
Following their evolution into a global popular cultural phenomenon that rivals other major entertainment industries in sales, audience numbers, and cultural impact, the past two decades have witnessed the emergence of a loosely connected, interdisciplinary research field dedicated to the serious study of video games. While Game Studies has interrogated cultural aspects of video games from the beginning, this has mostly concerned something vaguely called ‘game culture’ and often perceived as somehow distinct from other cultural spheres. Though their number has been growing recently, there are still comparatively few works that forcefully and consistently treat video games as culture in a broader sense (that is, as cultural actors operating within a larger system). In this context, Soraya Murray’s *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* marks a compelling intervention from a critical Cultural Studies perspective attuned to power structures and ideologies and their expression in mass culture.

Murray describes the book as a “model for understanding video games as visual culture and making progressive intervention into one of the most prevalent, impactful and underestimated forms of image-production of our time” (2). The introduction asks the question “Is the ‘Culture’ in Game Culture the ‘Culture’ of Cultural Studies?” and provides a convincing argument for the need for Cultural Studies in the study of video games and, by the same token, for the importance of taking games seriously in the critical study of culture. In a thoroughly engaging opening chapter that spans the cultural significance of video games, the state of Game Studies, the value of Stuart Hall’s approach to understanding culture, the deep-seated entanglements of video games with prevalent ideologies, and the importance of games criticism, Murray calls for critical interrogations of mainstream video games as part of the dominant culture. She elucidates the dilemma that arises from both the dismissal of video games as inconsequential in large parts of the academy and Game Studies’ widespread neglect of questions of representation that are intricately tied to larger sociocultural contexts. This is a fine line to tread since it necessitates arguing for the relevance of video games at the same time as challenging those who have long done exactly that in their work. Murray maneuvers these pitfalls effortlessly and the success of her introduction issues not least from the constructive nature of her criticism; while assertive of her own position, she never appears dismissive but rather productively works with, builds on, and expands some of the theoretical emphases she criticizes. The key insight of Murray’s introduction as well as the red thread of the book is her “base assumption that all games engage in a politics of identity, not just some of them” (40), by which she refers to the ways in which both games and gamers work to cast certain subject positions (generally: white, male, heterosexual) as the ‘neutral’ norm, which shows how ‘game culture’ is fundamentally integrated in, and consistent with, the dominant culture, rather than being outside of it. Ultimately answering her leading question (“Is the ‘Culture’ in Games Culture the ‘Culture’ of Cultural Studies?”), Murray contends that “[t]he answer to that question is both yes and no. No: it is not conceived of in this way; but Yes: in fact they are one and the same, and we should begin to fully think of them as such” (42). This is what she demonstrates in the four chapters that follow.

The first chapter, “Poetics of Form and Politics of Identity; Or, Games as Cultural Palimpsests,” reads *Assassin’s Creed III: Liberation* (Ubisoft, 2012) from
an intersectional perspective and against the history of representations it originates in. Analyzing the interplay of the game’s narrative, visuals, and mechanics, Murray shows how “a particularly messy poetics of form begins to reveal itself, as well as a larger politics of identity in video games” (50). At the same time as the game carries the potential to “generate a series of player insights about the fluidity of identity and the politics of context” (80), she argues, its logic appears to remain indebted to longstanding imperial traditions and Orientalist fantasies even as it subverts some of them. All of this, Murray insists, is central to understanding the politics of the game in relation to its own historical context: “In considering the playable representations of games, it is important to mine and fully understand the phantasmal aspects of culture that are at play. This is impossible without a contextual understanding of the object of study in relation to the milieu from which its representations and signifying practices arise” (86).

The standout contribution of the volume can be found in the second chapter, “Aesthetics of Ambivalence and Whiteness in Crisis,” in which Murray scrutinizes three popular games: *The Last of Us* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013), *Spec Ops: The Line* (2K Games, 2012), and *Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2013). Employing an approach based in Critical Whiteness Studies, she illuminates “how form, representation and affective qualities within each of these games engender a particularly ambivalent, embattled form of whiteness,” illuminating “the ‘normative’ invisibility of whiteness and how it functions within mainstream games” (92, 93). Drawing especially on the work of Richard Dyer, Murray persuasively traces a common thread throughout a set of games that, at first glance, actually appear to each be invested in very different themes. She asserts: “The overwhelming absence of a discussion of whiteness as core to each of the aforementioned games points to a larger, understudied area in playable media” (137). Precisely this gap endows Murray’s original intervention with a sense of urgency. The “aesthetics of ambivalence” at the center of this chapter refer to “affective qualities that trade on notions of the white male normative hero, but which in fact betray a larger form of whiteness that is deeply in crisis, desperate and which strategically mobilizes itself as a form of otherness” (138). Murray argues that we can gather a better understanding of the politics of mainstream video games “[i]f we suspend the idea of these games representing the normative and consider how they are in fact the expression of a particular group, and if we can make the whiteness of these game ‘strange’” (138). The chapter’s success stems from the way it achieves the latter across a set of well-known and already much-discussed games. Concluding a thoroughly exceptional essay, the final statement speaks for itself: “Expressions of whiteness appear again and again in games as both normative and under duress, unremarkable and exalted, deserving of, and denied that which was deserved. That is to say, these games must be understood as the visual politics of dominant culture and, therefore, at the time in which they were made, an expression of the totalizing logics of whiteness” (139).

