

# Playgrounds of Whiteness: Confronting Epistemic Bias in European Game Studies

**Sabine Harrer**

University of Vienna & Uppsala University

Campus Gotland

62167 Visby

[sabine.harrer@univie.ac.at](mailto:sabine.harrer@univie.ac.at)

## ABSTRACT

Invoking the analogy of playgrounds as spaces designed with particular bodies and pleasures in mind, this paper explores the impact of whiteness on knowledge production in European game studies. Among critical game scholars there is a growing consensus on the Eurocentric bias in games, play. However, the dominant role of Europe in the construction of this bias has been fairly under-theorized. The question motivating this contribution is: What is particularly *European* about game studies' Eurocentric bias? How has it been fabricated and what are current mechanisms of epistemic violence which reinforce and cement white ways of knowing about games? I explore these questions through a combination of conceptual work and autoethnographic reflection as a eurowhite Austrian games researcher.

The first part of this paper explores the relation between learning, knowledge and white bias, demonstrating how white bias as a structural phenomenon teaches us to value and devalue knowledge along racial lines with harmful epistemic effects. Secondly, *orientalism*, *exceptionalism* and *eurowhiteness* are discussed as three features working together to produce particular Euro-style mechanics of whiteness. These mechanics define what gets most valued on the white 'knowledge playground' of European game studies; the focus of the last section.

The overall aim of this paper is work towards a language of eurowhite accountability; suggesting that recognizing racial bias in European game studies is a required first step towards the long-term goal of epistemic justice.

## Keywords

game studies, whiteness, Eurocentrism, epistemic violence, autoethnography

## INTRODUCTION

No matter how objective games researchers attempt to be, critical race theory reminds us that we cannot escape the fact that all knowledge is racialized (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi 2001, Chakravartty et al. 2018, Liu 2022, Moreton-Robinson 2004, Perkins 2004, Smith et al. 2021, Twine and Gallagher 2008). This raises the question

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how well we understand the *hows* and *whats* of our biases, and what we are prepared to do to challenge them. This paper explores this challenge in the context of whiteness in Europe.

There is a growing consensus among critical games and play scholars that games culture is *Eurocentric*, which means that it primarily caters to European experiences, fantasies, and pleasures. Some examples include the dominance of white characters in digital games (Dietrich 2013, Gray 2012, Passmore et al. 2018, Jayanth 2021), the focus on economics and white victory in board games (Robinson 2014), and the prioritization of white players in analyses of games and play (Mukherjee 2018).

More recent studies have looked into how the very concepts of *play* and *games* are themselves Eurocentric (Fickle 2019, Trammell, 2023). If such concepts were neutral, why do definitions of play so often highlight experiences of joy and pleasure, rather than putting equal emphasis on the racist harm often experienced by non-white folks in the context of play? (Trammell, 2023). One answer is that white Eurocentric bias impacts ways of knowing about games and play today. Despite the centrality of *Europe* in *Eurocentric*, however, the role of Europe in this context is heavily understudied.

This article addresses this research gap by mobilizing a critical whiteness perspective specific to Europe (Böröcz, 2021; Wekker, 2016; Rastas 2012, Danbolt 2017). What is the kind of ‘whiteness’ specifically produced in European culture? How has it affected knowledge about play and games? Or, speaking through the playground metaphor, how has whiteness created an exclusive playground of ideas designed for specific bodies (of work) to play (a role)?

To bring game studies into this picture is to consider that ideas around play and games cannot be unrelated to questions of race because they are rooted in the global divisions fabricated by European colonialism (Maldonado-Torres 2007, Fickle 2019, Amrute 2019, Trammell 2023). In her keynote speech at the EPIC2019 conference, Sareeta Amrute asks whether tech today is colonial. She argues that if colonial relationships are hierarchical, extractive and exploitative, we can see these features clearly continue in the tech industry today, including in data extraction, the gig economy, and outsourcing practices which all systemically disadvantage workers in the Global South (Amrute 2019). As part of the tech world, games are part of this ‘tech colonialism’ and its imperial entanglements (c.f. Bulut, 2020).

What does this mean for the production and circulation of *ideas* about games? It is hard to imagine that ideas are free from the burden of colonial relationships. I am currently affiliated at Uppsala University, an institution which in 1735 produced one of the most influential racist models of human classification; dividing races into ‘white’, ‘yellow’, ‘red’, and ‘black’ (Linnaeus 1735). I often wonder what would have to happen to successfully decolonize a racist legacy like this. In the light of ongoing colonial relationships, it does not seem possible to imagine my work today as simply unrelated to past epistemic harms. Instead, it seems more constructive to openly investigate the links between whiteness, power, and European games scholarship.

Within the Western and Northern European research contexts I have inhabited as a game student and scholar, I have observed that *game studies* knowledge tends to get discussed in specific ways. The ‘key’ texts evoked in such discussions have often originated from other Western European ex-colonizing places, for example The Netherlands (*Homo Ludens*, 1955), France (*Man, Play and Games*, 2001), and

Denmark (*Half-Real*, 2005). Especially during my early years as an MA and PhD student, I have developed a particular *sense* for what can count as ‘excellence’ in such contexts, as well as what gets dismissed as ‘controversial’, ‘subjective’ and ‘irrelevant’. As I will explore in this paper, via this socialization into what fits and what doesn’t fit norms of excellence, I have also been socialized into norms of whiteness.

The theme of ‘playgrounds’ is evoked in this article as an analogy intended to illustrate the work and effect of white bias on games knowledge. Like academic knowledge, playgrounds are framed as spaces designed with the benefit of everyone in mind. They are supposedly safe and accessible to a general public, offering opportunities for excitement and learning. At the same time, playgrounds can become sites of informal racial segregation. Paajanen et al. (2023) observed that on Finnish public playgrounds, white parenting norms tend to dominate these spaces, rendering them inaccessible to non-white visitors.

