

Pleasure Not For Everyone: Epistemic Injustice Towards Ukrainian Game Studies

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INTRODUCTION

Calls for playfulness in research suggest that playful research can, among other things, bring joy and pleasure of learning (Nørgård and Moseley 2021). However, as Trammell (2020) argues, games are not inherently liberatory: they can also reproduce oppressive and traumatizing conditions for minoritized participants. We argue that academia is no exception, operating through rules, norms, and gatekeeping practices that limit access to the pleasures of learning and participation. Although game studies scholars have examined the policing of pleasure and access to play for decades, the discipline has yet to fully confront its own internal exclusions and the ways these restrict the pleasure of learning for voices outside the majority.

Postcolonial research in game studies is one area aiming to break the unequal representation of different cultures, races and ethnicities in game studies, bringing in minority perspectives. However, as Mukherjee (2017) notes, a big chunk of postcolonial theory and what has been taken from it by game studies presents the Western, or, more often, Western European perspective. With the discourses being so focused on imperial Europe and responses to its actions, other empires remain less discussed – and results of their colonization less seen.

The European colonizers are often grouped under the umbrella of whiteness. While the discussions around issues with grouping people of color under one label are more common postcolonial theory (Gunew 1997), non-monolithic nature of whiteness deserves greater attention (Imre 2012). It is the lack of this diversity that leads to one-sidedness of the discussions surrounding epistemic injustice in game studies.

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Unpacking the notion of “dirty whiteness,” Harrer (2024) notes how Eastern European whiteness keeps being condescended upon and marginalized by those embodying “eurowhiteness.”

Bringing in this division, however, does not automatically show all the nuances of yet another division that worsens the epistemic violence and exclusion of certain nationalities. Ukraine is among the countries that remain underrepresented even as a part of Eastern Europe. Ukraine has long been excluded from discussions on postcolonialism (Khylko and Khylko 2024) due to whiteness of the population and an oppressor not being a European empire. At the same time, Ukraine’s history has been shaped by imperial and colonial violence. Its sovereignty, internationally recognized in 1991, is now being threatened by Russia’s ongoing military invasion.

In many areas, game studies included, the invisibility of a postcolonial position of Ukraine, masked under “post-Soviet” generalizations, led to the lack of acknowledgement of Ukrainian scholars’ experiences and struggles. Game studies, however, is a special case. Like most knowledge fields, it is shaped by global hierarchies that determine who is recognized as a legitimate producer of theory. At the same time, game studies is a relatively young field that often presents itself as international and intersectional. Yet participation in the field still depends on access to unevenly distributed infrastructures, including digital game platforms, conferences, publication venues, funding, and academic networks.

This extended abstract presents our in-progress collaborative autoethnographic project as Ukrainian game studies scholars, outlining our theoretical framework and emerging reflections. Through journaling, note- and experience-sharing, we analyze our career paths as Ukrainian game studies scholars and reflect on our experiences in fields of HCI and game studies. Building on Fricker’s (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, we argue that Ukrainian scholars face a dual barrier to participation in game studies: structural inaccessibility within Ukraine, and epistemic misrecognition within Western institutions. Together, these barriers restrict not only who can enter the field, but also which forms of knowledge are treated as credible within it.

This study aims to point at the limitations of current discussions on diversity and accessibility in game studies, and show how these discussions reflect broader epistemic injustice despite topics of power and privilege having been raised more frequently in the past decade.

DUAL BARRIER OF EXCLUSION OF UKRAINIAN GAME STUDIES SCHOLARS

Epistemic injustice is a topic that has only recently gained attention in relation to game studies, focusing on how the very concepts of game and play take root in works by White European scholars, therefore ignoring knowledge produced elsewhere (Fickle 2019; Trammell 2023). As Harrer (2024) notes, game studies knowledge tends to be produced and discussed through dominant norms that define what counts as games, play, fun, and pleasure, often in ways that exclude alternative epistemologies.

Fricker (2007) points to different kinds of epistemic prejudice and discrimination, namely testimonial injustice (when a speaker is labeled as epistemically lesser due to their identity, nationality etc.) as direct discrimination and hermeneutical injustice (limitation of access to experience and understanding) as somewhat less direct

discrimination. In one of the latter works, Fricker (2017) also points to distributive injustice, unfair distribution of access and information that is also discriminatory.

Chernetsky (2024) applies the lens of testimonial injustice directly to Eastern Europe, highlighting the persistence of “pre-emptive testimonial injustice” in how Western academia disregards Ukrainian knowledge production. Chouliaraki’s (2013) work on humanitarian representation provides further insight into the Western tendency to construct “hierarchies of suffering,” where certain regions are framed as sites of victimhood rather than agency. Within this humanitarian gaze, Ukrainians are often represented as too vulnerable, too devastated, or too preoccupied with survival to participate in knowledge-making.

At the same time, theories of pleasure and play in humanities are often articulated from Western epistemic centers. Pleasure becomes framed as something theorized *from stability*, while trauma is theorized *from the margins*. As a result, scholars from Eastern Europe and the Global South are more readily associated with war, violence, or displacement than with joy, fun, or playfulness.

Based on the theoretical framework, we argue that Ukrainian game studies scholars face a dual barrier of exclusion, with two layers interconnected and influencing one another.

Within Ukraine, access to game studies is constrained by material conditions: limited funding for the humanities and some areas of social sciences, scarce institutional support for games research, bias towards games as a study subject, restricted access to libraries and journals, and the destabilizing effects of war. These structural factors form the first layer of exclusion.

Within Western institutions, Ukrainian game scholars often face a different form of epistemic injustice: Russia’s ongoing colonial aggression is often left unacknowledged, while Eastern European game cultures are flattened into the label “post-Soviet” within academic and industry discourse. Furthermore, there is a recurring assumption that Ukrainians are “too traumatized” to engage in research on play, pleasure, or storytelling. This excludes Ukrainians from producing theory about games, even when they have firsthand insight into how play operates under conditions of war, displacement, and resistance.

Drawing on our ongoing collaborative autoethnographic reflections (Chang 2008), we will trace how these two layers of exclusion shape access to funding, supervision, mobility, and recognition in both Ukrainian and Western institutions. Through analysis of each other’s notes on experiences of being Ukrainian scholars and studying games and experience-sharing dialogues, we present preliminary findings related to scholarship and visa applications, conferences, and peer review, and outline how international game studies communities might move from humanitarian concern for Ukrainian scholars toward genuine epistemic inclusion.

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