Book Reviews

Cunningham, Stuart, and David Craig. *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. NYU Press, 2019.

One perennial problem facing the study of social media has been its inability to be defined in terms that reach beyond a description of the value of the social capital accrued through influence. Promotional materials for brands of all kinds are propagated through the creative labor of content creators to support their careers and livelihoods. The labor of creators as individual entrepreneurs who build businesses entirely through the fabrication of digital content has yet to be concretized. An agreed-upon glossary of terms currently does not exist, arguably due to context collapse and the lack of communication between disciplines that overlap in approach and confront digital media as objects of inquiry. Journalists and scholars alike struggle to fix on a catch-all term to describe these self-starting content creators; the self-starters themselves avoid most labels like "influencer" because of its derogatory or shallow connotation beyond the screen (Abidin). The terms that have typically been employed to discuss the scalar growth of social media platforms and the rise of entrepreneurship roles afforded by platforms that have occurred over the last decade (e.g. monetized content creation through sponsored product advertisement emboldened by sociocultural influence) have been amalgamated to encompass what Stuart Cunningham and David Craig call "social media entertainment" (SME).

Seeking to fashion a new kind of screen ecology, Cunningham and Craig's monograph *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* argues for a tandem utilization of affordances provided by interactive technology and the reactive community engagement that occurs with and among fans and viewers. Such engagement is enabled when a creator utilizes said interactive technology to build an audience by producing videos, sharing their thoughts through diaristic self-disclosure, or posting aesthetically appealing photos of themselves, their friends, or their food. Relevancy and visibility on a platform can provide emotional, financial, and interpersonal support from millions across the globe as creators obtain bits of cultural capital with every view, like, subscribe, and follow. Significantly, *Social Media Entertainment* distinguishes between the

content found on platforms produced by individual users who are typically without institutional support, and video-on-demand “portals” that provide content produced by studio corporations with resources like major budget allowances and wealthy stockholders (Lotz).

Cunningham and Craig endeavor to map a critical media industry studies (CMIS) approach to examine how SME situates platform affordances; the innovation of content and reality of creative labor; and how that content is managed, monetized, and enables new forms of globalization (without the damning connotation, they hope). Similarly, they hope that this CMIS approach can feasibly engage with critical cultural concerns that are raised by existing disparities in access, merit, and pay ever-present in the media industry. Grounding the supporting structures of SME as a field in meta-geographical contexts like NoCal (Silicon Valley) and SoCal (Hollywood), *Social Media Entertainment* organizes the convoluted narratives of creative labor produced for social media around constant iteration through beta-testing and competitive experimentation, based on trends that platforms themselves amplify, circulate, and reinforce for the profit of their shareholders. Positioning content creators as entrepreneurs, *Social Media Entertainment* recognizes the impact over the last decade of media alternative to the mainstream.

The presence throughout the book of detailed economic analysis of content creators’ income, based on sponsorships and subscriptions if part of a platform’s partner program, is indelible to grasping the present and future of our very global, very digital economic reality. Particularly in the U.S., the boundary between what the media industry and the tech industry are qualified to handle and how they are regulated in response to this (mis)handling has been blurring rapidly, increasingly so since the book’s publishing in 2019. Deserved criticisms of how scholars in communication and media studies have attempted to piece together a broad-strokes understanding of social media and its entertaining manifestations, but without the level of undergirded attention to economic events and empirical detail that is demonstrated by Cunningham and Craig, are brought to the fore. Detailed comparisons of American versus European versus Chinese censorship practices specific to interactive technology and community engagement like livestreaming, as well as regulatory reactions to content through local, state, and nationwide mandates, are incredibly informative and provide very necessary context for Western social media analysis and the literature reviews that preclude them.

Speaking as an American myself, this book simultaneously centered, yet decentered, the effects of American social capital that permeate into expansionism and hero worship — we have a habit of revering our founders, in all senses of the term. Yet in propagating Hollywood and Silicon Valley, Cunningham and Craig also propagate the structural disparities present in relation to race. In most cases, they deconstruct these disparities, and shine a light on the most socially relevant creators of color. At the same time, however, there is little discussion of the emotional, material, and intellectual labor and support that is continuously provided by black creators, fans, and collective audiences who bear witness to anti-black racism on a daily basis, and which infiltrates and structures many online spaces. In their fifth chapter, "Cultural Politics of Social Media Entertainment," Cunningham and Craig focus on hatred towards Asian American creators and queer YouTubers who come out in public, yet only touch on the #OscarsSoWhite Hollywood moment without situating it in context: black people in the film industry not gaining the accolades of their white peers because of systemic inequality purported by racism and the subsequent lack of hiring representation in comparison to their non-black peers. While the demographic focus of the book is not hyper-specific to black creators, there is quite a bit of silence on the influence of sociohistorical circumstances of anti-black racism; like the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and the consequent beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement, which spurred many white and non-black creators to begin posting social justice-oriented content after receiving apt criticism from black fans and creators due to their ignorance and complicity in white supremacy, especially if their content tends to be political in nature. For a book that seeks to push forward the field of critical media industry studies through stratifying the American locales of Hollywood and Silicon Valley, the "critical" in the necessary context of race and racism enacted against black people is missing a large portion of its grounding.

Beyond this flaw, Cunningham and Craig's push for creator advocacy in terms of support feels feasible and effectively gathers the independently born yet collectively desired feeling for legitimized support by platforms. Taking the time to chart the varied ways that content creators make a living by posting all aspects of their lives online, *Social Media Entertainment* understands that the foundation of content creators' power rests in their ability to accrue cultural and social capital based on individual input as it is structured by the blurry boundary between media and technology, built up through collective organization against corporate experimentation for the last fifteen years.

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Lotz, Amanda. *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television*. U Michigan Library, 2017.

Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca. *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* (4th ed). Routledge, 2020.