As the parent of a two-year old, I have spent several rainy afternoons inside *Kotteland* (pine cone land), Gotland’s only indoors playground for toddlers and children. The playground’s mascot is a hedgehog, a Swedish local forest animal which might suggest that ‘pine cone land’ is themed around forests: Blueberries, mushrooms, perhaps a few squirrels, and pine trees. This is not the case. Instead, most of Kotteland is decorated with tigers, monkeys, zebras, lions, crocodiles and other animals typically associated by most Europeans with colonial ‘adventure’. In the midst of this, we find a more explicit reference; an illustration of the hedgehog mascot wearing a colonial hat whilst struggling through the jungle.

A few meters away, several heavy punching bags invite children to shove, push, box, and wriggle their way into the soft play area. One of the punching bags displays a caricature of a mask reminiscent of a Polynesian tiki mask. Whilst in Polynesian culture, such masks have sacred powers and significance – comparable to the sacredness of a mother Mary statue for a Roman Catholic – Kotteland turns these masks into meaningless decorations with the main affordance of being punched by white Nordic children. When mentioning this illustration to my white parent friend Maria who had joined our playdate with her child, she was puzzled: Why hadn’t she noticed the giant face on the punching bag?

When it comes to the notion of playgrounds as sites of racial segregation, Kotteland offers two lessons. First, rather than intentionally malicious, white norms dominate these spaces unconsciously, through established references. It is not Maria’s individual failing to ‘not see’ the soft-play racism written all over Kotteland, but a feature of white norms, which keeps us hooked on the notion of innocence (Wekker 2016). Secondly, Kotteland is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a larger culture which has normalized the equation that colonization equals fun. This is such an established pattern in Eurocentric play culture (e.g. Jayanth 2021) that the underlying historical link to white atrocities is buried and forgotten.

In analogy to the way participation is negotiated on playgrounds, I argue, white norms tend to define play in exclusionary ways which makes academia difficult to inhabit for alternative epistemologies. Especially in Europe, where institutions are firmly located in white majority culture, game studies tends to produce ‘playgrounds of white safety’ for those who theorize within the western norm, whilst excluding, erasing, or devaluing non-white, non-western perspectives on play (c.f. Trammell 2023). Rather than a conscious, isolated agenda, this is a result of the ongoing collective investment

in the myth that Euro-style epistemology is innocent; neutral, objective, apolitical, and most of all, race free (Bonilla-Silva 2012, Liu 2022), just like the tiki mask punching bag.

To ground this conversation in European critical whiteness literature, I discuss the concepts of orientalism (Said, 1978), white exceptionalism (e.g. Wekker 2016, Rastas 2012), and eurowhiteness (Böröcz 2021). While orientalism has split the world into unequal halves (west/east, civilized/barbaric), exceptionalism insists on the innocence of these concepts, and eurowhiteness turns belonging to innocence into a competition among different shades of European whiteness. By putting these concepts in conversation with each other, I intend to shed light on the specific histories and mechanics of whiteness in Europe, where the productivity of European game studies is locally embedded. The assumption here is that whatever mechanics of whiteness persist in Europe will manifest in the knowledge produced there.

The idea that game studies is Eurocentric is not new. This paper draws on recent scholarship (Fickle 2019, Trammell 2023) which makes important observations about European game studies' origins, particularly the widely acknowledged 'founding fathers' Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois. Fickle's and Trammell's respective studies have addressed how game studies are simultaneously rooted in and selectively evasive of the Orientalist agenda in *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1955/1938) and *Man, Play and Games* (Caillois 2001/1958). The argument is that leaving the dormant, structural issues in these texts unaddressed presents problems for today's scholarships, because colonial bias travels from the past to the present, for example through terms like 'civilization' which has historically been linked to white supremacy (Trammell 2023, 16).

These earlier critiques raise the question how the eurowhiteness of game studies epistemologies potentially translates into instances of epistemic violence (Spivak 1989, Liu 2022), e.g. the unjust simultaneous elevation of white knowledge and devaluation of racially marginalized knowledge. I unpack this subject along two questions (1) What is considered ideal knowledge about games and play? (2) Who is considered the ideal knower of games and play?

The intention with this piece is to extend existing conversations about "attending to structures of power embedded within knowledge production" (Chakravartty et. al. 2018, 261) to the context of game studies. This means looking at dominant trends in European game studies through the lens of race, and more specifically whiteness.

What I don't claim is that the relationship between European whiteness, game studies and epistemic violence is a causal or deterministic one. Europe's game studies is obviously not a monolith, but encompasses a wealth of traditions, approaches, and worldviews. However, attending to structures of power, in this paper, means to investigate dominant trends which threaten this potential diversity of European game studies.

This is by definition a politically engaged project, because its main interest is in challenging the ongoing European investment in hegemonic whiteness. Rather than pretend that all epistemologies in European game studies are equal, it insists that scholarship needs to actively divest from whiteness, or end up enforcing a 'hegemony of play', a cluster of dominant ideas with the power to exclude and oppress (cf. Fron et al. 2007). Whilst other areas of game studies have highlighted similar discriminatory

dynamics, for example in relation to queerness (Ruberg 2019) and disability (Schmalzer 2020), this article explores them specifically in relation to race.

Throughout this conceptual piece, I use autoethnographic storytelling as a method which allows me to put my racialized socialization as a white European game scholar in conversation with literature, concepts and theories (Moosavi 2022). While a potential risk of this approach is white performative self-centering (Ahmed 2007), there are potential benefits in seeing and naming concrete moments of eurowhite epistemic failings. Ultimately, the intention is to reflect on my participation in eurowhite epistemology as a structure which potentially limits and distorts expectations about race and knowledge making.