Chapter three is titled “The Landscape of Games as Ideology” and sheds light on the ideological underpinnings of video game worlds through the case study of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (Konami, 2015). Lamenting previous, largely formalist, theorizations of gamespace, Murray writes that “turning a visual studies lens to gamescapes in order to understand these landscapes as ideology, we can begin to see how these spaces naturalize a certain set of relations through a highly curated framing of the playable environment” (142). Taking cues from W. J. T. Mitchell as well as Leo Marx, she contends that “video games as visual culture always make a set of claims about land, space and place” (146). The chapter covers the game mechanics’ capitalist logics, the whitewash-
ing of the complex and ugly realities of the 1980s Afghanistan setting, and the alignment of the game's representations with the expectations of a film and television-savvy American(ized) audience. In doing so, it convincingly illustrates how, in the shape of playable landscape reminiscent of yet distinct from earlier forms, “[i]deological needs and cultural formations intersect in mainstream games, which seem to convey much more about our desires, than their lived-world counterparts” (181).

The fourth and final chapter, “The World Is a Ghetto: Imaging the Global Metropolis in Playable Representation,” follows up on the third with “a close consideration of game space, focusing on visual representations of the megacity as a global node, with its extreme economic inequities and playable dystopian environments” (184). Here Murray engages two case studies, Max Payne 3 (Rockstar Games, 2012) and Remember Me (Capcom, 2013). Drawing on the work of Nezar AlSayyad, she asks, “if all we had were gamic representations of the global city, how would those cities be described, and what would those simulated places tell us?” (184). Entertaining this question, Murray covers a myriad of interrelated aspects, ranging from the games’ generic genealogies to Manuel Castells’s idea of the Fourth World in relation to the dystopian gamespaces and from the metaphorical use of memory to David Harvey’s argument about time-space compression in postmodernity, which is perhaps why this chapter reads a bit more choppy than the others. She concludes that the games “each in their own way point to a paradigm of expulsions, profound exclusions that come as a by-product of geopolitical and economic shifts, and a resultant Fourth World” (225), exemplifying “two complex responses to” exactly these ongoing upheavals, which can serve as access points to the imaginaries occupying the culture that produced them.

The book’s recourse to the original theories of foundational thinkers like Stuart Hall, Edward Said, and Richard Dyer works superbly in demonstrating how closely aligned video games are with long-standing, powerful ideological formations. As Murray constantly couples these ‘classics’ with state-of-the-art video game and new media theory and criticism, she is able to attend to both the continuities with earlier media representations and the specificities of the form of the video game, thus avoiding the “provincialism” (Bogost 181) that frequently plagues Game Studies scholarship. Murray’s writing is at her best whenever she paints a big picture across different games, media, and fields; these are the moments when readings of particular games turn into accounts of larger cultural phenomena. The analyses presented in the four chapters are captivating and insightful throughout, but the real strength of Murray’s book lies in the general thrust of the project at large. On Video Games is a necessary, timely, and forceful intervention into several intersecting fields, chief among them Visual Culture Studies and Game Studies, but certainly also American Studies. The book succeeds particularly because each of the numerous arguments it makes and problems it raises decidedly relates to the stakes of the matter and directly feeds into its larger concern. The research is impeccable, while the writing is engaging and lucid throughout. If there is anything to criticize about this book, it is that the reader is sometimes left longing for more, less in the sense of notable gaps but more in the way some of Murray’s assertions spark the reader’s interest while not fully satisfying it before moving on to the next point. In these moments, one gets the feeling that there would be more to say about the issue at hand—and that Murray, in particular, would have more to say—but that this book simply cannot provide more space to elaborate even further. This is the price the author pays for a smooth reading experience in a book that is dense yet readable,
complex yet accessible, which is to say that this is a fair price to pay—especially since the copious notes and references, not least to some of her own articles on similar topics, certainly ameliorate the problem. Because of its accessibility, the book speaks to a broad audience and will prove to be an insightful resource for the seasoned games researcher and the novice alike.

The important contribution of Murray’s work lies in her perceptive explication of the politics at work in many mainstream video games, which are intricately tied to prevalent ideologies and power structures, even (or especially) when these games are declared politically neutral or inconsequential by both producers and academics. Her insistence that the politics of video games are not really those of a subculture but are, in fact, perfectly in line with those of the dominant culture, should assist Critical Game Studies to further gain prominence and to spill over into other fields that still neglect the relevance of studying video games. One such field is American Studies, which has only just begun acknowledging their pertinence. “Playable representations matter,” Murray writes, and Americanists should take her assertion to heart. If one wants to understand (and teach) American culture today, video games are one essential site to look to, and Murray’s book tells us why and how.

Works Cited