Building on very successful previous editions, the recently published fourth edition of *Understanding Video Games* introduces the reader to developments and perspectives in the study of games. Across nine chapters, the authors discuss games (including their history), the game industry, video game aesthetics and narratives, video games in culture, and serious games and gamification. To clarify key questions including "what is a game," "do games affect the player," and "can games teach children useful skills," the book provides examples, digs into the history of game development and production, and allows readers to gradually understand what video games are about and what they can contribute to bringing about. The chapters are structured in a coherent way and all end with discussion questions and further readings, which "are designed to stimulate thought and argument on the topics covered and to offer avenues for further reading and research" as well as to "address areas that we find are tangential to the chapter but not always covered in full detail" (Introduction, p.4).

Following a brief introduction, chapter 1, "Studying Video Games," discusses the basics of how to study games by suggesting five major types of analysis (game, player, culture, ontology, and metrics). The authors also explicate some common methodologies for each. A short subchapter titled "Schools of Thought?" sets out to clarify certain dominant perspectives. As with every chapter, this one ends with

discussion questions and suggestions for further readings. Chapter 2, "The Game Industry," takes up several aspects related to game production and development. For instance, the industry's size, including revenue numbers and examples for sales numbers of major consoles like Sony PS4 and Nintendo Switch, are presented. The chapter proceeds to discuss the industry's structure for developing new products. Two short subchapters also introduce readers to the basics of the game development process by giving brief descriptions of the conceptual and design phases and production and testing phases. It is in the latter that the actual production happens, such as code writing and the creation of graphics and audio. The longer chapter 3, "What is a Game?" considers the core question. It is here that the key authors of game research are introduced, especially those present at the start of game studies and research. Short paragraphs make the readers aware of Johan Huizinga and the Magic Circle, Marshall McLuhan and Games as Cultural Reflections, Henry Jenkins and the Art of the Game, and others. The chapter then proceeds to offer some formal definitions of a game. This chapter's second part on game genres provides an overview of the most important genres, namely action games, adventure games, strategy games, and process-oriented games.

Chapter 4, "History," represents the book's longest chapter. This chapter is divided into an opening section devoted to the pre-history of video games and a brief discussion on whether history matters, as well as to a detailed section that guides readers through video game history. Beginning in the 1970s, this section offers information on each decade up to the 2010s and beyond. In a final outlook, the authors offer three perspectives on what they call likely developments: a likely rise in experimentation, a growing gamification that moves gaming beyond clearly defined platforms, and a likely growing cultural attention for games, as games will be more and more perceived as an established part of culture and society. Chapter 5, "Video Game Aesthetics," begins with introducing the concepts of rules and gameplay. The subchapter on geography and representation highlights, among other things, massively multiplayer online role-playing games and video game perspectives (first- or third-person perspective, isometric perspective which is similar to an architect's sketch of a building and top-down perspective, also known as bird's-eye). Furthermore, brief introductions to aspects such as dimensions, space types, graphical style, and game audio have been added here. Chapter 6, "Video games in Culture," focuses on the interrelation of games with culture and society. The cultural position of games, games as cultural forms, and the public perception of games are the core points of discussion here. Additionally, the chapter

looks at players, considering why people play and who plays. Namely, this book chapter discusses female players, player communities, and cooperation and conflict in games and e-sports.

Chapter 7, “Narrative,” explores storytelling, including settings and actors in games, game mechanics, and reception — that is, the player’s experience of a story. The chapter offers a brief history of literary theory and video games to explore the theoretical work “that explicitly deals with questions of narrative, storytelling, and fiction in relation to video games” (223). Authors such as Espen Aarseth and Jesper Juul, as well as the ludology versus narratology debate, figure here. The chapter concludes with remarks on the interactive element of games and transmedia games. Chapter 8, “Serious Games and Gamification,” expounds on games-for-change and games-for-health as examples of serious games, introducing readers to genres such as news games, political games, and advertainment. Serious games including edutainment and educational games are discussed here, including a helpful subsection on key research challenges in serious games. The book’s final chapter, “Video Games and Risks,” acquaints the reader with two key research perspectives in game studies, active media perspective and active user perspective. Both are presented in detail, enabling the audience to further understand the complexity of games and their research.

Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction was very deservedly leveled up to a fourth edition. These is no doubt that this concise introduction will remain an important starting point to gain first insights into the academic inquiry of video games related themes, for many students, researchers, and non-academic audiences alike. As the authors state, “today we increasingly talk about a society where games and play are ever-present” (Introduction, p. 1). The massively increased interest in understanding video games and their research (in manifold academic fields as well as beyond academia) calls for books like these that are predetermined to attract a large readership. Moreover, beyond introducing the theme, the book succeeds in raising interest and excitement for the ever-expanding worlds of games and gaming and inspires the readers to further delve into these worlds.

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Freeman, Matthew. *The World of The Walking Dead*. Routledge, 2019.

The Walking Dead comic books, written by Robert Kirkman, were first published in 2003. A TV series of the same name followed in 2010. Since then, two other television spin-offs have been produced (*Fear the Walking Dead* and *The Walking Dead: The World Beyond*, premiering in 2015 and 2020 respectively), with additional TV shows and three films also announced. The franchise, which has garnered a large dedicated fanbase, inhabits a detailed storyworld, which is the focus of Matthew Freeman's *The World of The Walking Dead*. The book is part of Routledge's *Imaginary Worlds* series, each volume of which discusses a historically significant imaginary world and examines it via a range of theoretical approaches (other books in the series at the time of writing are *The World of DC Comics* and *The World of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*). In this volume, Freeman takes a transdisciplinary approach, utilizing concepts drawn from history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and religious studies to develop an "understanding of this particular storyworld as a place that is not constructed or indeed consumed as any kind of absolute" (110) and recognize "the value of seeing world-building as an *innately* social phenomenon" (114, italics in the original). To do so, he divides the book into four key chapters, each adopting a different concept to theorize a specific aspect of the world of *The Walking Dead*.