## LEARNING WHITENESS IN EUROPE

To study whiteness in Europe is to engage with its central paradox: On the one hand, it is a category fabricated and exported by Europeans as a core narrative justifying European colonialist exploitation during New Imperialism. Whiteness is a result of emerging capitalist interests in Europe which turned global differences into racial ones (Liu 2022, 778, Robinson 2000). Hence, 'whiteness' only gained meaning through European-made racist classifications, including binaries such as West/East, civilized/barbaric, as well as pseudo-scientific taxonomies which divided human value according to racial hierarchies (e.g. Carl Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae* (1735)). The European self-image established during modernity is deeply entangled with the invention of whiteness and attempts to prove its moral superiority (e.g. Saini 2019).

On the other hand, within contemporary Europe, race-evasiveness, or "the habit of ignoring race" (Morrison 1992, 9) has become a common marker of tolerance and progressiveness (Wekker 2016, Rastas 2012). This also affects European university contexts, where whiteness is expected to be considered irrelevant to knowledge creation. As a result, when bringing race into the picture, a common response is resistance. As Black Swedish media scholar Ylva Habel puts it, "If we discuss race issues during class, some students assume the passive position of a distant, critical observer — or, unabashedly question the relevance of the subject altogether" (Habel 2012, 113). From this position, addressing questions of race in the classroom can be perceived as "unsound, divisive, and excessively political" (ibid).

I have observed similar dynamics in my game design classes, albeit inflected by my white standpoint. After suggesting the theme 'how the media will talk about white people in the future' among a bullet list of optional prompts for an experimental game, I was contacted by a student who shared their frustration about the 'provocative' and 'divisive' nature of this prompt. Wasn't it time to leave human classification labels like 'white people' behind us, and embrace human equality? I strongly agree with the underlying sentiment that racial categories are absurd, and shouldn't exist, seeing that, biologically speaking, there is only one human race. At the same time, the ongoing effects of such categories suggested it *wasn't time* yet to stop talking about 'white people'. Notably, for this white student, considering doing so in a playful, reflective, or even kind manner didn't seem like an option.

What wasn't said but implied: The mentioning of (white) race is an anathema to the progressive, equality-minded, and safe learning environment expected from a university course which fosters 'excellence'. By mentioning white people, the course

had disappointed this expectation established via the habit of ignoring race (Morrison 1992).

### **The whiteness of excellence**

From the perspective of critical whiteness studies, race-evasiveness in white people is a requirement for keeping the normative force of whiteness intact (Dyer 1997, Frankenberg 2013). The refusal to consider one's perspective to be racialized is in itself a feature of whiteness; it describes itself as the human norm, denying its own historicity and particularity (Yancy 2004). White epistemology is part of the "specific mechanisms, practices and social relations that produce racial inequality at all levels" today (Bonilla-Silva 2012, c.f. Maldonado-Torres 2007). It affects ideas around 'excellence', 'relevance, and 'competence' in knowledge creation, producing a state where epistemic status and influence remains associated with the white masculine bourgeois self (Liu 2022, Moreton-Robinson 2004, Noxolo 2020, Richardson 2018).

My first-hand experience with this dynamic started with my Austrian school curricula's selective focus on 'great white men in history', including thinkers like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Rudolf Steiner and Sigmund Freud to authors like Hermann Hesse, Stefan Zweig, Friedrich Schiller and Thomas Bernard to scientists like Albert Einstein, Erwin Schrödinger, and Karl Kraus. As a child of an opera singer taking violin lessons for twelve years, I was intimately familiarized with the work of composers like Mozart, Haydn, Bach, Beethoven, and Vivaldi, Schumann, and Wagner.

While on these lists of undoubtedly great and influential people there were no Black, indigenous, and people of color, they made countless appearances in casual entertainment contexts, including schoolyard games like *Who is afraid of the black man?*, blackfacing in Mozart operas and on Three Kings' days, songs like *Three Chinese men with a double bass*, and the habit of dressing up as 'Indians' during carnival season.

Within my mind, this segregation created a coherent pattern in regards to who was allowed to be active on the playground of relevance. There seemed to be certain bodies who were destined for greatness, and others who were supposed to take the passive role of decorations or scaffolding. By the time I entered university, I had already developed clear expectations about the shape, sound, appearance, and *race* of excellence. The "coloniality of being" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) had done its work, and was orienting my attention towards and away from particular bodies (of work). It just felt more relevant, more 'key' when knowledge arrived via a white, male, older body. It just felt more objective when that older white body cited other white European men. Conversely, knowledge felt more 'subjective', and less reliable when racial or gender minorities were involved in its creation or delivery.

Whilst becoming vaguely aware of the existence of non-western ways of knowing, the contributions of Black feminists or Indigenous scholars somehow felt too 'niche' to say anything meaningful about the human condition. However, when white male scholars evoked 'ancient' knowledge, African tribes, or 'Eastern' philosophies to make their 'universal' points, I did not experience any doubt in the appropriateness of such references. In fact, I was convinced that knowledge could stand 'on its own', so the race and gender of the knower did not matter.

## **White epistemic violence**

By proxy of my socialization into European university culture, I have been initiated in patterns of what postcolonial philosopher Gayatri Spivak has termed “epistemic violence” (Spivak 1988). This describes systemic silencing and erasure of marginalized groups due to the prioritization of Western, white knowledge (Dotson 2011). Epistemic violence continues on a less perceivable, less direct level the more obviously detrimental effect of European colonialism, by guiding scholarly interests, agendas and priorities. As opposed to common perceptions of violence, it has been characterized as a “slow violence” in that it produces long-term harms on impacted communities and the persistent erasure of non-western knowledge (Pérez, 2019). Epistemic violence has been described in a variety of research fields, including communications (Chakravartty et. al. 2018), humanities and social sciences (Pérez, 2019), as well as management studies (Liu 2022).

