Reclaiming Play: Positioning Central Asia in Global Game Studies

An Editorial Introduction to the First DiGRA Central Asia Conference

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The first DiGRA Central Asia conference was conceived without predefined tracks or a dominant methodological frame. Rather than prescribing directions, the organizing committee sought to understand where the field currently stands, viewing the conference as an opportunity to map the intellectual terrain of video game scholarship in Central Asia. The resulting body of work prompts a broader reflection on the position of Central Asian game studies within the nature of human play. Do the emerging research trajectories signal the beginning of a new academic formation shaped by global theoretical frameworks and technological advances, or do they represent the scholarly articulation of ludic traditions long embedded in the region's cultural practices?

The history of the Central Asian homo ludens is rooted in ancestral forms of collective play, long preceding the advent of digital gaming. For much of human history, play permeated everyday life and contributed to the formation of cultural norms and practices. Mancala, one of the oldest known board games and a precursor to the Kazakh Togyzqumalaq and Kyrgyz Toguz korgool, is well over five thousand years old (UNESCO 2020). By comparison, one of the earliest known legal codes, the Code of Hammurabi, was created some fifteen centuries later.

Games and toys have often carried sacred significance. Among nomadic Turkic peoples, *asyks*[1] signified much more than simple toys—they functioned as objects embedded in broader systems of cultural practice and symbolic meaning. The four stable positions of the bone correspond to key animals of the pastoral economy (horse, camel, sheep, and goat), forming a symbolic system in which chance outcomes reflect the hierarchy of steppe life: horse indicating success, sheep prosperity, camel endurance, and goat misfortune (Pegg 2001). Before major battles, elders cast *asyks*

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to divine the will of fate: depending on the side on which the bone landed, the outcome was interpreted. Asyks were often passed down through generations and marked with a tamga. When worn as amulets around the neck, they were believed to bring good fortune and protection from malevolent forces (Sydykov et al 2015).

Kanat Nurov suggests that play operates on two levels in nomadic culture: as a universal human impulse common to all societies and as a culturally intensified principle uniquely structuring nomadic social and symbolic life (Nurov 2011). Central Asian culture is organized around ludic modes of engagement with reality, in which intellectual skill, ritual authority, and social wit are expressed through performative practices. Poetic contests, such as *aitys*[2], publicly stage verbal mastery, while ritual genres like *bata*[3] follow their own codified conventions. In this sense, both entertainment and ceremony operate as forms of play: the bata may be understood as a sacred game and the aitys as a social one. This playful disposition was observed by the nineteenth-century ethnographer and turkologist Radloff, who wrote that steppe nomads "possess an excellent command of speech, love storytelling, and frequently engage in wordplay. Their conversations are always witty and full of playful teasing. It is therefore unsurprising that they have developed an extraordinarily rich folk poetry" (Radloff 1884/1989, quoted in Nurov 2011). The language itself inscribes the convergence of play and verbal culture. In Kazakh, oyın signifies "game" or "play," while its semantic field overlaps with joking and ironic speech. The language thus preserves traces of a worldview in which play permeates everyday modes of social interaction beyond the confines of formal games.

This broader semantic range of play is not unique to Kazakh. In many languages, the verb "to play" extends far beyond children's amusement. Musicians play instruments. Actors play roles. The wind plays in the treetops. We have grown accustomed to perceiving play as trivial or childish, yet language itself preserves traces of a far deeper and more expansive meaning. "Play" once denoted a mode of being in the world rather than a marginal activity confined to leisure. The gradual displacement of oral culture during industrial modernity weakened many playful practices. Marshall McLuhan, in his theory of media determinism, argued that the dominant medium of an era shapes the culture of that era itself. He devoted particular attention to what he termed the "Gutenberg Galaxy"—the typographic age inaugurated by the printing press of Johannes Gutenberg. The printing press standardized texts; standardized texts, in turn, standardized perception. According to McLuhan, print culture cultivated linear thinking, segmentation, and uniformity, making printed text the dominant vehicle of meaning and communication for centuries. The legacy of homo typographicus remains with us today, especially in our inherited preference for linear logic and standardized modes of thinking (McLuhan 1962). This standardizing force primarily affected written culture. Oral traditions of nomads, which rely on performance, memory, and variation, rather than fixed textual forms, are structurally more resistant to the rigid linearity imposed by print.

