A Call for an Appalachian Game Studies

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ABSTRACT

An unlikely intersection of Appalachian studies and game studies may prove beneficial to both interdisciplines. Following the concept of regional game studies, an Appalachian game studies continues the tradition of evaluating media for its representation of the region and associated power dynamics, as well as furthering newer drives toward reclamation. It also introduces insights from an overlooked rural culture.

Keywords

Appalachia, regional game studies, rural

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Appalachia is a cultural region within the Southern and Mid-Atlantic regions of the United States. It is widely known for past exploitation by natural resources industries, relative underdevelopment compared to the rest of the country, and regressive stereotypes such as the "redneck" or "hillbilly." Despite this, scholarly attention toward the region over the last century has looked to dispel negative outlooks and advance the region's interests through organizations like the Appalachian Studies Association.

Game studies has experienced a "regional turn," emphasizing a need for insights from nontraditional contexts (Liboriussen and Martin 2016). Appalachia may be situated within the United States, but decades of Appalachian studies make use of a framework known as the internal colony model (Lewis et al. 1978; Stump 2018). This model positions the region as a pseudocolony to examine how its underdevelopment occurred and continues. It has made Appalachian studies quite familiar with postcolonial theory, although analogies have been fairly problematized for overreach, reductionism, and inappropriateness (Fisher and Smith 2016). Nonetheless, this extended abstract proposes an Appalachian game studies to the benefit of each source interdiscipline. This intersection aligns with the postcolonial analysis and unique regional contexts present in broader regional game studies (Liboriussen and Martin 2016).

An unfortunate tendency of Appalachian studies has been to reinforce a notion of a region stuck in the past (Obermiller and Maloney 2016, 110). Little work in the field focuses on newer forms of media and resultant cultural practices. Appalachia, however, is not isolated from these developments. For instance, a cave system in the

region inspired one of the earliest text adventure games, *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther 1976; Reed et al. 2020, 35). Recent years have also seen Appalachia and its culture featured in notable video games: *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Game Studios 2018), *Nights in the Woods* (Infinite Fall and Secret Lab 2017), *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2020), and *Call of Duty: Black Ops 6*. Beyond just representing the region, research especially cropped up around the first of these, showing such study as relevant through documentation of emergent cultural practices and relationship to place (Hilliard 2022; Bowman et al. 2020). Examples range from touristic theft of heritage, to futurist reimaginings of Appalachia's revival, to a virtual return to home for "expatriates."

Appalachian presence is not limited to video games. There are tabletop games set in the region: *Rage Across Appalachia* (White Wolf Game Studio 1995), *Holler: An Appalachian Apocalypse* (Earley 2021), and *Old Gods of Appalachia Roleplaying Game* (Monte Cook Games 2022). Popular play podcast *The Adventure Zone*, hosted by Appalachian natives, also sees its use in their campaign settings (Elroy et al. 2014). Many of these feature both reclamatory elements and reproductions of harmful tropes—like Appalachia as home to the supernatural due to its underdevelopment— all varying in audience reception.

Furthermore, attention should be paid to play outside of video and tabletop games, such as that of sports situated in Appalachian contexts. Stock car racing, popularized by NASCAR, originated with Appalachians evading law enforcement over illegally produced moonshine and whiskey (Paic 2019). Emily Hilliard (2022, 153–180) demonstrates a connection between independent professional wrestling and the region, suggesting it operates as a folkloric practice for navigating identity and sociopolitical tensions. Other Appalachian play is poorly documented but holds much promise for scholarly exploration. One such case is that of childrens' self-entertainment while laboring in coal mines over a century ago (Manning 2014). Outside of the historical, the study of present-day play contexts may provide more opportunities. Consider a documentation of "mudding" culture, an activity heavily associated with Appalachia wherein participants overcome the obstacle of slippery, muddy terrain in off-road vehicles, sometimes as a race and other times solely for entertainment.

Across multiple domains, an Appalachian game studies offers much material of interest for its source interdisciplines. It grants Appalachian studies a new perspective on the region, its representations, relevant power dynamics (external *and* internal), and potential interventions. This crosspollination may additionally provide more allies for Appalachia in its defense and recovery, particularly in a chance at overcoming narratives of isolation and fossilization. As for game studies, rural outlooks on games and play—especially those involving exploitation and its subversion—are introduced, which further complicate simplistic notions of power that regional game studies attempts to overcome (Liboriussen and Martin 2016). It also offers yet another opportunity for incorporating unique work on non-digital games into the field.

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