In the latter context, Liu (2022) has observed that institutional, administrative processes, as well as career trajectories, visibility and valuing of academic staff are affected by such violence. Often, non-white scholars are “refused as knowers” frequently read as “a-theoretical”, and “prone to white appropriative possession” (Liu, 2022: 788). Whilst establishing a systemic suspicion against indigenous and anti-racist work as ‘biased’ and ‘undisciplined’ (Mukandi and Bond 2019, Liu 2022), epistemic whiteness has framed the “white bourgeois masculine self as the ideal knowing subject” (Liu 2022, 779). At the same time, it constructs this deeply colonial imbalance as fair and objective.

In my academic biography as a white learner, this materialized through the belief that knowledge could ‘stand on its own’ whilst scholarship which got too ‘extreme’ about standpoints appeared biased and unjustified. White socialization created a guise of objectivity around a selective canon of acceptable knowledge. Whiteness became an unseen reference point for what I was able to consider relevant knowledge for human existence. It is in this dismissal of colonized and marginalized ways of knowing that the aspect of violence in Spivak’s notion of *epistemic violence* is grounded.

## **THREE FEATURES OF EUROPEAN WHITENESS**

While conversations on white socialization and epistemic violence apply to the global dynamics of knowledge production more generally, my focus in this contribution is on the European discourse around ‘play’ and ‘games’, and the question how local European expressions of whiteness relate to it. If all knowledge is racialized (Liu 2022), white European norms both produce and are produced through epistemic standards and traditions. In what follows, I will introduce three aspects of European whiteness practice which emerge from critical whiteness literature; (1) the Orientalist practice of dividing the world into an East/West binary, (2) the practice of white exceptionalism and (3) the practice of policing boundaries around the privilege claim of ‘eurowhiteness’. I will later look at how these practices manifest in European knowledge paradigms around games and play.

### **Orientalism**

There is a wide consensus that whiteness only gains meaning in the context of modern European colonialism. It was fabricated as an additional, ‘quasi-objective’ justification for Europe’s extractionist, dehumanizing practices (Böröcz 2021). Rather than

essential, or biological, it is a relational concept, which relies on a set of binaries that produce a contrasting image of 'us' versus 'them', 'civilized' versus 'barbaric', and 'West' versus 'East'. The chasm between these binaries has been constructed via a mindset known as Orientalism (Said 1978), which has produced a normalized belief in a cultural and moral difference between the "West" and "the rest" of the world. This difference is imagined on a hierarchy of innate human value, civilizational 'progress' and moral abilities and has produced European whiteness as a metonymic sign of moral goodness, physical beauty, and universal knowledge.

One of the discursive outcomes of Orientalism is the impression that whiteness and its surrounding culture exists in isolation of countries which Europe has previously colonized, rather than being a product of an ongoing hierarchical, extractive, and exploitative colonial relationship affecting every aspect of society (Amrute, 2020), Maldonado-Torres 2007). Partha Chatterjee (1993) has described these dynamics in terms of the "rule of colonial difference" which demands white Europeans to deny two realities (1) the idea that the evil that has taken place in Europe matters, and (2) the idea that the evils committed on behalf of Europe today matter.

In short, Orientalism has played a central role in shaping the production of whiteness in Europe by reinforcing the notion that Europe is a self-contained entity, whose moral superiority in comparison to 'the East' or 'the South' is merely circumstantial. This self narrative obscures that whiteness is not a static or isolated phenomenon, but rather a product of ongoing colonial power dynamics (Böröcz 2021). By portraying non-western cultures as fundamentally different and inferior to Eurowhite culture, Orientalist discourse reinforces the idea that being white is coterminous with being human, or just being in the world. At the same time, Orientalism promotes the idea that Europe's colonial past is a closed chapter, irrelevant to the present day. This refusal to consider historical relationships as generative of current power dynamics allows for the continued production of European white innocence (e.g. Wekker 2016), while simultaneously disregarding the effect of colonialism on global inequalities.

## **White Exceptionalism**

The history of Orientalist binary making has given rise to European white exceptionalism, which has been widely discussed across different European contexts (e.g. Mulinari et. al. 2009, Wekker 2016, Habel 2012, Danbolt 2017, Rastas 2012, Hübinette 2013). At its core is the assertion that because of [European country's] particular exceptional status, race or whiteness are essentially meaningless categories when it comes to explaining the continuation of today's racist experiences. This is grounded in the Orientalist equation of white European culture as stand-in for human value. The denial of race and racism is paradoxically framed as a marker of progressiveness and moral virtue. Compared to the more 'crude' direct way Europeans see whiteness dealt with in e.g. the US context, European white exceptionalism frames racial silence as a practice of human dignity, politeness, and moral superiority.

This logic has been observed in different cultural contexts. In her book *White Innocence* (2016), Gloria Wekker discusses several paradoxes of whiteness at work in the white Dutch self-narrative of color-evasive progressivism. One case study is the persistent Dutch racist tradition of the *Zwarte Piet* (black pete) blackfacing parades in early December whose cultural innocence is preserved through several conflicting discourses rooted in the assertion that racism in the Netherlands is over.



Mulinari et al. (2009) have discussed Nordic exceptionalism (Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway) in terms of a framing as 'outsiders' in relation to colonial histories. This counter-historical denial of colonial ties has been expressed through various local practices. Examples include Danish whitelash in response to the removal of racist caricatures from liquorice candy products (Danbolt 2017), the Swedish myth of the "hyperborean identity" which defines moral goodness through ignoring race (Habel, 2012) and the Finnish practice of "historical innocence", which constructs Finland as a victim of rather than a benefactor of European colonialism (Rastas 2012).

## **Eurowhiteness**

Sociologist József Böröcz (2021) characterises European whiteness in terms of a competitive process; a race for inclusion in the privilege community of *eurowhiteness*. He argues that due to the moral-political division of Europe into 'East' and 'West', Orientalism has not only been productive in separating European whiteness from the rest of the world, but also in creating an intra-European division between 'Western' and 'Eastern' European shades of whiteness. The notion of 'eurowhiteness' is associated with naturalised global privilege claims, for example through the ownership of a Schengen passport, ex-colonial infrastructures, and the unquestioned belonging to the relatively vaguely defined moral 'European value' community of the European Union.

