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Interview with Déyfou-lah Sani Bah-Traore on the Togolese Game *Origin – the Rise of Dzitri*

by Lisa Kienzl, 127

**reviews**

*We. The Revolution, a Review. Vive la Révolution or Death and All His Friends*

by Kevin Recher, 134

*Kingdom Come: Deliverance. A Bohemian Forest Simulator*

by Eugen Pfister, 142

# Round Table Discussion on *Nation(alism), Identity and Video Gaming* with with Megan Condis, Marijam Didžgalvytė, Georg Hobmeier and Souvik Mukherjee

Kathrin Trattner and Lisa Kienzl

### Abstract

Questions of nation and identity not only concern multiple aspects of video games, their production, and their consumption, but also require further and manifold discussion from different perspectives. In an effort to bring together voices from different fields that engage with video games and gaming practices from various perspectives, this virtual round table discussion attempts to open up the conversation beyond the realms of academia. Kathrin Trattner and Lisa Kienzl talked to Megan Condis, Marijam Didžgalvytė, Georg Hobmeier and Souvik Mukherjee about how concepts such as nation(alism) and identity impact video game representations, the gaming industry, and online gaming cultures in numerous ways.

**Keywords:** Nation, Nationalism, Identity, Round Table, Discussion, Megan Condis, Marijam Didžgalvytė, Georg Hobmeier, Souvik Mukherjee, gameenvironments

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### Introduction

In the course of compiling this special issue, we were tasked with the following question: What is our perspective as researchers regarding our field of investigation? We believe that video games are embedded in multiple contexts – historical, economical, sociocultural, medial, and political. Our approach is heavily influenced by Cultural Studies, which, particularly in relation to media, means that “meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes







To start in medias res, how would you assess the impact of concepts such as nation, nation building, nationalism or identity on video games in general? Which influence do these concepts have on the gaming industry?

**Megan Condis:** One of the things that I work on in my research is the way that video games as a cultural object have become integrated into existing identity categories and are used as props to uphold and perform certain identities (for example: whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality). Although virtual worlds are often optimistically imagined as spaces of *free play* where gamers can try on different ways of being and explore different facets of their identities (an idea that, many once assumed, would naturally lead to the disillusion of oppressive hierarchies and the embrace of liminality and fluidity of identity in these spaces), I would argue that discourses around gaming and what it means to be a gamer are steeped in existing schemas related to race, gender, and sexuality. Being a gamer might not mean being physically embodied as a white male, but it often means being willing to submit to rhetorical regimes that privilege the performance of whiteness and maleness and imagine other kinds of performances as aberrant and possibly even destructive to the cohesiveness of the larger community. This makes gamer culture ripe for exploitation by anti-feminists, homophobes and transphobes, and white supremacists, who hope to use gaming culture as a vehicle to expose a brand new crop of disaffected young white men to their toxic, hateful ideology.

**Lisa Kienzl:** In fact, the reification of existing identity categories and the exclusion mechanisms involved can be observed in several contexts of video games and gaming culture. You mention that concepts such as the notion of the *nation* and the often concurrent ideas of gendered, racialized, sexual, and religious identities can reinforce clearly visible demarcations in the formation of the gamers' self-identity.

However, how did this mental picture of the self, that still has an impact on gaming cultures, originate? How long will this impact remain in full force and effect? In this regard, what are your thoughts concerning the video gaming industry, Marijam?

**Marijam Didžgalvytė:** The poverty of mechanics in video games has resulted in a few basic scenarios being repeated ad infinitum in the medium. The historically limited community of people capable and willing to create games, has also limited the output, hyper-masculine tropes have until fairly recently stayed unchallenged. In such a context, we have seen themes of military action, nation building and Western hegemony becoming normal in this global industry. Such offer worked and brought about large and stable profits in the first forty years of the industry, but the companies have eventually caught up with the fact that it's abandoning a huge population that may not be interested in such themes. The diversification of video games in the past ten years came about due to the lowering of the cost of making games, but also because the capitalist class had to expand its audience. In the height of the military game boom, circa early 2000s, when even the United States Department of Defense was using this burgeoning industry for its own needs, we have seen Western hegemony being extremely capable in imposing its myth on to a new cultural phenomena.

**Kathrin Trattner:** This is an interesting point. How would you, Georg, as a politically engaged game designer, value the close relation between the military, war, and video gaming?

