

EDITORS' NOTE



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American Narratives and Video Games

*The intersection of video games studies and the humanities has been fertile ground for inquiry for the past twenty-five years, ever since the foundation of the scholarly journal *Game Studies* (2001) defined it a subfield in its own right. As its editor Espen Aarseth put forth, computer game studies represented “an emerging, viable, international, academic field,” centered on cultural objects in which “the aesthetic and the social are integrated parts.” Since then, ever-increasing academic research has been showing the enduring potential of the theoretical intersection between video game studies and the humanities. To this day, in fact, the scholarly interest in video games has exceeded its medium-related boundaries, engaging with wider issues concerning critical theory (Chess and Consalvo) by applying cultural, sociological, and philosophical approaches. These constitute the major theoretical facets of video game studies (Wolf and Perron), along with the most recent shift toward an environmental turn that underlines how video game immersive worlds may be considered as a mirror of the real world and thus work as operational strategies of empowerment for players in defining their own realities (Aliano and Crowley). Recent close inquiries into audience-related notions such as immersion (Koenitz; Nae 11-31) and self-involvement (Robson and Meskin), have produced insightful discussions on what may aptly be termed as the ‘aesthetics of interactivity’ that shapes video games as a narrative form.*

*American studies have been contributing remarkably to the critical and theoretical investigation on video games, especially by framing them as powerful cultural and ideological artifacts. In *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies* (2019) Sascha Pöhlmann provides the background for this kind of scholarly investigation, underlining the dialogic nature inherent in a mutual*

exchange between American studies and video game studies. According to Pöhlmann, “American Studies with its strong theoretical diversity must find a way of incorporating video games not just as yet another object of study but as one that may fundamentally challenge the field to reevaluate its methods” (12). In this light, the incorporation of video games into American Studies has led to a reconfiguration of the very discipline as “digital” American studies (Fuchs). The increasing gamification of contemporary culture invites a methodological reevaluation of the field with cultural politics through historical, social, and ideological perspectives (Mayar and Schubert 2-5), while launching fresh challenges in “deciphering” the code of an American experience seen “as simulation and digital story – and as a gamic code” (Wills 9).

This special issue titled *American Narratives and Video Games* wishes to join in this cutting-edge trend in American studies, by engaging with the aesthetics of interactivity and answering the following question: how can an aesthetic focus on narrativity help understand the manifold implications of the current digital American experience? To do so, this special issue offers a range of critical discussions on specific case studies dealing with the transmedia adaptation of American cultural motifs and literary traditions into video games (both mainstream and indie, produced in the US and abroad). As such, this special issue expands the questions that animated the first international workshop on American studies and video games held in Italy – “Play New Game: The Multilevel World(s) of Video Gaming in Contemporary US Culture” – hosted at the University of Chieti-Pescara in 2024.

The essays in *American Narratives and Video Games* fall into the two main thematic categories that are related, respectively, to the culture and literature of the United States. Essays in Part 1, “Culture,” explore the strategies and the issues at stake in the process of adapting national images, myths, and ideologies for digital American experiences, be they developed domestically or internationally. Articles in Part 2, “Literature,” offer an interactive literary history of the United States, surveyed through video games that translate into digital environments a number of tropes and genres characterizing nineteenth- and twentieth-century US literary works.

John Wills opens the cultural section focusing on one of the most enduring sites of national identity formation for the US: the Western frontier. In "Playing the Hollywood Western on Repeat: Cinematic Realism in Mad Dog McCree," he conceptualizes the arcade game Mad Dog McCree (1990) as a case of transmedia recreation of the traditional frontier story. He further argues for the hybridization between video game and cinematic worlds as a marker of the contemporary popular Western, illustrating the path that leads from the filmic depiction of the Western myth to the ludic mechanisms of its digital reenactment based on structural strategies of interactive repetition.

In "The Frontier as American National Identity Narrative in the Red Dead Redemption Games" Andrei Nae pursues the inquiry into the ideological unfoldings of the transmedia Western. Nae offers a postcolonial reading of the Red Dead Redemption video games (2010-2018), contending that their frontier narrative echoes patterns of digital violence which reaffirm the traditional dominant position of white ideology against the racial otherness represented, in this case, by the Native Americans.