It is also characterized by a condescending suspicion towards Eastern European whiteness, which Böröcz refers to as *dirty white*. This is a group who are considered to be part of the broader 'white' category but do not have access to the same privileges as those who embody eurowhiteness. This marginalization is often perceived as a form of condescension or insult from Western Europeans. Despite this marginalization, there has been no significant movement among Eastern Europeans to challenge the racialization of humanity on principled grounds. Instead, various political ideologies that could have served as a basis for such a reaction, such as socialist internationalism or liberal humanism, have failed to gain widespread traction. Thus, people racialized as dirty white are caught in a paradoxical situation where they simultaneously seek acceptance as white Europeans while also experiencing marginalization due to their perceived lack of eurowhiteness.

Böröcz describes the European whiteness as "comparative Europeanness" characterized by an anxiety around being and/or staying included in a privileged community recognised as eurowhite. Dynamics of Orientalism and exceptionalism are mobilised in this race for moral-geopolitical belonging. Ultimately what or who gets to be seen as white also gets to be seen as entitled to the global privilege of relevance, knowledge, and truth.

Overall, Orientalism, Exceptionalism and Eurowhiteness work together to produce a particular racial cognition which can be expected to manifest in the knowledge practices, processes and products made in Europe. Whilst this potentially applies to any academic project located there, my interest is in how the affect of eurowhite competition and exceptionalism manifests in the epistemic game studies culture in Europe.

## GAME STUDIES' EUROCENTRIC FOUNDATIONS

Tellingly, scholarship which directly confronts game studies' epistemic whiteness and Eurocentrism tends to come from places outside of Europe (Fickle 2019; Rizvi/Mukherjee 2023, Trammell 2023, Grace 2023). Rather than indicating the political innocence of European game studies as a disciplinary formation, a more plausible reason for this is the previously discussed white exceptionalism: Simply put, it is less cumbersome to practice "selective amnesia" (Rastas 2012) about racial history than to confront it, especially when amnesia is encouraged through by norms.

For this reason, it seems useful to dedicate a section of this paper to the discussion of Tara Fickle's chapter "West of the Magic Circle: The Orientalist Origins of Game Studies" from her 2019 book *The Race Card*. This is a text which actively challenges white amnesia by meticulously tracing the racist bias in the work of Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, two European game scholars who are generally accepted as the 'founding fathers' of game studies, seeing that they were the first scholars to present systematic analyses of the "seemingly limitless range of human activities described as play" (Fickle 2019, 113).

Fickle presents an exceptionally detailed analysis of the structural epistemic Orientalism in the two canonical game studies volumes *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1938) and *Man, Games and Play* (Caillois 1958) While conceding that Orientalism is "endemic" to the modernist Western project as a whole, Fickle demonstrates that Huizinga and Caillois were "particularly intimate with Orientalist beliefs and practices" (Fickle 2019, 117) which manifested in their foundational theories of games and play.

For instance, Dutch Orientalist Johan Huizinga's vastly influential conceptualisation of play as a 'magic circle', "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly" (Huizinga 1938), is anchored in a universalist Eurocentric vision of culture as 'civilization', a term which only makes sense via the implied Orientalist counterpart of 'primitivism'. Fickle explains:

This Eurocentric viewpoint, in which "culture" implicitly means Western European culture of the sort that had produced both Huizinga and Caillois, is further evident in their tendency to use the term "culture" (and "civilization") as if it were merely a neutral description of the attitudes and behaviors of a society. Yet "culture," as numerous scholars have amply demonstrated, has historically been invoked as a more palatable euphemism to obfuscate or naturalize thornier issues of structural inequality, particularly with regard to race and ethnicity (Fickle 2019, 115-116).

Fickle's suggestion is that Huizinga's argument regarding 'play as culture' contains racialized subtext pointing to what kind of 'culture' will, and in fact can, produce 'civilization' via play. It invokes white western self-narratives, such as the notion of human history as a linear progress which moves from 'primitivism' towards the 'ideal' state of the white western man (Fickle 2019, 116, Ehrmann, Lewis and Lewis 1968).

Building on the foundation of Huizinga, Roger Caillois's text *Man, Games and Play* (1958), provided an equally groundbreaking contribution to the 'disciplining' of European game studies via his influential ludic taxonomy, which divides games into four categories: competition, chance, mimicry, and vertigo and explains the unique pleasures and functions associated with each category. As Fickle argues, Caillois's

typology “has fundamentally shaped the course of contemporary discussions of gaming across a wide range of media, from console and handheld games to roulette and poker”. However, these discussions are far from racially neutral. Especially Caillois’s analysis of gambling hinges on associations to yellow peril stereotypes (Fickle 2019, 114).

Moreover, like Huizinga, Caillois imagines human development from the ‘most primitive’ stage of human play – the free, unstructured play of *paidia* – towards the most ‘civilized’ stage of play - the rule-governed ‘*ludus*’. *Ludus* is envisioned here as a uniquely Western way of ‘disciplining’ *paidia* via “process, calculation, [and the] spirit of enterprise”, whilst the ‘Orient’, represented by China, essentially chose a ‘more suited’ fate through the “calm, patience, and idle speculation” of *wan* (Caillois as cited in Fickle 2019, 129).

Fickle’s detailed dissection of Caillois’s ludo-Orientalism reveals that most of his extensive discussion of the term *wan* hinges on the poorly written but authoritative Giles’s Chinese-English Dictionary whose only purpose was facilitating British colonial administration over Hong Kong. As Fickle puts it; “That this dictionary of the empire would then serve as a privileged hypotext for Caillois’s own ludo-Orientalist endeavors is especially fitting given the latter’s own appetite for bureaucratic standardization and the taxonomic classification of foreign entities” (Fickle 2019, 129).