Chapter one adopts a historiographical approach to the core texts of *The Walking Dead*: the comics, the main television series, and the *Fear the Walking Dead* spin-off. One of the key issues in examining these in relation to world-building, as fans know, is that the comic book and TV shows often diverge. The character of Chandler was killed in the show but survives in the comics; Carol was killed early in the comics but survived in the show (and will be the star of her own spin-off with Daryl Dixon); and Daryl was created specifically for TV, not existing in the comic universe. Yet these apparent inconsistencies are key to the world-building of the series, with Freeman's historiographical approach informed by "multi-perspectival narratives, and [affording] a mode of world-building across multiple, seemingly contradictory media based on relativism" (37). Indeed, although Freeman deals with audiences in more depth later, he notes that nearly 80% of the fans surveyed for the book said both comic book and TV series were critical to their experience of the storyworld. He argues that "audiences may embody ideas of relativism in their media-crossing behaviors and yet, simultaneously, also behave like historiographers in their complex, dialogical engagement patterns with the world of *The Walking Dead*" (38).

Audience engagement is an important element of world-building, and Freeman utilizes a sociological approach to the affordances of the digital platforms they use in both chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 focuses on "augmented television" and the webisodes, talk show, and apps that have built up around *The Walking Dead* and which are "characterized by the crafting of a temporality based on reaction and reflection" (47). Freeman looks at: *The Walking Dead* webisodes, which he argues allow viewers to delve into character relationships; the chat show *The Talking Dead*, which allowed audiences to make sense of the episodes in emotional terms; and AMC's Story Sync app, which does both. The range of platforms and the functions of each allow audiences to respond in different ways and arm scholars with new concepts with which to "rethink the building of imaginary worlds" (59). The augmented television platforms discussed in chapter 2 are "official" ones built, developed, and endorsed by AMC. Chapter 3 turns to the fan-produced content that exists on social media and explores how these "can produce distinct world-building experiences and provide specific narrative contributions" (62). Rather than seeing social media as a complement to television, Freeman argues that they allow for religious world-building through opening up "opportunities for audiences to collaborate together in further defining and extending the moral code of the storyworld [and] binding together as an online community" (69). For example, a discussion on the fan-run "*The Walking Dead* Fandom Universe" about Rick's status as villain or hero enabled fans to establish a consensus and maintain coherency about his moral value, which extended to a set of beliefs about the world itself. Similarly, the use of hashtags on Twitter has allowed for greater audience discussion and "bringing people together as a loyal, hopeful, belief-filled community" (79). Freeman talks about "official" hashtags here, using the example of #InCarolWeTrust, which was announced by *The Walking Dead*'s AMC Twitter account as its new motto on October 19, 2015. Yet unofficial hashtags also exist and circulate within fan communities, and an analysis of these, as well as of the roles they may play in world-building would, I feel, have provided an opportunity for further in-depth analysis. Indeed, while Freeman highlights the role of audiences in world-building, he does so in relation to predominantly official texts: the comics, television shows, AMC-run social media sites, and authorized games. One fan-run Facebook page is mentioned in chapter 3, yet fan labor produces a much wider range of content including fan fiction and fan art. An analysis of these and how they contribute to world-building would have added an extra dimension to this volume.

Yet this book manages to demonstrate how worlds are built by official authors in a variety of ways while considering the role that the audience plays. Chapter 4 examines three of *The Walking Dead* games and argues that these "present new opportunities for […] *philosophical world-building* on account of the degree of personalized moral choice and ontological ambiguity that such technologies afford" (86, emphasis in the original). *The Walking Dead* games allow audiences to experience the storyworld through gaining actual experience of it. *The Walking Dead: The Game* enables players to take on the role of a character called Lee Everett and, through a point-and-click narrative style, make decisions in the care of a young girl called Clementine. Players have seconds to pick from the options presented to them on screen, effecting an urgency like that which they may feel in a real-life situation. On the other hand, the augmented reality game *The Walking Dead: Our World* overlays the real world with that of the storyworld, thereby asking users "to believe in the imaginary world as itself reality by traversing the line between real and virtual!" (103). Subjectivity is thus key to how audiences both engage with and experience a transmedia world, and Freeman demonstrates this throughout the book.

Of course, as the book was published in 2019 it does not cover all iterations of *The Walking Dead* storyworld. The comic has ended since the book's publication, the final season of *The Walking Dead* has been announced, and *The Walking Dead: The World Beyond* has joined *Fear the Walking Dead* as a spin-off. With more locations being added, and new experiences available, *The World of The Walking Dead* offers an insight into the universe as it exists at a fixed point in time, as well as offering scholars a framework through which to examine further forays into the storyworld. Further areas for research could include fan creations, as I mentioned earlier, as well as the novels, theme parks and sites of tourism, which Freeman points out in the introduction the book does not cover. Although some more rigorous copyediting could have been undertaken (the name of a prominent fan studies scholar is misspelled throughout), this volume nevertheless offers a clear argument for the expansion of imaginary world studies to include scholarship from a range of disciplines and is essential reading for those studying *The Walking Dead*.

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Grimm, Josh (ed.). *Fake News! Misinformation in the Media.* LSU Press, 2020.

As a scholar and professor of digital media, it is difficult to escape the specter of fake news. No longer content to solely extol the virtues of social media and online communities as spaces for productive communication practices, I increasingly spend class time discussing the darker sides of technology. Most Americans are now familiar with the term "fake news," given the previous president's near-daily denunciation, so it behooves educators to instill media literacy into the next generation of news consumers and creators. How exactly is fake news defined though, and in what ways is it a cause for concern? Editor Josh Grimm tackles these topics and more in the edited anthology *Fake News! Misinformation in the Media*.

