designer, and educator from the American Southwest who earned her MFA in game design from the Tisch School of the Arts. Ung has worked as a narrative designer for mobile games and has been awarded fellowships, scholarships, and residences from the Asian American Writers' Workshop, Millay Arts, the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences Foundation, and Kundiman.

Patrick Miller, who teaches people to play fighting games, and whose personal works include *From Masher to Master* (2014), a book that introduces fighting game fundamentals, and *Bruce Lee Is Your Roommate* (2016), a short Twine story collaboration with Irene Koh.

Minh Le, the co-creator of *Counter-Strike* (1999) who has worked on such titles as *Day of Defeat* (2003), *Rust* (2003), *Tactical Intervention* (2013), *Plan 8* (in development), and numerous mobile game projects.

Matthew Seiji Burns, who created *Eliza* (2019), a visual novel about an AI-assisted therapy tool, and wrote for Zachtronics games *EXAPUNKS* (2018), *Opus Magnum* (2017), *SHENZHEN I/O* (2016), and other titles. With Tom Bissell, he wrote *The Writer Will Do Something* (2015), a Twine game about being a writer on an AAA game (a game from a major publishing company).

Minh Le: I got into the game industry at a very young age; I started playing games when I was eight years old. My dad was really into computers—he bought the early IBM computers. I grew up in Vancouver—I came to Canada when I was two—and Vancouver is a very, I guess, it's a very multicultural city. The people that I played with were very diverse. I didn't really feel Asian because there were a lot of Asians in Vancouver, but we were all, you know, we all identified as Canadians. Even though I am an Asian developer, myself, that never really came into my mindset. I didn't see a lot of Asian developers in my early stages. These days, it's changed quite a bit.

Emperatriz Ung: Similarly, a lot of my family members were computer engineers, so there were always computers around, and I was introduced to that at an early age, and it was an escape. That was how I spent a year and a half when I dropped out of high school. When I was a teen parent, I was in high school and didn't have time or resources to afford a new PS3 or Xbox 360. What kept me connected were actually browser games, flash games. They were short, it was something I could play while my son was down for a nap. And it really opened my mind up to how things could be, but there wasn't a community at the time in New Mexico for any kind of game design or game development. Either you were an artist, or you were a programmer; anything in between, there wasn't really a space for it. It wasn't until I was doing my master's on the East Coast that I came into contact with the New York City Independent Games community, especially the Game Developers of Color Expo, and that was what encouraged me to dive in.

Matthew Seiji Burns: To be honest, I wasn't attracted to games and computers the first time I saw them. I didn't see what was cool about games until the fidelity got a little bit better. Friends of mine had Nintendos, but I wasn't engaged until I could start to see and hear these other worlds—like in *Myst* (1993), you can hear the wind blowing, and you can see these trees.

But I think like everyone else, I struggled to find a place to start because you just have ideas, and you don't really know how to make them real. So I literally just showed up at Activision and applied for a job as a tester. I started from the ground floor, as they say.

Patrick Miller: I mean, I was born in 1985. I grew up with *Ninja Turtles*, *Karate Kid*, *Power Rangers*, like hand-to-hand combat. So when I was a kid, I assumed I had learn how to fight people in case some ninjas, like roll up on

you, right? Then when I played *Street Fighter* (1987), I remember thinking anyone could just fight each other, right? Suddenly, when *Street Fighter II* (1991) blew up, there were arcade cabs all over the place. I'd go down to the 7–11 on Clemente Street and play an arcade cabinet and rumble with people, and then again two blocks away in a laundromat. So to me, games were always about the collisions you could have with other people and being able to see other people around you. Oh, I see that person, six foot tall, probably about thirty years old, but they got a hell of a Zangief. And having fighting games as a medium to communicate and learn about other people has always fascinated me.

Minh Le: It's interesting that you [Patrick] mention *Street Fighter* because even though I'm into first-person shooter (FPS) games, *Street Fighter* was a global phenomenon for me as well. Growing up, I played it in the arcades, and pretty much every type of genre. But when *Doom* (1993) came out, it changed the industry and pretty much everyone I knew was playing *Doom*. I gravitated toward FPS games because of their immersion factor. It was the one genre that made me feel I could really put myself in a different world. That was my main attraction for making *Counter-Strike*. People always ask me, "Why did you make *Counter-Strike*? Do you like terrorism?" No, that's not the case at all. The reason I made *Counter-Strike* was because I was born in '77, and I grew up watching movies like *Rambo*, and all these '80s action movies, and some of the movies that really influenced me were Hong Kong action movies, like the ones with Chow Yun-Fat, like *Hard Boiled*. And I felt that style of action was similar to FPS games.