One example for this appetite, according to Fickle, is Caillois’s very taxonomy, whose division of games into four hierarchical categories with references ‘world cultures’ follows in the footsteps of Carl Linnaeus’ famous civilizational typology. In *Systema Naturae* (Linnaeus 1735), Linnaeus divides humans into four hierarchical racial ‘subspecies’ (‘white’ people from Europe, ‘black’ people from Africa, ‘dark’ people from Asia, and ‘red’ people from the Americas), along with descriptions of each race’s specific ‘humors’. Rather than suggesting that the contents of these models are the same (some overlaps exist), Fickle points to structural similarities in the way Caillois’s argument is designed: Rather than a “sociology derived from games”, as purported, it is “based on a schema that was from the very beginning made for classifying human beings” (Fickle 2019, 133).

One important caveat in Fickle’s argument is that the ‘ludic Orientalism’ at the core of Huizinga’s and Caillois’s work is neither surprising nor particularly unique. As discussed at length, Orientalism is a by-product of whiteness and therefore baked into western epistemologies by default. What is remarkable, however, is the persistence with which it has been ignored in citational practices around Huizinga and Caillois. Fickle observes a citational “tunnel vision” focusing on the first few chapters where definitions and taxonomies appear, while the “sizeable remainders” which follow stay uncited (Fickle 2019, 114).

This hides that “the definitions and taxonomies for which these theorists are now remembered were in fact, for them, only starting points for much broader ethnographic projects that have since been largely forgotten” (ibid). Ignoring this context, Fickle argues, happens at our own scholarly detriment:

“[W]e overlook these ludo-Orientalist resonances at our own peril, for doing so produces a series of blind spots in our own analyses that unwittingly reproduce some of the original theories’ most problematic ethnocentric assumptions. When we fail to acknowledge the East/West distinction as both the foundation for and a stumbling block in Huizinga’s and Caillois’s own binaristic conceptions of play

and seriousness, magic circle and ordinary life, competition and chance, and so on, the limitations of their theories become our own” (Fickle 2019, 118).

The impulse to ‘rescue’ Huizinga’s and Caillois’s theories from their problematic pasts to a better future of disciplining game studies is understandable, given the extensive theories they offer to explain the relevance of play and games within academia. However, this ‘rescue’ comes at the cost of harmful epistemic effects: at the core of these theories are racialized epistemic claims about what constitutes ‘ideal’ knowledge, who is the ‘ideal’ knower, and how is it ideal knowledge should be created.

## **DEFINITION MAKING OR: WHAT IS ‘IDEAL’ KNOWLEDGE ABOUT GAMES’ AND PLAY?**

Huizinga’s and Caillois’s undoubtedly significant analyses of games and play have offered particular blueprints for how to envision ‘ideal’ knowledge in game studies. As discussed by Fickle, Huizinga and Caillois are most frequently cited for their definitions and taxonomies of games (c.f. Stenros 2016). Huizinga’s idea of play as a ‘magic circle’ which is set apart from ordinary life and allows play to be a free, pleasurable activity unaffected by the pressures of real-world circumstances, has been particularly influential. It has been the starting point for many contemporary game studies, ranging from role-playing, to digital games, to sports. It has also been shaping the popular discourse around immersion in games – the pleasant feeling of losing oneself in play.

I suggest that the magic circle idea has another particular resonance with the racial condition of European whiteness. The imagination that play can – or ideally should – be located outside ordinary life resonates with the desire to ignore racial bias. In fact, it is a version of white exceptionalism, via Huizinga’s suggestion that play exists within culture and simultaneously outside of its ordinariness. Play is both socially profound whilst being (race) ‘free’. Huizinga’s theory adds scholarly authority to the collective eurowhite desire for racial innocence via play.

Within game studies, it has allowed a strong academic consensus to form over the notion that play is universally a source for joy, pleasure, and positive feelings in general. Within contemporary European games research this is most visible in modifiers such as ‘toxic’, ‘dark’, or ‘transgressive’ which get added to the term ‘play’ to suggest something else than the agreed-on meaning of pleasant play.

In his path-breaking study *Repairing Play* (2023), Aaron Trammell delivers a book-long critique of this sentiment, arguing that at its core, play is a power relationship with multiple potentials (Trammell 2023, 11). In addition to producing affects of joy, play can equally produce pain, oppression, and even torture. In other words, the ‘magic circle’ is not by default a pleasant or safe place for all players; it can exclude as much as include, and these dynamics are racialized.

While exclusion is not limited to race, Trammell argues that especially for Black, Indigenous and players of color, participating in play has never been pleasant or voluntary by definition. One of the potentials of play is ‘being played’; being subjugated to someone else’s rules against one’s will, the most extreme example being slavery. The pleasure and consent focus of Huizinga’s ‘magic circle’ theory does

not account for realities like these. By implication, it prioritizes the feelings and experiences of white players, thereby reproducing colonial biases.

Remembering the indoor playground of Kotteland, the distinction of *playing* versus *being played* is materialized in who gets to get 'freely' immersed in play and whose culture gets to be symbolically played by being displayed on a punching bag. The ample real-world references to African flora, fauna, and colonizer fashion further beg the question how much the 'magic circle' of toddler play is actually removed from practices of everyday racism. Arguably, not everyone can get equally safely 'immersed' in a play space like this.

In the Eurocentric formula of play as pleasure, there is no room for this acknowledgement, since the goal is to arrive at an 'essential' definition of play, which is expected to function regardless of socio-cultural contexts. As a result, instead of being seen as racialized and privileging white players, the definition of play as pleasure gets normalized, and deracialized into 'innocent' play. I would suggest that this is the equivalent of what in the context of epistemic violence Liu (2022) has described as the disappearance of whiteness behind the mantle of objectivity. This mantle of objectivity allows deviant experiences to be framed as 'corrupt', or 'not play', instead of getting seen as potentials of play, equal to pleasure.