The book opens with three essays about the history of fake news, showcasing numerous examples throughout the centuries. Some of these examples are well-known, such as Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast, while others are more obscure but no less compelling. Two original quantitative research projects follow next, the first exploring exposure to fake news in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, and the second testing the effect of media literacy in reducing peoples' overconfidence in assessing whether news is fake or not. Next is a case study involving the *Onion*, Miley Cyrus' twerking performance at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards, and CNN. While this article helps untangle fake news from satire, the scrutiny given to this one series of events is perhaps disproportionate, given that every week there is fresh outrage over this or that offensive episode in the media.

The most compelling piece is Joel Timmer's essay, "Fighting Falsity: Fake News, Facebook, and the First Amendment." Originally published in *Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal*, this chapter differs substantially from the rest in terms of tone and depth. Despite being a strong supporter of the First Amendment, I am no legal scholar, so this article helped explain that, while fake news is clearly a problem, and social networks are complicit in its rapid spread, social networks enjoy enormous First Amendment protection through the Communications Decency Act (CDA). Timmer concludes that, "Government regulation of fake news […] does not appear to be the solution to the problem" (155). Instead, Timmer argues that corporations like Facebook can use the immunity provisions in the CDA to identify and remove fake news articles more proactively.

The penultimate essay unpacks the distinction between lying and bullshit, between falsity and fakery, and calls on the field of journalism to call out dishonesty where it exists to counter the spread of fake news. The final essay, "The Self-Radicalization of White Men," explores the role online communities play in the spread of conspiracy theories, and how dangerous ideologies, fueled by fake news, can spill over into the offline world. One can immediately extend this analysis to the January 6, 2021 insurrection attempt on Capitol Hill, which occurred after the chapter was written.

At times, the collection feels disjointed, perhaps because four of the nine essays were previously published elsewhere, thus not cohering with the rest in either structure or content. The same fake news episodes are referenced numerous times — including the 2016 Presidential election, Pizzagate, Alex Jones, and the alt-right — and nearly every article references former President Donald Trump and his Twitter tirades against fake news. While these current events serve as the impetus behind this collection, several authors also emphasize that fake news is nothing new, that it has been around since the early days of modern journalism, which diminishes the power of these arguments. If fake news is nothing new, then what is the problem? As many of the essayists point out, the difference today is the speed and scope of fake news: untruths go viral nearly every day on social media, working their way into legacy media like cable news and everyday conversation. It is not a wholly satisfying distinction between modern fake news and historical examples, but the ability of today's fake news to spread rapidly through the media ecosystem is still highlighted as a pressing issue.

As I was reviewing this book, my acquaintances on social media were sharing a tweet from a US senator, purportedly from several years ago, comparing the senator's previous comments on a hot-button issue to the senator's current stance. The purpose of sharing this tweet was to show that the senator is a hypocrite. A few days later, an article came out showing that the senator's tweet was false: there was no record of it ever being tweeted. This mattered not to the audience who had shared the false tweet as their minds were already made up about this senator and they had already moved on to something new.

I think much fake news is like this: here today, gone tomorrow, with little effect on people's daily lives. However, there are more serious concerns — election interference, dissemination of medical misinformation, the spread of hatred and bigotry — that deserve society's continued attention and vigilance. *Fake News!* offers partial solutions to these problems: social networks, media literacy educators,

and journalists can all help reduce the harm of fake news. Yet no solution is perfect, leading Grimm to conclude, "the future of fake news is more about trying to contain the damage rather than stopping the problem. In other words, it's about mitigating damage and slowing down the distribution, if nothing else so the fake news feed becomes manageable" (208).

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Mukherjee, Souvik. *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Souvik Mukherjee's *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (2017) is an inquiry into the present applications of postcolonial thought in game studies. Mukherjee poses various debates contested within contemporary postcolonial studies and game studies while synthesizing foundational analyses from both disciplines. Mukherjee contends that the ludic has always been part of the colonial system in more than just rhetoric. From the "Great Game" of colonialism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) to players' active participation in a revolution against colonizers as the colonial Other in Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (2013), the colonial system has always intwined itself with play. Mukherjee grounds the ludic within the purview of the postcolonial, describing the role of non-digital games in reinforcing, exposing, and subverting the history of colonialism. To make this correlation, Mukherjee uses historical examples like cricket and colonial toys to suggest that non-digital games introduced by colonizers as part of the colonial system function as "ludic [symbols] of the 'playing back'" that the colonized empire uses to subvert the colonial game (Mukherjee 5). *Videogames and Postcolonialism* provides a clear path for future engagement with postcolonial theory in game studies. Each of Mukherjee's chapters are tied together with case studies that examine intersections between the study of digital games and the lived histories, experiences, and representations of the colonized. In this way, each chapter describes how the colonial and the ludic have always been related.

In the first chapter, Mukherjee lays out the theoretical foundations and key considerations of *Videogames and Postcolonialism*. This chapter emphasizes the breadth of Mukherjee's text, as well as its focus. Mukherjee places the ludic and the colonial in conversation with one another by defining the ludic as a core

component of the colonial system. The chapter itself has two primary sections: the first section explains the primary theoretical frameworks used, and the subsequent section displays Mukherjee's methods. In this first chapter Mukherjee explains that the notable lack of invested inquiry by games studies scholarship in postcolonial discourse serves as the book's exigence. Throughout the book, Mukherjee pushes to integrate foundational and contemporary postcolonial thought into discussions about time, space, and intersectional identity in video games. Mukherjee refers to these postcolonial thinkers repeatedly throughout the text, emphasizing by practice the necessity of postcolonial critique in game studies.

The second chapter provides a foundation for discussing the relationship between empire and space in video games. Mukherjee's primary interest here is in bridging the gap between critical postcolonial thought on the experience of space and the representation of space and empire in video games. Appropriate of the breadth of this topic, this chapter addresses a wide variety of games and approaches the ideas of space and empire from equally diverse perspectives. This makes the chapter feel a bit scattered at times, though Mukherjee remains a steady guide through the messy web of colonialism in contemporary digital games. Of games that explicitly engage in colonial rhetoric, Mukherjee concludes that "the mechanism of empire is based on a geopolitics through which it lays claim to a consolidated space and on further expansion" (30). This geopolitical policy, then, manifests in both the ludic and narrative components of games. One of the great challenges of *Videogames and Postcolonialism* is in pointing out the relationship between ludic and the idealized spaces of empire, given the scope and complexity of this question.

