

On Field Colonization, Intersections and Marginalized Games

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ABSTRACT

This presentation highlights the ontological tension of marginalized communities framed as specific types of game studies. The advent and definition of research domains such as Queer Game Studies, Indigenous Game Studies, Black Game Studies et al. both makes space for such work and, arguably, subjugates or others it. In much the way foreign or exoticized cultural elements are made apparent with qualifiers, framing these game studies areas as a specific type of game studies might also be narrowing who is encouraged to research it and further isolating such work from the milieu of games studies. While conforming to an historical precedent of identifying, deconstructing, and identifying narrower and narrower game studies domains, this discussion aims to question the appropriateness of such patterns for an inclusive game studies future.

Keywords

Game studies, game research, decolonizing game studies

INTRODUCTION

This presentation highlights some of the challenges and opportunities of increasingly narrowing specific domains of game studies. Acknowledging the progress evident in specific domains, including Queer Game Studies (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017), Indigenous studies (LaPensée, 2021), and Black Game Studies (Grace, 2021), the discussion also highlights the risks in such domain specificity. Does such work run the risk of tokenizing, of narrowing fields and creating analogous academic ghettos that unnecessarily compartmentalize a niche discipline to its subsets? Are the names of these fields in themselves immediately hierarchical, implying that each is a subset of a master field known more commonly as Game Studies? Is such framing antithetical to decolonizing game studies, play (Trammell, 2022) and game literacies (de Paula, 2021)? Are there ways to frame such work to avoid this pattern of domain declaration, analysis, and subset creation? Is this the responsibility of those people identifying the work within these areas, or the work of others? By geologic analogy, are these new continents split from a single Pangea, the product of political treatise defining individual territory, the recolonizing of existing spaces already inhabited by domains to which we act ignorant, or otherwise?

This question is in part ontological, bringing to question how identification, classification and naming of these specific game studies areas might avoid the history of colonization potentially evident in research that aims to define through making borders distinct. How does an emerging researcher avoid being a clumsy Christopher Columbus (Loewen, 2014) discovering sparsely populated worlds that are already well inhabited? How can game studies move toward work within the community reading the

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stars and riding the seas of academic research as accurately as ancient Polynesian sailors (Evans, 2011). For those without anthropological or sociological backgrounds - how can such work be done well while remaining aware of multiple cultures, “indigenous” research in a given area of study, and their intersections?

This presentation is less about providing best practices, and more about highlighting the unique moment in game studies that allows for more careful, contemporary understanding of these essential spaces that contributes to a 360-degree understanding of games. It is an attempt to raise questions about understanding the world of games that contrasts with the historical blunders that have so awkwardly shaped the socio-political borders of our contemporary globe.

How can game studies take a 21st century perspective on researching the diverse world it examines? Are there specific approaches demonstrated from other academic disciplines that would better frame the ways in which we understand the games we and others play? Are game studies ready for a critical cartography (Wood and Krygier, 2009) that reminds it to view the world beyond its equivalent of Mercator projections, or that prepares it for the reality that nature abhors vacuums and ignores the arbitrary borders we draw from historical precedence?

Are there other ways to understand game studies, that are less about performing a Darwinian catalog of discovered endemic species and more about synthesizing new knowledge by acknowledging what already is? In short, can there be a more generative game studies practice or one that is divorced from the colonial history of such knowledge systems? Can decolonizing game studies involve a philosophical shift assuming that early generation game studies were not a foundation, but instead an exploration of an expanse already well-inhabited by cultures and communities that were marginalized at that time.

Such efforts within game design as critical play (Flanagan, 2009), critical design (Bardzell and Bardzell), radical game design (Pedercini, 2009) or even discomfort design (Grace, 2011) have been somewhat successful, precipitating a variety of games that remind players to play differently. Is it time to turn such practices loose on game studies, offering game studies that are critical of the assumptions of game studies themselves? Or are game studies, yet too nascent for such deconstruction and alternative framing?

This discussion is about reminding the community of game studies researchers about the foibles of the past, while looking to be adaptive futurists that help lead an apex of technology and society. How can a game studies future interpret intersectionality and embrace the ambiguity of the field that might serve as a motivation for other equally ambiguous, evolving fields? While some researchers do the ontologically valuable work of specific tasks like interpreting game type and genre (Apperley, 2006), what does it mean to find non-classification interpretations of game studies sub fields? Is this type of thinking particularly useful to other fields, where the apex of technology and society might take a naturally amorphous and evolving form? Is early classification and domain definition contrary to adaptive, responsive interpretation of new discoveries in games, in other intersections of society and technology, or beyond?

Most importantly, does escaping the traps of fields and subfields, offer an opportunity to also avoid the problematic dynamics that seem to inevitably ensue? Is there opportunity in not disambiguating, from not hyphenating game studies or framing them as a subfield to computer science, anthropology, social science, humanities, or others? Perhaps more easily addressed, should game studies find another solution to the implied

relationship of Black Game Studies, Queer Game Studies, Indigenous Game Studies, and more?

These questions, like critical design, offer an opportunity for organizational reflection as well. Does part of the unraveling of tightly bound hierarchies occur from a declared independence obvious in the creation of a society of game studies researchers - in DiGRA? In DiGRA's nearly 20-year history, is game studies moving forward or falling into the patterns from which it declared its independence? Just as one might look at postcolonial nations that declare independence, but adopt some of the cultural history to which they revolted is the research trajectory of game studies moving forward or affirming the past? What are the specific patterns game studies rejected in declaring its independence and which did it embrace? Are these relationships repeating 20 years later in child-parent or master-slave relationships to emerging fields currently understood as within game studies? Does the community of game studies research continue to deal in the same currencies (e.g., citations, peer review, key scholars, etc.) from which it declared its independence? Is that actually a bad thing, given the stability and persistent value of these? From this frame, are regional DiGRAs embassies for a future or colonies analogous to the etymological origin of the West Indies or Portuguese Africa. What can organizations like DiGRA do to avoid the research equivalent of the Dutch East India Company?

More than a linguistic exercise, the idea is to examine the structural differences. More than argue the need for new, distinct conferences or research communities, the discussion examines how this pattern may be broken. Its aim is to improve the future for all game studies. An alternative subtitle title for this discussion might have read simply, "How Foreign Food, Culture and Play is anything but 'Foreign' in their Countries of origin." That is, more simply, Chinese food is simply food in China, just as a shift in perspective might immediately de-hyphenate or de-qualify some game studies. The goal in this work is to offer an alternative perspective to the systematic research domain patterns that may in themselves reflect a non-critical view of what needs to be differentiated and what is merely foreign to those defining the research menu.

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