The ludic mechanisms enabling interactive and racial experiences of frontier narratives are further explored by Michael Fuchs in "Affective Necropolitics, Procedural Necrorhetorics, and the US–Mexico Border in the Call of Duty Series." Fuchs shows how the military shooter Call of Duty franchise, especially in Ghosts (2013) and Modern Warfare II (2022), proceduralizes and aestheticizes the Southern US border as a space that is digital and ideological at once, marked by the racialized violence experienced by its players.

Along with the frontier, the ideology of the American Dream of course represents one of the foundational myths related to American culture. Zsófia O. Réti proposes a counternarrative of the American Dream in her essay "Living the Dream, Playing the Nightmare: Remediation as the Critique of the American Dream in American Arcadia (2023)." Réti reads the indie video game American Arcadia as an interactive narrative that sharply criticizes the American Dream, envisioning it as a dystopian ideology rather than the neoliberal utopistic realm of individual freedom.

An additional factor that cannot be overlooked when considering the process of adaptation of culture-related images deals with their mobility – be it in

diachronic and/ or diatopic contexts. Christian Wilken investigates the transnational dimension characterizing global gaming in his "Playing the American Nightmare: Japanese Horror Games at the Millennial Turn." Bridging transmedia and transcultural critical approaches, Wilken highlights the inherent mobility of American culture, by showing how landmark Japanese game franchises of the 1990s and 2000s, such as *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*, adapt and reframe the foundational tropes typical of American horror narratives.

Clearly, the concept of mobility involves not only the shifting nature of cultural images, but of literary narratives as well. In this light, Stefan Schubert leads the literary group of essays in this special issue with his discussion on the techniques of narrativity. In "It's Like It's from a Movie or Something': Narrative Instability, Remediation, and Cultural Prestige in the Indie Video Games *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero*," Schubert introduces the notion of 'narrative instability' in order to describe the ways through which the indie video games *Hotline Miami* (2012) and *Katana Zero* (2019) exploit narratively unstable techniques first witnessed in American postmodernism, while contextualizing them in terms of cultural prestige.

Taking heed of this discourse on narrativity, "Play Me for a Fool: Horror-Inducing Madness from Edgar Allan Poe to *The Dark Eye* (1995)" by Valentina Romanzi provides the temporal starting point for unfolding the timeline of an interactive literary history of the United States. Romanzi shows how *The Dark Eye* is a thorough adaptation of Poe's narratives; the distinct levels of this adaptation are not limited to the thematic tropes related to horror and madness, but involve also visual, aural, and gameplay features of the video game.

Next in this chronological timeline is Michael Feagan's "Playing *Moby-Dick*: Agency, Disempowerment, and Adaptation in *Nantucket*," which addresses Herman Melville's masterpiece through its interactive counterpart, the 2018 video game *Nantucket*. According to Feagan, the central themes of agency, individual choice, and power shape Melville's textual narrative and its transmedia companion alike.

In "Video Games as Literature? Realist Discourse in *Red Dead Redemption 2*" Francesca Razzi further explores the theoretical notion of narrative construction across modes. Razzi considers *Red Dead Redemption 2*

(2018) as a case study, to show how interactive narratives reproduce the devices that make up literary fiction; the video game structural foundations are examined as functional strategies that adapt the core motifs underlying many works of late-nineteenth-century realist writers like Mark Twain, Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser.

The chrono-historical transition into twentieth-century literature is marked by Justin R. Carpenter's essay "Videogame Narrativity: Tense-Aspect-Mood, Mechanical Drifting, and the Valences of Play in Kentucky Route Zero's 'The Death of the Hired Man'." Carpenter analyzes the relations among tense, aspect, and mood that shape the narrative structure of the video game Kentucky Route Zero (2011-2020), especially in its virtual staging and consequent polyvalent adaptation of Robert Frost's poem "The Death of the Hired Man."

Finally, Gavin Davies deals with a case of postmodern narrativity from literature to video games in "Replaying Adolescence: Temporality and Recurrence in Life is Strange and The Catcher in the Rye." Davies highlights how the Life is Strange series (2015-2021) reworks the main concerns expressed in J. D. Salinger's novel on generational alienation, while performing an operational relocation from observation (through reading) to experience (through gaming).

Given the variety of its contributions, American Narratives and Video Games hopes to break new ground for a scholarly exchange on the forms and modes of interactive narrativity in the American context. Future developments in this exchange would profitably involve further cross-conversations among video game studies, media studies, cultural and literary theory.

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