Mukherjee's third chapter delves into hybridity as a part of the colonial project from the lens of *Freedom Cry*. This chapter's investigation is specifically concerned with representations of colonized individuals or communities as monstrous, or otherwise hybrid/hybridized figures. To discuss the representations of colonized and hybrid identities, Mukherjee draws on the works of postcolonial and critical race theorists like Gayatri Spivak, Lisa Nakamura, Homi K. Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon. Mukherjee uses these theoretical frameworks to define ideas of hybridity, the "Other," and monstrosity within the lens of colonialism. This chapter emphasizes one of Mukherjee's great strengths in *Videogames and Postcolonialism*, which is his accessible method of weaving together critical, theoretical work with ludic and narrative exposition of specific games. By bringing together these texts, Mukherjee contends that video games "bring their own

complicated multiplicity and fluidity of identity formation to postcolonial studies" (70-71). In this way, video games like *Freedom Cry* engage in critical postcolonial work by positioning the player as the colonized subject feared and hated by the colonizer.

Mukherjee's penultimate chapter functions as a sort of parallel to chapter two. Where the earlier chapter focused on spatiality as a critical level of consideration for postcolonial game studies, this later chapter does similar work with temporality. Building on his previous discussion of the historical hybrid postcolonial subject, Mukherjee contends that the (re)playability of historical narratives in video games facilitates the creation of alternative histories. Mukherjee presents a series of examples of colonial stereotypes through historical situations in video games, forming a literature review of recent works engaging with issues of alternative history creation through video games. Mukherjee explains that counterfactual histories can also present situations that reverse the colonial project. He uses literary texts like *The Man in High Castle* (1968), *Aztec Century* (1993), and Munshi Premchand's "The Chess Players" (1928) to demonstrate a tradition of the ludic in literary reversals of history, asserting that this kind of historical reversal is possible in games too. After all, intentionally or otherwise, games facilitate the re-making or re-playing of a similar counterfactual histories — a computing glitch in *Civilization V* renders Gandhi a warlord (79), just as the *Empire: Total War* facilitates narratives of reverse colonization (86). In this way, players participate in counterfactual storytelling that challenges or subverts colonial histories.

The concluding chapter of *Videogames and Postcolonialism* provides no decisive conclusions, instead integrating existing scholarship on postcolonialism in video games with the goal of sketching a potential future for game studies research. Most importantly, this chapter suggests that while uncommon, there are exceptions to Mukherjee's assertion "that the culture of the ex-colonies has been portrayed in videogames through lenses that privilege Eurocentric accounts of history and progress" (103). Mukherjee determines that narratives like that of Adewale of *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* function as exceptions to this common preference for reinforcing eurocentrism, describing this process of responding to colonialism as a *playing back*. He writes that these games evoke a process of playing back which "disrupts linear chronologies and centers of truth" (Mukherjee 103) through instances of plurality and alternative or counterfactual histories.

Across this study, one of the most powerful conclusions is the point that "any discussion of identity from a postcolonial perspective is to be one that has no

conclusive answers or clear descriptions" (71), acknowledging how this inquiry into the representation of colonial power in video games presents more questions than answers. Seeking to bring together classical postcolonial theorists, contemporary writers, and the diffuse conversations being had across game studies that engage in postcolonial criticism, with the ultimate goal of bringing those writers together to indicate a need for a more developed postcolonial lens in game studies. Given this ambitious scope and the need for this kind of inquiry, the issues raised here can feel too disparate at times. Each chapter features numerous small case studies, summaries of major postcolonial theories, and potential starting points for further research related to the chapter's focus, be that space, hybridity, or a similarly complex position. Mukherjee's broad scope in *Videogames and Postcolonialism* lends itself to rich conversation in graduate seminars, or for scholars seeking to better understand foundational postcolonial theory within a media studies context. This text would be especially useful to seminars focused on postcolonialism and digital media, or in any interdisciplinary postcolonial study that seeks to better understand the ways in which video games can function as complicit in the reification of colonialism, or subversive against neocolonial structures.

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Samer, Roxanne and William Whittington (eds.). *Spectatorship: Shifting Theories of Gender, Sexuality, and Media.* U Texas P, 2017.

This edited volume brings together 17 articles, broadly themed around theories linking gender, sexuality, and media, that were originally published in *Spectator: The University of Southern California Journal of Film and Television Criticism.* Established in 1982 as a forum for University of Southern California students to disseminate scholarship issues related to film and television, *Spectator* quickly gained a reputation for compelling investigations into the media's representation of gender and sexuality. As the editors note in their introduction, the positive reception of certain early contributions that laid the foundation for significant subsequent publications — including Gaylyn Studlar's *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* and Amy Lawrence's *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classic Hollywood Cinema* — provided a strong

impetus for other students to follow a similar path and contribute their graduate research to the journal.

The volume is structured into five parts, each comprised of several chapters that focus on a central theme. The first part, “Revisiting film subjects and the pleasures of cinema,” is comprised of four *Spectator* contributions that address significant early feminist readings of cinema — most notably Laura Mulvey’s seminal article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” — from a variety of new perspectives and employ case studies that contemplate spectatorship beyond the confines of a strictly white/heterosexual male gaze.

Part two, “Speaking up and sounding out,” provides space for discussions that move beyond the common perspectives encountered in media readings of gender. Each piece in this section explicitly calls out gaps in the contemporary academic discourse examining, for instance, the significance of media that deals directly with the issue of abortion and providing an investigation of the representation of working-class feminism, as epitomized by Roseanne Barr. Mary Celeste Keaney’s piece is especially effective in this regard, drawing on journalist Val Phoenix’s linking of the riot grrrl counterculture with the 1970s lesbian-feminist community to decouple the riot grrrl counterculture from traditional punk by exploring its position as a sociopolitical force that can sit alongside other forms of radical female-youth cultural resistance.