Yet the broader transformations of industrial modernity gradually displaced play from the center of social life in Central Asia. During the collectivization and sedentarization, nomadic communities experienced a forceful separation from the practices that had shaped their cultural and social lives. Play receded from everyday visibility. Yet it did not disappear—it survived in the realm of childhood. Children's capacity to play anywhere and under any circumstances preserved traditions that might otherwise have vanished. And this preservation extends beyond games per se: divination rituals, superstitions, and ceremonial practices all retain a ludic core (Huizinga 1949). It is no

coincidence that fascination with such practices often peaks in childhood, where the boundaries between ritual, imagination, and play remain fluid (Woolley 1997; Brashier & Multhaup 2017).

Industrial modernity reorganized everyday life around regimes of discipline, productivity, and standardized time. Play was now framed as unproductive, a fleeting indulgence without tangible value. Leisure became scarce and costly, while societies drifted toward a cult of overwork—from Stakhanovite production quotas[4] to survival labor during economic crises. Only in recent decades has this rigid dichotomy of work and play begun to erode. Contemporary generations increasingly seek work that inspires rather than exhausts, and they approach leisure as something productive and meaningful (Petelczyc et al. 2018). Playful elements enter serious domains; games themselves are taken seriously.

Traditional games in Central Asia regain public visibility. Initiated in Kyrgyzstan in 2014, the World Nomad Games institutionalized and revived nomadic ludic practices. The event expanded beyond Central Asia, with Türkiye hosting the 2022 edition, signaling its growing international scope. Play thus reclaims public space within a globalized and digital environment, transforming ancestral practices into platforms of cultural diplomacy and transnational exchange.

Renewed attention to traditional games is not mere nostalgia. It acknowledges that play functions as a vehicle for transmitting knowledge, values, and identity. Games have accompanied humanity throughout its history; only now has their seriousness become fully apparent. In the digital age, technological modernity produces a paradoxical return, recreating patterns of experience that recall ancestral myth. The digital space resembles an enchanted forest: hyperlinks carve pathways, and algorithmic "spirits" guide us, often anticipating our desires more accurately than we can articulate them ourselves. Content is no longer static or linear; it becomes pliable material that users actively reshape. Contemporary digital communication increasingly functions according to the logic of cyberdrama—a convergence of narrative and interactivity in which stories are enacted rather than passively consumed (Murray 2017). The user is no longer merely a recipient of meaning but an active participant in its unfolding.

The ludic turn follows logically from the digital transformation: as technologies restructure communication and participation, they also normalize games and gamification, embedding interactive logic across social life. Information itself becomes something we navigate, modify, and experience playfully (Zimmerman 2015). Video games have reclaimed their position as a significant medium of cultural production, providing expressive opportunities not found in conventional media. They create interactive, multilayered spaces in which cultural symbols and archetypes can be reinterpreted. Player choices alter narrative trajectories and reshape characters (Bogost 2007).

Video games are inherently global products. Unlike locally distributed goods, they circulate instantly across borders. This global circulation simultaneously homogenizes and diversifies culture: it risks flattening local identities, yet it also creates unprecedented opportunities for cross-cultural visibility. Like any cultural artifact, a game can embed its creator's cultural code. It can be explicit, as in narrative reflections on collective memory in The Train Parable, or through culturally grounded mechanics, as in Making Beshbarmak, an interactive cooking game based on Kazakh

and Kyrgyz culinary traditions. Cultural references may also be embedded subtly through aesthetic detail. In Illusionary Manor, players enter and interact with works of world art, stepping inside paintings and altering them; among these canvases appear Kazakh artworks. Here, the incorporation of local works serves not only as an Easter egg but also as a symbol of cultural recognition, encouraging global viewers to explore regional heritage through gameplay. All three projects, showcased at DiGRA Central Asia, demonstrate distinct strategies for integrating regional cultural narratives into globally accessible digital forms.