Trammell's suggestion to the colonized definition of play inherited from Huizinga and commonly used in game studies needs to be repaired by remembering that play is a power relationship (Trammell 2023, 11). This means to acknowledge that "play includes through pleasure and excludes through torture" (2023, 14).

Fickle has reminded us of the temptation to locate the problem with Huizinga's and Caillois's Orientalist baggage in the 'antiquated' nature of analog games, whilst dismissing its relevance for digital games (Fickle 124). However, there is evidence that digital game theories are similarly affected by Orientalist legacies. One particular pattern Fickle observes is the use of hierarchical binaries inspired by Caillois's ludus/paidia binary.

Fickle cites the example of Jesper Juul's *Half Real* game definition, which hinges on the formal division of games into two halves, 'rules' and 'fiction', whereby the former is marked as more 'core', and thus relevant to understanding games 'as games'. Fickle argues that this model performs the "complete and unconscious lamination of the East/West binary onto the game/reality binary" (125). Like in the East/West binary, one half is considered more relevant than the other, thus suggesting a hierarchical order in which to prioritize game elements.

The argument is not that Orientalism gets directly repeated in its most blatant expressions, but rather in its logic; the epistemic practice of splitting in half and attributing a hierarchy.

This logic has been repeated in other digital game definitions which have influenced me as a young game scholar familiarizing myself with key research in European game studies, including Frans Mäyrä's (2008) core/shell gameplay model (2008, 17). A variation of the half-real argument, Mäyrä defines the 'core' of a game or gameplay experience as "everything a player can do" in addition to rules governing player behavior. As opposed to this the 'shell' layer is the semiotic surrounding adding meaning and flavor to the 'core' interactions. Like Juul's model, the main purpose of

this binary is to create a hierarchization of information, where the 'ludic' aspect of games is presented as more urgently required to understand the 'essence' of games.

The attractiveness of binary game models derived from ludo-Orientalism is also closely associated with European game studies only 'disciplinary lore', the 'ludology versus narratology' mythology. This mythology divides the world of academia into two unequal halves. Ludology, the 'civilized' half of Caillois's ludus/paidia binary (Fickle 2019) competes with 'narratology', a term invented to suggest distance to game studies. The mythological 'debate' constructs game studies as a territorial fight for relevance. Whilst ludology locates itself at the center of game studies, via its calm and rational pursuit of formal game analysis, a bunch of extra-disciplinary narratologists attempt to colonize game studies (Phillips 2020). This puts ludology in peril: It must fight to protect itself from the threat of disciplinary invasion.

This well-travelled mythology has had a number of epistemic implications. First, it has had ludologist work position itself as politically neutral 'core' of game studies, avoiding reflection on its ludo-Orientalist biases. In the same way that rules have been seen as more essential to games than semiotics, formalism has been seen as more essential to understanding games than cultural studies. Secondly, this has positioned politically engaged games research at the margin/shell of game studies, devaluing their relevance: Have cultural scholars who include questions of power in their games research *really* been doing game studies?

The ludology vs. narratology mythology is a battle for relevance which is a lamination of the dynamics Böröcz observes in the context of eurowhiteness vs. dirty whiteness. Ultimately, what or who gets to be included as a ludologist is entitled to the privilege of relevance, knowledge, and truth.

I would call this sentiment ludic supremacy: The belief that there is an epistemic hierarchy on which the formal study of rules and mechanics is the most valuable, relevant, and justified contribution to game studies. Again, rather than a conscious agenda, it is an unconscious effect of the eurowhite racial cognition to associate essential 'goodness' with a particular standpoint and set of privilege claims. Eurowhiteness views itself as naturally deserving of access to global goods and services. It aggressively protects its boundaries. Growing on this cultural soil, ludology has affirmed itself as deserving of authority whilst closing its epistemic borders to others.

When considering these dynamics through the playground analogy, the racial heritage of Huizinga's and Caillois's binary practices functions like a fence which shields off 'safe play epistemology' from purported dangers to the discipline. Whilst appearing detached from questions of race, considerations as to what kind of bodies (of work) should be relevant on the epistemic playground are racialized via Orientalist binaries. The 'rides' and activities designed through binaries of relevance are only accessible to some players; those whose ideas match the invisible criteria of eurowhiteness. To have fun on this playground, it is expected that play aligns with the rules of eurowhite competition and exceptionalism (Böröcz 2021). Players who are seen to use the normative rides in awkward ways or report their pain whilst using them, are considered colonizers and told to conform or to leave (e.g. Bishop 2020).

## **CAREER MAKING OR: WHO IS THE 'IDEAL' KNOWER OF GAMES AND PLAY?**

This takes me to the second question of epistemic violence, who is assumed as the ideal knower of games and play. Just like definitions of play and games are racialized by default of being derived from Orientalist legacies, the scholars who make them are steeped in particular standpoints, traditionally white, male, bourgeois (Liu 2022). As shown in Fickle (2019) Huizinga's and Caillois's authority status as founding fathers not only established their ideas as 'leading' the field of game studies, but presented a blueprint of what kinds of bodies to see as generative of neutral authoritative voices about play and games: This is because the relationship between idealizing white European play culture and experts about that culture goes both ways: Huizinga and Caillois were both produced by white European culture, and producers of it via their neutral treatment as simply 'culture' or 'society' (Fickle 2019, 115–116).