The volume’s third part, “Queering media,” continues delving into uncharted academic spaces, providing new perspectives on media forms that are rarely addressed when discussing the representation of queerness and sexuality — namely, animated films, soap operas, and public access television. As Hollis Griffin notes in his chapter about slash fiction for daytime soap operas:

There is a considerable amount of scholarship on female authors slashing traditionally “male” television genres, particularly science fiction [but] there is almost no scholarship on slash written about traditionally “female” genres, nor is there any substantive literature on gay male slash fiction authors. (147)

Part four, “Containment and its critiques,” is perhaps the most illuminating section of the entire volume as it deals with the myriad ways that media forces have attempted to contain rising resistance to traditional representations of gender and sexuality. Notable chapters in this section include Mary Celeste Kearney’s case study of the journalistic demonization of female sexuality and queerness in the sensational trial of Hollywood Madam, Heidi Fleiss; Raffi Sarkissian’s extrapolation of how mainstream media continue to drive stereotypical readings of

queerness via the respective film and television LGBTIQ tragic/comedic queen dichotomy identified by the author; and Jennifer DeClue's investigation of the exploitation of black queer sexuality in *The Wire*. Throughout this section, each piece effectively elucidates an ongoing patten of media responding to challenges over representation by continually attempting to reassert damaging patriarchal and heteronormative practices.

The final part of the book, "Fandom and transmedia," explores how the growing visibility of fan activities has offered yet another space for scholars to bear witness to how diverse spectator communities work to challenge mainstream representations of gender and sexuality. For example, Suzanne Scott — who would go on to publish one of the most significant contributions to fan studies in recent years, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* — highlights how commercial interests and an adherence to traditional notions of the power hierarchy between creators and fans of a textual product works to delegitimize "alternate" readings by female and queer fans. Acting as an effective conclusion, these final essays acknowledge how convergence cultures contribute to the transformation of the media landscape as we know it and offer some hope for future evolution in representations of gender and sexuality.

The ability of *Spectatorship*'s contributors to touch on such a vast range of alternate subjectivities in its examination of representations of gender and sexuality across a broad media landscape is, undoubtably, its key strength. However, even with a small handful of chapters that reference cultural touchstones from the last twenty years (e.g. *The Wire*, *Gossip Girl*), the dearth of more recent scholarship makes the volume appear quite dated. Yet it also fails to really hold up as a historical overview of critical theories. Even if we were to simply consider the book as a deserving chronicle of the *Spectator*'s legacy of encouraging important critical discourse into how media treat gender and sexuality, it still feels like a rather unbalanced effort, with large time gaps between contributions adding to the disjointed feel of the volume. For example, four essays represent the journal's first eleven years of operation but then there is a glut of seven essays in the five-year period covering 1993-1997, before a relative scholarly drought that sees just two essays representing the twelve-year long block between 1998-2009.

The book's subtitle, *Shifting Theories of Gender, Sexuality, and Media* seems to hint at an attempt to provide a coherent overview of responses to developing theories that have been explored in *Spectator* during its impressive thirty-nine-year run. Indeed, the editors likely hoped the volume would act as a historical snapshot

of critical discourse, with contributors delving into some of the most significant issues confronting film and television studies scholars over this period as those respective disciplines continued to expand in significance. However, while the volume does a stellar job showcasing a diverse range of perspectives on various related issues, it misses important connections in the development of key theories relating to gender, sexuality, and media and, ultimately, lacks the tight focus and depth of sustained exploration of critical issues that one would expect to find in a more explicitly targeted edited volume.

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Serazio, Michael. *The Power of Sports: Media and Spectacle in American Culture*. NYU Press, 2019.

When bookending his monograph, *The Power of Sports: Media and Spectacle in American Culture*, Michael Serazio notes the importance of his own connection to the then-San Diego (now Los Angeles) Chargers as a spur and framing device for this research. Thus, it is appropriate that I write this review of his valuable work on the day that long-time Chargers quarterback Phillip Rivers has announced his retirement after a final year playing for Indianapolis. Rivers is known for both his athletic prowess and his ability to trash talk while avoiding profanity. This skill made him popular to mic up during games and in this we can see a tension that Serazio returns to again and again: the complex needs of both a sports and media industry. Indeed, tension and complexity are two repeated elements within the

book, as evidenced by both Serazio's style and his introduction. Academic writing tends to be dense, full of jargon and theory, and therefore remains inaccessible to much of its potential audience. While Serazio's book includes discussions of relevant sociocultural theory, it is not densely theorized meaning that it is accessible to an educated lay audience. As such, it would be an appropriate choice for a first- or second-year university course on sports and culture. The bibliography is also suitable for students to mine for more specific research interests. The book therefore resolves its tension between academic and non-academic needs while still exploring the subject's inherent complexity.

The first chapter sets up Serazio's argument that a sports team functions as something akin to a religious totem by discussing his connection to the Chargers through his grandfather's fandom. The association of fan activity with religious activity is common and, in my view, somewhat problematic; I hail from the de-pathologizing tradition which focuses upon affective play rather than arguing that fandom (of whatever kind) takes the place of or functions like a religion. That said, because this book is primarily focused upon industrial and journalistic concerns, these issues remain unaddressed. This lack of discussion does not negate Serazio's skilled industrial analysis or his overall argument in the book, but I think this chapter might have benefited from more engagement with fan studies theory and less with classical sociology or anthropology. We can perhaps see that, however, as emblematic of the divide between how sports and media fandoms are studied and think of it as a problem of academia rather than the book.