**Georg Hobmeier:** It is crucial to remember that computers and digital games in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were a byproduct of the cold war. We should keep this in mind, when assessing the history of games. All too often, the bills of those who invented

computers and later on games on computers were paid directly or indirectly through the military. Therefore, it also should not surprise us, that games have a troublesome history regarding the reproduction of hegemonic imagery and symbols. There was an infusion of counter cultural thinking in tech too, but the way these concepts have been handled in the last four decades was mostly problematic. In recent years, we saw a different thinking trickle into the gaming industry. Mainstream disputes around identity, colonialism a.o. related themes are now handled in a much more diverse way, but we also saw the rise of very conservative and reactionary forces grow in numerous backlashes. What we can say for sure, is that we are now past the naive and unquestioning reproduction. Now we are facing the actual debate as it seems.

**Lisa Kienzl:** Marijam and Georg, you have both observed various changes in the gaming industry and culture in the past years. However, excluding discussions appear to linger in various contexts. Souvik, what are your thoughts on these issues?

**Souvik Mukherjee:** I would like to view the initial question from multiple perspectives. On the one hand, nation, nationalism and identity are very different things. Benedict Anderson has given us the concept of nations as imagined communities but indeed, there is a vast spectrum within which the term is viewed still. Empire-building RTS (real-time strategy) games such as *Age of Empires* series (1998-2018), *Civilization* series (1991-2016) and *Rise of Nations* (2003) are all about steering a particular nation to power and glory, usually at the cost of enslaving, dispossessing, colonizing and destroying others. Strangely, such games continue to be ever-popular despite discourses on postcolonialism and anti-imperialism being common currency in our socio-cultural milieu. Then there are games such as *Call of Duty* series (2003-2019) where, again, the defense of a nation in times of war and peace is the prime *call of duty* for the player. Jingoism is a thing that is quite common in video games











**Lisa Kienzl:** Viewing video games as potential vehicles for scrutinizing and destabilizing monolithic concepts of nation and identity is an interesting perspective, thank you, Souvik. Megan, what are your thoughts on how societal discussions of nation, nationalism and identity relate to video gaming?

**Megan Condis:** I believe it is vital that we both look at how video games as interactive narratives are imagining nationalism and populism on the level of story and at how video games as platforms are being used organize and radicalize young men in service of nationalist and populist political agendas. The latter, I think, is especially important because it involves asking not just what kinds of narratives game designers are creating but also how political narratives are (or are not) imagined to function within the broader ecosystem of gaming culture (on social media, on gaming-related forums, on Discord and Twitch, etc.). In fact, I would argue that one of the most effective means of political indoctrination that takes place in video game culture has been the attempt to rhetorically position community concerns relating to issues of diversity and inclusion as inherently *political* (and therefore as divisive and dangerous) while explicitly racist or white supremacist speech comes to be labeled as *trolling, just jokes or heated gaming moments*.

**Kathrin Trattner:** There are many examples that confirm your observations on how online platforms relating to video games and gaming culture are providing a continuous breeding ground for the targeted recruitment to white nationalism. Think of the close ties between Breitbart, Gamergate, and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (Johnson 2016, Sherr and Carson 2017) or more recently, the link between mass shootings and online gamer communities (Wu 2019). Marijam, from your perspective, what is the role of politics in video game culture?



politics? At many conferences there seems to be a general understanding that we are a progressive community, but I have my doubts that this is being adopted by every single entity as the *new natural order*. Behind the many keynote speeches that advertise a diverse medium, there is still a ferocious debate between developers themselves and of course with the increasingly toxic and sectarian gamer communities.

**Kathrin Trattner:** Overall, it appears that things are, indeed, changing: The industry is diversifying and with it the representations in games are too. On the other hand, these changes have also led to increasing backlashes from gamer communities and game producers that appear to feel an increasing need to reinsure themselves of their own identity in excluding, toxic, and even violent ways. Questions of nation, nationalism and different aspects of identity collide in these discussions in various ways. One could say these questions, to a certain extent, are a potential minefield. Could you point out a few issues, addressing the entanglement of national, nationalism identity and video gaming, that from your point of view are especially important, fascinating or that should be tackled in academic research, the gaming industry and the wide-range societal discussions involved?

**Megan Condis:** In the next few years, I would love to see more work being done on how the act of participating in play itself, as charming and fun and, therefore, intellectually disarming as it can be, functions as a potential vector for the transmission of political ideology. As the recent controversy regarding Blizzard’s censorship of political speech sympathetic to the protests in Hong Kong in a seeming attempt to court favor with the Chinese government amply demonstrates, video games are starting to be seen as a powerful venue for the spread of political speech. It is vital that we start to consider how governments and other political entities might







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