From the perspective of epistemic violence, it is standpoints like Huizinga's and Caillois's which are by default equipped with the invisible authority of appearing as objective, instead of productive of eurowhite privilege claims. The result is an epistemological climate in which Huizinga- or Caillois-like bodies, interests and languages have a better chance at getting recognized as experts on games than those whose bodies have historically been framed as opportunities for European colonial extraction and exploitation; Indigenous knowers. In her article on Indigenous autoethnography as a method which 'pushes back' against western paradigms of knowing, Michelle Bishop writes:

My dissent with imperialistic, Eurocentric, patriarchal knowledge paradigms is shown through what may be interpreted as non-conventional research and writing practices. Indigenous autoethnographies cannot and will not be defined or reduced to a checklist. They operate from a different axiology and ontology that does not seek to categorize, classify, or simplify; instead, Indigenous autoethnographies strive to increase complexity. In this way, cultural agency is asserted; bound by obligations to family, communities, Country, Knowledges – 'where storytelling can spiral into a bigger pattern, an interconnected-ness that recognizes and links together infinite experiences across time and space' (Bishop, 2020).

Bishop's characterization of Indigenous knowledge as complex and bound by cultural social obligations positions 'knowers' in a way which cannot be easily recognized as such within aggressive eurowhite practices of epistemic boundary making. Knowing as a practice of interconnectedness is fundamentally at odds with the eurowhite expectation of a 'neutral' white male knower who produces 'universal' theories by splitting the world into center/periphery binaries. This creates a climate where Indigenous knowers of games and play are urged to protect their legitimacy as experts and valid creators of knowledge via arguments of Indigenous self-determination (Laiti 2021, LaPensée 2018)

The racial disparity regarding perceptions of 'knowers' as attached to whiteness has been more widely related to other problems, such as white extractionist behavior in cross-cultural collaborations, and, ironically, an unfair advantage in publishing on and being cited on race (Chakravartty et al. 2018, 260). These reports resonate with my own experience as a white scholar who has not faced any significant institutional hurdles when attempting to publish on race-related topics in games. At the same time, I have witnessed colleagues go through humiliating co-authoring experiences and gate

keeping processes because their bodies and epistemologies did not match eurowhite excellence norms. Talking about different experiences within the same institutional framework with non-white colleagues has been insightful in challenging the seeming objectivity of academic publishing: From reviewing standards, to accepted linguistic norms, to the very definition of what constitutes a successful academic contribution: Many elements within this system are designed to elevate Eurocentric ways of being a knower.

Finally, when it comes to studying videogames in Europe, being an 'ideal' knower seems to mean being a knower of games made in the Global North (Rizvi & Mukherjee 2023). As Rizvi and Mukherjee document, when games from the Global South are being studied, it tends to be through an Orientalist "filter of sameness", which ends up in "the popularization of the grand-narrative of a single game-story where caste, the diversity of religion and faith, queerness, and affinity are not reflected" (p. 1).

Eurocentric game studies seems to repeat on the research level what is already happening on the in-game level of video games: Taking white representation more seriously (e.g. Dietrich 2013). Following the larger academic trend that white men get to be seen as 'ideal' harbingers of knowledge (Liu 2022), white game contents from the Global North get to be treated as the 'ideal' object of study, deserving of more discursive, reflective nuance than their Global South counterparts. They get to be valued in terms of multiple game stories, as opposed to the stereotypical "single game-story" discussed by Rizvi and Mukherjee (2023).

## **CONCLUSIVE THOUGHTS**

What does it take to dismantle whiteness in European playgrounds of knowledge? Is it enough to highlight the racial line of segregation between those who get to play (a role) in European game studies, and those who get to be turned into background decoration? The aim of drawing together the threads of eurowhite privilege, play, and epistemology in this paper was to work on a language of accountability about the continuing relationship between coloniality, whiteness and knowledge. If all knowledge is racialized, what does this mean for game studies in Europe? How do 'white epistemic playgrounds' function? What type of excellence do they produce? What roles are we assigned when learning and performing epistemic whiteness? How do these practices affect our individual, collaborative, and institutional research settings?

In having explored these questions, both through conceptual work and through autoethnographic data demonstrating my immersion in racialized knowledge structures, I have attempted to show that European whiteness and games epistemology are closely linked and inform each other in ways which produces exclusionary effects through epistemic violence.

In this paper, I have particularly focused on the what and the who of epistemic violence: What kind of knowledges have been encouraged in the climate of white exceptionalism, white innocence and Orientalist history? Which ones are by default excluded? And who can expect to receive the designation as a 'knower', given these conditions?



Whilst the ambition of this paper was to encounter, unpack and confront the relationship between race and European whiteness, the work of accountability would require the development of practices which break established patterns efficiently from where we stand. Chakravartty et al. (2018) propose “citational representation” as a strategy, not just by ‘adding’ scholars of color to subfields, but by rethinking normative engagement with the literature in the first place. It will require more collaborative action to attend to structures of knowledge production in a way which can challenge current structures of power embedded within knowledge production. To dismantle the entrenched power dynamics that perpetuate epistemic inequity, it takes more than to ‘play critically’ on the segregationist playgrounds of whiteness.

The children playing on the Swedish Kotteland playground may subvert its colonial theme by deciding not to punch the tiki mask bag, roleplaying as a tiger, or retheming the purple ball pit into blueberry land. However, it would take conscious redesign to change the grand narrative of Kotteland towards a place where bite-sized pieces of colonialism aren’t fed to kids with tiny plastic spoons, and where nature serves as a backdrop to white colonial adventures. What if such environments were built to nurture human-nature relations and not to promote superiority of any kind? What if protecting, caring and coexisting, rather than pushing, shoving, and conquering, were the main verbs of child play interactions?

As my friend Maria informs me, Gotlandic mythology itself offers some potential inspirations in this regard. The *small ones underground* (*di sma undar járdi*) are creatures who will help us if we treat them well, encouraging us to form sustainable relationships with the ground. This is an excellent example for alternative models for human-nature relationships which might guide ways to rethink (knowledges of) games and play beyond eurowhite extractionist relationships. At the same time, the endemic nature of whiteness in Eurocentric knowledge suggests that such a process of re-design must recognize the embodied, racialized nature of knowledge production.

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