One of the advantages to Serazio's industrial interviews is that he can elucidate the tension felt by many sports journalists between the journalistic ideal of objectivity and the necessity to both preserve their access and make money for their news outlets. This forms the substance of his second chapter, one of the strongest in the book. The third chapter builds on the discussion of economic pressures in sports journalism and focuses on neoliberal capitalism and its incorporation into professional sports. Though maintaining the meritocratic fallacy, athletes are well-paid celebrities whose personal and professional brands are, in Serazio's terms, totemically tied to a location and the team itself. This is despite the athletes' brands being as constructed as any media celebrities' brands. This totemic association, however, leads to higher profits for the team owners, leagues, and the athletes themselves. Serazio argues that loyalty to the totem that is built through what are essentially parasocial relationships can lead to increased sales of merchandise and tickets and that the totemic loyalty exists regardless of the team's performance. He

also discusses the tension between the global and the local that sports brands must negotiate to maximize their profits without alienating local supporters. The fourth chapter looks at gender, specifically how sports reinforces conservative, arguably toxic forms of masculinity. This is coupled with positioning the male as a breadwinner while also arguing for suffering as a moral force. This combination, Serazio argues, is one of the main reasons why male athletes specifically will play through injuries as they fear losing their jobs and being perceived as both physically and morally weak. As the "weakness" is also feminized, particularly through insults or jeers meant to motivate athletes, this also reinforces toxic masculinity.

The fifth chapter focuses specifically on the tension between politics and ideology in professional sports. As with the above chapters, the main risk Serazio finds, as far as his interviewees are concerned, is that of alienating a potential audience, which would cause the team, sports-news outlet, and/or athlete to become less profitable. He notes that this issue seems to be two-fold; in part, this desire for an apolitical milieu supports the fallacy of a meritocracy while also allowing the audience a needed escapism. That said, neoliberal and perceived-masculine discourses tend to predispose toward conservative political values, meaning that most [expected] negative audience reactions come when left-leaning politics appear. As this book was written before the current (2020) push of Black Lives Matter and other explicit progressive causes into the historically-conservative NFL, as well as other sports franchises, this chapter might have included more discussion of the tension between and, arguably, pandering to different political sides while hamstringing public-facing people with regard to their personal political viewpoints. Serazio concludes in his final chapter by returning us to the Chargers' last game in San Diego and his awareness of the ephemeral, costly solidarity that sports can bring.

This is a very fine book accessible to most potential adult readers. My only real criticism about this book is, as noted above, that it fails to deeply engage with fan studies theory; there are occasional mentions of Sandvoss (2003) and Crawford (2003) but they lack depth. Serazio only tangentially discusses previous fan studies surveys, without giving a thorough review of those projects. The pseudo-virtual ethnography in Chapter 5 also seems a bit thin. That said, this is clearly framed as an industrial, journalistic study rather than an audience-focused one, and no book can be all things to all people. The interviews with various industry practitioners are very deeply analyzed and are a critically important and often overlooked part

of academic research. As such, this is an extremely valuable book from an industrial perspective and deserving of a place on any bookshelf.

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Williams, Kiera V. *Amazons in America: Matriarchs, Utopians, and Wonder Women in U.S. Popular Culture*. LSU Press, 2019.

Wonder Woman made her silver screen debut only recently in 2016's *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice,* over 50 years after her first comic book appearance in 1941. With the recent release of her second solo film, *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020), the famous Amazonian warrior continues to serve as a main character in the DC cinematic universe. While the Wonder Woman canon may be the most popular iteration of matriarchalism, Paradise Island (aka Themyscira) is not the only woman-led society to grab the attention of American consumers. In *Amazons in America*, Kiera V. Williams traces the understudied history of matriarchalism in American popular culture. While matriarchalism, matriarchy, and related terms can describe a series of interrelated concepts, Williams uses the term "matriarchalist" to "refer broadly to popular sets of beliefs about the origins, history, and nature of female power" (8). Williams contends and efficiently argues throughout the book for the strong impact matriarchalism has had on both feminist and anti-feminist movements throughout U.S. history. Throughout her nine chapters and epilogue, Williams discusses anthropological theories, world fairs, children's books, comics, sci-fi novels, political discourses, films, television shows and more, demonstrating that, while understudied, matriarchalism has had a broad influence on American public and popular culture.

Williams begins her examination in the mid-19th century, describing how anthropological matriarchalism starting in Europe found new ground in the U.S., partly through Lewis Henry Morgan's work with the Iroquois Nations. The familial and community structures of indigenous people like the Iroquois strongly interested many anthropologists and inspired suffragette feminists for years to come, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Joslyn Gage. A consistent theme in the book is that cultures in which women were given more agency and power were simultaneously utilized as both inspiration for feminist activism and as justification for colonization and other oppressive imperialist practices. Chapter three, "White

Queens and African Amazons," is especially illustrative of this fascinating duality. According to Williams, near the turn of the 20th century, there existed two leading conceptions of matriarchalism, both heavily raced and gendered. On the one hand, there were "feminine conquistadors" like May French Sheldon, who campaigned for white women to take on a matriarchal role in Western colonialism. Emphasizing a maternalist rhetoric that had become popular among mainstream suffragettes, French argued that women's essentialist roles as mothers made them uniquely well-positioned to "civilize" people from other nations. Around the same time, "African Amazons" of the Dahomey Village were showcased in Chicago, and people were simultaneously amazed and horrified by these African women who fought with handmade weapons for observers. Williams observes that, while white matriarchs were something to aspire to, Black matriarchs were considered frightening remnants of the past.

Williams then moves to the matriarchal utopias found in the works of L. Frank Baum, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and William Moulton Marston. While Baum's *Oz* stories featured his feminist, socialist, and ethnically diverse ideas, this was not the case for many matriarchal utopias. For instance, Perkins Gilman's matriarchal works, including *Herland* (1915), demonstrate again how both feminist and racist matriarchalist ideas often coalesced, as her own utopias featured a white supremacist view of evolutionism. Likewise, while Marston's Wonder Woman has evolved with the times, the character's original comics were deeply imbedded with the matriarchalist ideologies of her (male) creator.

