

Chapter 17

Games People Play: A Trilateral Collaboration Researching Computer Gaming across Cultures

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ABSTRACT

The study of various choices made while producing and playing games allows little opportunity for interrogating video games as a transcultural convergence of multiple subjectivities and institutions. This chapter speaks to this topic by presenting the Computer Games Across Cultures (CGAC) project. CGAC involved humanities researchers from West Virginia University (USA), Bangor University (Wales), and Jawaharlal Nehru University (India) who over a two-year period sought to understand creative and cultural aspects of gaming. CGAC's researchers employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to bridge the gap between the academic explorations of gaming in tandem with industry-specific practices within such spaces. This chapter provides an overview of the resultant work through its analysis of a cross-section of games. Examining both Western mainstream games and lesser known games from places like India and Ghana helped interrogate representational politics in videogames and provide a broader view of the relationship between gaming and game making, in a socio-cultural context.

INTRODUCTION

In the days before the 2014 Indian elections, voters played *Modi Run*, a mobile action game where candidate Narendra Modi runs through all the Indian states and wins the election to become Prime Minister of India. In Ghana, teenagers play *Ananse: The Origin*, a 2-D adventure game adapted from traditional African folktales. The game features Ananse, a trickster figure, as the hero, capturing enemies and villains in order to become a master-storyteller. In the USA, over 27 million people play the fantasy game

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League of Legends daily, with many millions more playing in other countries. The annual *LoL* World Championship professional competition draws over 32 million online viewers and a prize of over one million dollars.

Games are a shared global experience and activity. They can be seen as an overarching cultural identifier. That is, games are a way of life that directly reflect the culture in which they are played. This is true for the most traditional of games, from croquet and *Monopoly*, to games such as *Mancala*, the board game common throughout the Middle East and northern Africa. It is also true today for video and computer games.

Games are simultaneously global and local. Mainstream video and computer games are often designed by multinational corporations with enormous budgets, high production values, voice talents from famous celebrities, and technical requirements limited to state-of-the-art devices and connectivity. At the same time, cultures outside of the West often negotiate a variety of challenges in regard to access and bandwidth. Does this mean they are not playing games? To the contrary, games are everywhere, and this fact means that games must be understood across cultures and for the ways they provide insight into both the local and the global.

The global game industry is projected to generate 86 billion dollars annually by 2016. In India alone, the industry is already close to 890 million dollars (Nasscom.in, 2015). Video and computer games are often studied for their technological construction and aesthetics, but not enough attention is given to games as cultural artifacts. Even more pressing is the need to consider games in a cross-cultural perspective that recognizes both the global phenomenon of gaming and cultural differences as performed and represented in gaming.

CULTURE AND PLAY

In his seminal study *Keywords*, Raymond Williams (1976) argued that the term *culture* involves an “intricate historical development,” with the many connotations of this word existing in the twilight zone between “material production” and “signifying or symbolic systems” (p. 91). While acknowledging the varied manifestations of the same term, Johan Huizinga (1949) argued for the integral role of “play” within cultures, since “all play means something,” acting as material and non-material signifiers within the larger “scheme of life” (p. 1). Any effort therefore to understand culture must consider play. Efforts to understand how games work must emphasize both the act of playing and the games being played, all as vital clues towards decoding the cultures within which these acts are performed *and* the ways in which games perform cultures. Unfortunately, most attempts at enumerating a history of gaming have been contextually limited, focusing mostly on American games and gaming practices as symptomatic of global conventions. The generalization from the American or Western market to global gaming is easy but deceptive. Computer Gaming Across Cultures (CGAC), a two-year project funded by the British Council, emerged to address this scholarly gap, with the goal of accounting for the various spaces and the multiple mediums in which gamers and gaming practices emerge.

With the proliferation of game studies and the resultant scholarship, studying the aesthetic as well as technological choices made while producing and playing games have become increasingly common. However, such processes allow little opportunity for interrogating video games as a transcultural space where multiple subjectivities and institutions converge, making video games both the subject and tool for study. The scale of the trilateral collaboration at the core of the CGAC research project combined critical

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