Tara Fickle: Your comments seem to highlight a central limitation of a project like this, in bringing you all together with the one similarity you all have, right, is that you're Asian. But what we're really excited to hear from you is the very nuanced ways your backgrounds come to matter or not matter in your gaming practices.

Emperatriz Ung: I was really surprised that, coming into games from the literary world, there were no Asian/American groups, really. Microsoft now has an internal group, formed less than two years ago. Whereas in literature we have organizations like the Asian American Writers Workshop, which is thirty years old now. Walking into the games industry, I saw that there wasn't the space for these groups, and people were actually kind of weird about it.

Some people said they didn't feel the need to be represented. Part of me was like, well, I don't think it's exactly about representation, but about community and supporting each other.

Matthew Seiji Burns: That tracks with my experience too. I never really thought about Asian and Asian American identity when I was younger, partly because I could afford to not think about it, and I had a certain amount of privilege growing up in LA. And while working at a game company, I didn't feel like I was treated in any really different ways, maybe because there's a lot of game industry in Japan. A lot of developers are really into Japanese games and grew up playing them. And eventually they worked in the game industry and went to Japan and worked in Japan for a while. So during one of my first jobs I met someone who had just returned from Japan, who had married a Japanese woman while he was there. It came up that I was half Japanese, on my mother's side. And he just had this weird smile on his face. And he looked at me in this, you know, looking past me kind of thing. Maybe he was looking forward to his own children. I might be reading a little bit into it. But that was the moment where I first thought about being half Japanese in the game industry.

Tara Fickle: It's notable to me that both Patrick and Minh talked about the people they played games with growing up as being quite diverse. The fighting game community is one of the more diverse genres and communities.

Minh Le: Yeah, the FPS players are generally more toxic than other genres. When I played RTS (real-time strategy) games like *StarCraft* (1998), the player base was much more friendly and easier to connect with outside of gaming. But with the FPS genre, the games are way more competitive and emotional. And it skews toward a younger age as well. When I was younger, I was, admittedly, probably more toxic. I played the game to beat others, not to connect with others.

Patrick Miller: When it comes to fighting games, there have been all kinds of attempts to explain how the player community around the world grew into what it is, and especially in North America, how it became significantly more racially diverse, though still mostly dudes. In arcades, anyone can quarter up and play, right? So the barrier to entry starts out pretty low. And then you have *Street Fighter*, which launches with eight characters from around the world.

Chun Li is probably the most recognizable female video game character, and there is probably more media about her than any other female character in a video game. You have Balrog, who's this dated Mike Tyson stereotype but is also one of the first Black characters in a mainstream video game. And so for fighting games in general, there's rich opportunity for character fantasies here. And because these games were predominantly made by Japanese studios, they could get away with a shit ton of super racist character designs that do not register in a way that Americans are used to.

Matthew Seiji Burns: I remember seeing an early study about racial representation in games that concluded that Asians were overrepresented in games. They didn't say why, but, well, it's because they counted games made in Japan. But that doesn't mean Asian representation is good in games; it just means that a lot of games made in Japan happen to have Japanese characters. There's a lot of room to explore forms of Asianness that haven't even been thought of in games, though games seem very Asian friendly.

Patrick Miller: And we don't have an Angry Asian Man or some other pop-culture group to really start looking at what an Asian American video game experience or community might look like. Plus, when you look at video games at scale, North American studios are trying to make inroads into the Chinese audience. Everyone who's thinking about video game earnings in terms of billions of dollars is aiming at China, right? And so they will adopt as much as they can, whether it's art styles, character design, aesthetics, marketing. And the other thing is, if you think about it, fighting games are essentially the video game version of kung fu movies, right? And hand-to-hand combat, either in sports or in media, can create venues for resistance against white supremacy. You got Ali, you got Bruce Lee, you got all kinds of stories being told in the tradition of martial arts movies. So when, you know, a pro *Hearthstone* player rolls up and is like, hey, "Free Hong Kong," obviously, that's going to create a lot of problems for Blizzard. And that is part of this incredibly rich history of using sports to give people a soapbox to stand on.

Matthew Seiji Burns: When I was working at Microsoft, there was a whole division called "Geopolitical Review." They check every Microsoft product for any kind of potential problem across any region. So anything that could

be considered religious is forbidden. Anything that could be seen as taking a side in any ongoing geopolitical conflict. Anything having to do with China and Taiwan. And, I'm sure, anything having to do with China and Hong Kong now. All of those kinds of things have to be completely removed.