Antimatriarchalism was especially prevalent in the post-war era through momism discourse. Williams analyzes various books, films, and political texts, illustrating a prevalent, continuous fear of female power that manifests in the stereotype of the domineering, neurotic mother. This sentiment would be repeated in the latter half of the 20th century, this time more focused on the figure of the Black matriarch. Yet, as Williams notes, where the white matriarch is seen as a "neurotic and in need of treatment," black matriarchs were described as "pathological and in need of correction" (219). In the book's last chapter, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Welfare Queens," Williams turns her attention fully to Black matriarchs, and specifically to how images of Black women have impacted social policies in the U.S. This chapter is particularly illustrative of Williams' emphasis on the relationship between popular culture and the political, whereby popular conceptions of matriarchalism strongly impact how wider discourses conceptualize female power, leadership, and agency.

In each chapter of the book, Williams analyzes various artifacts to create a wider image of how the matriarchal myth touches many interweaving contexts. To this aim, some of the specific texts are looked at more briefly than others, often privileging more examples over closer readings of less artifacts. While some of the artifacts are not looked at as closely, Williams is always careful to present a complex cultural context for each chapter. She does not focus solely on a narrow view of feminism but explores issues of race and class in each iteration as well. *Amazons in America* should be of particular interest to feminist media scholars, as it provides a history that is often overlooked. In the epilogue, Williams describes the cyclical nature of the matriarchal myth, asserting that because the key proponents do not seem to be aware of each other's work, newer incarnations of matriarchalism rework many of the existing conversations. Williams' book may be a step toward emerging from this cycle, encouraging us to pay closer attention to the continuing significance of this under-studied concept.

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Games Review

Mass Effect Legendary Edition, Electronic Arts, various editions/platforms, 2021.

With the 2021 release of the remastered *Mass Effect* video game trilogy, promises of a planned sequel, and rumors about a possible movie adaptation (Bankhurst), this series, originally released between 2007 and 2012, remains relevant. *Mass Effect* is set in a futuristic Milky Way and emphasizes technology as part of its interactive narrative, which players can influence with their decisions, placing the fate of the galaxy in their hands. As part of this technological landscape, robotic figures and elements are part of the fiber of the game experience.

Outside of this series, culture influences perceptions of and relationships with robots and technology (Alesich and Rigby 51-52). The threat of automation in the workforce (Kim and Kim 310) has created tensions as it affords assistance alongside competition (Acemoglu and Restrepo). A distrust of and discomfort with robots (Alesich and Rigby 52) has also produced representations that highlight their

distance from emotion, marking them, and any beings with robotic elements, as separate from humans and humanity (Kim and Kim 312).

Depictions of robots in the United States tend to be marked by fear (Alesich and Rigby 52), but representations of robots and robotics in media can and do stray from cautionary characters, with the most obvious example being the fan-favorite droids in *Star Wars* (Strickland). *Mass Effect* walks a line between these approaches, incorporating both hesitation and hope through the exploration of synthetic lifeforms — specifically the Reapers and the Geth — and EDI, a programmed artificial intelligence who becomes a crewmate. The narratives surrounding these groups and characters are worth examining more closely, with some spoilers, in this context.

The Reapers, as a primary foe, serve as a backdrop that reflects much of the distrust often aimed at robots in media. They present an existential and ultimately genocidal threat to organic life in the game world, producing warped and unrecognizable versions of humanity, known as husks, as part of their takeover. This representation of robotic entities destroying humanity echoes the concerns and fears prompted by the turn toward automation and the emphasis on robots as cold, unfeeling, and poised for dominance. Despite the danger presented by synthetic beings, reflecting many of the physical-world hesitations and anxieties surrounding robots, the narrative itself is cautious not to portray the concept in absolute terms.

The Geth are also synthetic beings that run on shared programming and have mechanical bodies. The player has more opportunities for positive interactions with this group and can incorporate a Geth known as Legion into their team as a companion. Legion is introduced saving the player character's life and engaging with them and their team, with characters responding by turning to in-game cultural stereotypes to dismiss these actions. In many ways, the character acts as an ambassador between so-called organic and synthetic lifeforms, addressing the common fears and misconceptions that people have. Narratively, Legion serves as a means through which to question ideas of sentience, individuality, and, ultimately, what it is to be a living being.

Questions of humanity are further explored through the character EDI. Mirroring the tendency to design human-looking robots as women (Alesich and Rigby), EDI is a spaceship's artificial intelligence turned independent android. She more closely illustrates the tendencies to feminize, sexualize, and romanticize robots (Alesich and Rigby 50-4), with her character being partially explored through a slow and deliberate relationship formed with the ship's pilot. She shows

initiative and agency, becoming interested in learning what it is to be human, but the player can choose to discourage EDI from pursuing these interests. This opens an opportunity for cultural influences on the player to take hold, despite the clear narrative direction the game is taking. EDI has more leeway for being regarded as a person than Legion through the story's pacing of her advancements and her apparent emotional connection to humans, despite the crew's initial distrust due to her technological capabilities and software vulnerabilities. Both EDI and Legion are framed through the fearful comments of other characters while their actions and dialogue simultaneously challenge these presumptions.

Mass Effect presents a sci-fi story that centers on the looming threat of technology, but also pushes beyond the frequent popular culture limitations on robotics, particularly in Western media. The games offer action, adventure, and opportunities for players to explore their own intentions and beliefs through the influence they have on the narrative and the decisions that they make about synthetic life. Despite players' impact and the menacing technology that aims to eradicate organic life, there is also a narrative openness that allows players to confront, reimagine, and question their relationship with and feelings toward technology.

While much of the story is molded by players, including the ability to remove synthetic life from the galaxy, the narrative also pushes for the recognition of these beings as individuals capable of thought, connection, and growth. Technology and robots in this world can pose a potential threat but can also work together with humanity. As a result, *Mass Effect* addresses both possibilities, giving players a space to reflect on their relationship to robots, consider the position of technology in society, and ultimately interrogate what it means to be human.

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