Video games are effective instruments of soft power—the ability of states to influence others through cultural attraction rather than coercion. One of its key mechanisms is cultural export, understood as the transnational circulation of cultural products that enhances international visibility while generating symbolic and economic capital (Nye 2004). In this context, video games represent a particularly potent form of cultural export due to their global accessibility and immersive, interactive nature.

For Central Asia, cultural export carries a decolonial dimension: it enables the articulation of local histories, values, and perspectives beyond inherited imperial Soviet frameworks, allowing for the construction of an autonomous cultural subject in the global arena. Rather than being represented through externally imposed narratives or geopolitical stereotypes, the region gains the capacity to narrate itself through its own aesthetic forms, symbols, and modes of storytelling (Tlostanova 2015). In this sense, the production and circulation of games becomes an opportunity to reclaim authorship over cultural meaning.

Within this framework, a key strategic question emerges: should Central Asian game development prioritize explicit local cultural representation, or can global relevance itself constitute a form of cultural presence? Black Myth: Wukong, inspired by the classical novel Journey to the West, has stimulated tourism in Shanxi province, China, with players seeking real-world locations recreated in the game. Local authorities and businesses capitalized on this interest by integrating cultural heritage and digital narratives (Fan 2024). Here, game design becomes a driver of tourism and national branding. Sweden illustrates another path. In 2024, it recognized fifteen domestically developed video games, including Minecraft, Candy Crush Saga, and It Takes Two, as part of its cultural heritage (Kerr 2024). None of these titles needed to explicitly reference traditional Swedish culture to be recognized as part of the nation's cultural heritage. Their cultural impact lies in creative excellence and global resonance rather than direct representation, making it a legitimate strategy of cultural visibility in the global gaming landscape.

Central Asia's game development sector has not yet crystallized into a recognizable global brand and remains in a phase of consolidation. Industry mapping identifies more than 100 active studios across the region, with the largest concentration in Kazakhstan, followed by Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. A significant portion of the industry operates in outsourcing and co-development for international publishers, limiting opportunities for local authorship despite technical integration into global production networks. At the same time, the expansion of developer communities, game jams, and educational initiatives points to an ecosystem in formation rather than a marginal or isolated field (Xsolla 2023). While the region has not yet emerged as a globally recognized game development hub, analysts point to industry growth, increasing institutional support, export orientation, and long-term potential.

Whether the region follows the Swedish model of globally resonant creativity, adopts a culturally explicit strategy similar to China's, combines elements of both, or forges an entirely new path is ultimately secondary. What matters here is the recognition that games and ludic practices already exert cultural, economic, and symbolic influence. They shape narratives, circulate values, and participate in the construction of identity. Ignoring this influence would not halt the development of the industry; it would merely forfeit the opportunity to shape its direction.

In this context, the consolidation of Central Asian researchers, developers, and educators enhances the visibility of video games not as peripheral entertainment but as a serious domain of cultural and economic production and academic inquiry. Methodologically ambitious, technologically literate, ethically attentive, and increasingly engaged with global academic discourse, the papers presented at the first DiGRA Central Asia Conference reveal both the structural strengths of the region and the emerging trajectories that may shape its contribution to international game studies in the years to come.

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The conference showcase participants deserve special recognition for presenting their creative projects and playable works, including Illusionary Manor, The Train Parable, Emberbloom, Making Beshbarmak, Reverb, Step to the Moon, and Art Freaktion. Their contributions highlighted the diversity of game development practices in the region and enriched the dialogue between academic research and creative production.

ENDNOTES

[1] Sheep ankle bones used as playing pieces in traditional games across Eurasia.

[2] A traditional Central Asian poetic contest in which two performers (akyns) engage in improvised verbal dueling, composing and singing verses in response to each other before an audience, often addressing social, political, or cultural themes.

[3] A traditional Kazakh ritual blessing delivered in poetic or formulaic speech, usually by an elder, to express goodwill, invoke protection, or mark decisive moments such as journeys, celebrations, or communal gatherings.

[4] Production targets established in the USSR in the mid-1930s as part of the Stakhanovite movement, encouraging workers to exceed standard norms as a model of socialist labor productivity and discipline.

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