Chris Patterson: I do want to follow up on the topic of mixed race, as many of us here, including Tara and I, identify as mixed race. And I've always wondered if that mattered when it came to playing games and writing about games. Tara and I have both asked each other about this during interviews, and we both can't really come up with satisfactory answers. As a literary scholar or fiction writer, if I present myself as Filipino, or white, or mixed race, people have a very hard time reading me or knowing what to do with my work, whereas when I write about games, I don't feel urged to put myself in a kind of box that's instantly recognizable.

Emperatriz Ung: When I was in writing workshops and literature, being mixed race—half Latina, half Asian—I was called out early in my creative work by my peers and teachers, before I had a chance to enter any industry. And any bilingual work was automatically shut down. A peer of mine was like, I don't understand how your father is Chinese, but you have a grandmother who speaks Spanish, which is like not a critique at all, or even a comment really, but they spent a whole half page. It was development spaces like "Latinx in Gaming" that saved me. Then again, I've been on a development team once, where they knew I was mixed race and spoke Spanish and some Mandarin, and if they needed Spanish, instead of writing it themselves, I became the resident expert on totally different cultures.

Chris Patterson: In other conversations with Asian diasporic designers, we've talked about how being mixed—particularly mixed Asian—signifies a kind of bridge that makes us more useful to the industries, more trustworthy as writers and designers, and also more comfortable. For me, I rarely cared about self-representation in games until I played *Soulcalibur II* (2002), and first played as Talim, one of the first Filipina characters in a game. Suddenly, it was important to me that I was playing this character from the Philippines. But before that, I would have said representation in games didn't do much for me personally. So, too, *Eliza* is one of those games where seeing mixed-race representation became unexpectedly meaningful.

Matthew Seiji Burns: I absolutely wanted the main character in *Eliza* to be mixed race for that reason. I just hadn't seen it very often. Prior to *Eliza*, the only game I could think of where mixed race is explicitly stated is this old PS2 game, *Ring of Red* (2001). The main character is half Japanese and half German, and throughout the game, they're using that to tease him, like, "What do you think of that, halfbreed?" And in *Assassin's Creed Liberation* (2012), there's a side story, where the character can pass in different contexts because she's mixed race. So the game uses the "stealth mechanics" of being mixed, and she can enter into different situations based on how she presents.

Patrick Miller: In my experience, most game dev teams are not operating off a strong model of creative direction. When I've seen mixed-race representation in video games, it's usually coming from fighting games, usually a part-Japanese character. Ken from *Street Fighter* is technically a quarter Japanese. Laura and Shawn Matsuda in *Street Fighter III* (1997) and *Street Fighter V* (2016) are Japanese Brazilian, and there's some fascinating diasporic stories there. Like, when I did a research fellowship in Japan, I was training Brazilian jiu jitsu with Japanese Brazilian immigrants who worked in factories. And it was super cool to see how the character design had paid some homage to the sport. But a lot of times when I see mixed-race characters, it's about being between two different national or racial borders. And it's executed without much nuance or sensitivity.

Matthew Seiji Burns: In games coming from Japan, I feel mixed race is often used in a slightly exotic, fetishistic way. In anime, you might see a girl who's half Russian or something like that, and it's used to give her blond hair. It's very much a kind of a visual typing. But a lot of this gets lost in the localization process, when products from Japan, which might have dodgy racial representations, are "fixed," and are turned into something a little bit less awful by the US branches. It happens to a lot of Japanese games, where racial representation is dialed back or made more appropriate for a global or Western audience. It reminds me a lot of food, food as imperialism, food as being an ambassador to a new culture.

Patrick Miller: If I could offer a tip for the academics reading this, if you're ever wondering why video games are the way they are, the place that I would

start is economics. Because video games are expensive as hell to make. And this is a hits-driven industry. So that means the more you increase your possibility for scale, in general, the higher your risk, and so you're going to have to make the game more broadly appealing to try and minimize risk. In other words, we do not have a healthy ecosystem as other industries might. If you want to make a film that isn't meant to be a Hollywood blockbuster, you can get academic funding, you can get grants, you might be able to just shoot it on your own and shoestring it. But when you look at the prospect of trying to do interesting, personal, smaller-scale games, usually the problem you're going to run into is that the people who have the skills that you need to satisfy the vision you want are going to be too expensive to justify taking that risk.

Tara Fickle: Which is interesting, because there's the industry assumption that whiteness is the most cost-effective representation, which goes back to what Minh was saying about making players feel comfortable. Whiteness is this thing that helps you inhabit this character fantasy, right?

Minh Le: That's true. When I play games, even though I'm Vietnamese, I feel more comfortable picking a Caucasian character. And I put my mindset in that as well. That guy's cool. He does all the cool stuff. To me, he's always been the hero.