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Game studies, futurity, and necessity (or the game studies regarded as still to come)

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ABSTRACT

As members of the Critical Approaches to Technology and the Social (CATS) Lab at UC Irvine, we are particularly motivated by this special issue's call to action. As a collective of interdisciplinary students at various stages in relevant degrees, we *are* the future of game studies. As such, this question strikes us not as one for speculation, but as a space to commit a set of shared values necessary for game studies to have a future—one that is more equitable, more sustainable, and more transparent. We argue that working towards this future will require an increased commitment to critiquing the relationship between industry and game-making practice; examining the sociopolitical landscape of both game culture and the world; and an attention to the institution of the university itself. Imagining the future in this way is a necessary practice, and a core component to scholarly critique. When we imagine the future, we can work both towards and against it. We do this work as researchers, but also as streamers, makers, critics, and players, each of whom brings our perspective to this special issue to articulate our vision of a critical game studies that strives for equity, sustainability, and self-reflexivity.

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We come to this special issue as members of the Critical Approaches to Technology and the Social (CATS) Lab at UC Irvine, a collective of interdisciplinary graduate students at various stages in our degrees united by common concerns with who is encouraged to make, play, and study games. We are drawn to the question of game studies' future because *we* are one facet of that future. The question of what will become of the discipline strikes us not as an opportunity for speculation, but as an occasion to advocate for a broader commitment to a set of shared values that we believe to be necessary for game studies to have a future worth imagining, one in which industry and academic venues alike no longer marginalize and dismiss those who take on the courageous and necessary work of understanding, critiquing, and reshaping the power of games and

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culture. We do this work as researchers, but also as streamers, makers, critics, and players, each of whom brings our perspective to this special issue to articulate our vision of a critical game studies that strives for equity, sustainability, and self-reflexivity. Working towards such a future requires that we all work to confront extant tensions in game culture and indeed game studies itself.

To better illustrate the future that we desire, we discuss three sites of power struggles both past and present, and show how these represent an oncoming future of games that we are actively working against. Specifically, we examine the relationship between industry and independent game-making practice, the sociopolitical landscape of game culture in/of the world, and the positionality of game studies in the institution of the university. Beyond being a core component of intersectional feminist scholarly critique, having a clear, collective vision of the future that we desire and deserve is vital for balancing the weight of realism with the possibilities of optimism. As such, we gesture to many mentors and peers whom we already see doing this necessary work throughout this piece, although our citations are not to be taken as exhaustive. While any discussion of the future is informed by the past, our purpose for writing this article is not to reflect on the work that precedes ours and distinguish the "good" research from the "bad." Regardless of what led us here, we are writing from a specific present, and it is only from this moment that we can direct thoughts and our actions forward. Imagining the future involves a commitment to action in the present and we view this conscious writing down of our shared hopes for a game studies yet to come is one such act among many.

Video game industries: re-working how we talk about work

A renewed understanding of the relationship between industry and game making practices is imperative to the future of games and therefore game studies. Rampant abuse and inequity continues to pervade game studios large and small (Semuels, 2019; Orland, 2020). Most recently, *California* V. *Activision Blizzard* has led to public scrutiny and calls to expose and punish AAA developers for their harassment and exploitation of employees. At the same time, international labor movements like *Game Workers Unite* have taken up the charge to enact change within the industry through organizing and collective action. It is increasingly clear that these issues have persisted throughout all of game history, but recent publicity brings with it the potential for attention and action from within the industry and outside of it. The games industry is rotten to the core and any scholarship that uncritically elevates commercial games is complicit in this culture of months-long mandatory crunch without overtime pay, chronic job insecurity, bigoted office culture, and abuse. We must shift our priorities.

We are by no means the only ones to recognize this. In tandem with a greater public scrutiny of abuse and exploitation in the games industry, a more critical lens towards game production has occurred in game studies—even as non-disclosure agreements continue to impede full access to many spaces and practices. Ethnographic studies of game development studios (Romine, 2016; Bulut, 2020) have been conducted to understand the logic and culture of the contemporary games industry, often revealing the misogyny, racism, and problematic capitalist ethos festering within the modern gaming studio. Anthologies like *Game production studies* (2021) have brought together scholars

seeking to dissect the realities of game making by putting production at the forefront of analysis. This work not only accounts for the ways that the politics of labor can be reshaped when artists and creators reject the AAA games industry, but also does well to question the extent to which these politics are reified even under apparently different models in the indie sphere (Bulut, 2020; Ruberg, 2019a). Yet we believe that there is still more game studies can do to aid the empowerment of game laborers and disentangle game production from the hegemonic industry imposing subjugation.

For instance, more must be done to investigate exploitative production cycles on a global scale. We agree with scholars like Kerr (2017), Švelch (2019), and Liboriussen and Martin (2016) when they argue for the need to look beyond the Western and Japanese game industry for creative production that exists at the geographical and cultural peripheries. Scholars must also acknowledge the multitude of actors both globally and locally that contribute to material production of game creation that are often overlooked by academia and the industry—factory workers, resource miners, and other precarious laborers (Nguyen, 2017; Ozimek, 2021). It is critical to expand game studies' role to one which stands in solidarity with global workers, which recognizes that there is no *one* games industry, and that labor is within the domain of game production. We must equally attend to the number of people who contribute to game culture from its peripheries. For instance, recent scholarship has shown the extensive emotional and physical labor that is undertaken by peripheral industry actors such as streamers and competitive gamers (Ruberg & Cullen, 2020; Kou & Gui, 2020). Game scholars must recognize the value of this work and its conduciveness towards fostering a healthy and vibrant gaming industry, particularly given the continued pervasiveness of the bigoted, reactionary politics unearthed by GamerGate.

It is also the role of game studies to fight for the legitimization of creators who do not engage with the games industry in normative fashions. Recent trends of situating independent game development in a larger industry context have been useful for understanding alternative paths of development outside of the AAA sphere, but much of this work has revealed similar structural inequities at play: toxic environments, demanding publishing cycles encouraging crunch, and harassment (Carpenter, 2021; Cote & Harris, 2021; Ruffino & Woodcock, 2020; Colby et al., 2021; Ruberg, 2019a). While we see continued value in exploration of the indie development scene, we wish to emphasize the need to look even further beyond what is considered a part of the industry, especially to those creators who are making games and content for non-monetary purposes.

If game studies is to have a future at all, we must not simply include but *forefront* queer games in our scholarship. (Here, we use "queer games" to indicate not just games with LGBT+ topics, but games which resist and reject the mores of the traditional games industry.) Unlike commercial games, queer games reach beyond the marketability of "fun" to evoke unpleasant emotions like anger, loneliness, or anxiety. In doing so, they challenge palatability, traditional concepts of profit models within the games industry, and the very core of what counts as "play" (Ruberg, 2019b; Trammell, 2020). While we must work *against* exploitative practices in the games industry, we can also work *towards* making queer games a sustainable alternative. There exists a thread of this working-towards in game studies, highlighting the vibrant histories and communities of creators who operate parallel to and in defiance of an otherwise hegemonic community (Pozo, 2018; Ruberg, 2020; Yang, 2020; DePass, 2018; Stone, 2018). We join these

and other scholars in insisting that queer games are valuable to study in their own right—beyond their utility to a mainstream games culture. However, we cannot build a critical, radical future of game studies solely in opposition to the games industry as it operates today. We must carve out space for hopeful scholarship that uplifts queer games and holds them outside of their utility to the games industry.

The sociopolitical landscape of games and game culture

Central to our vision of the future of game studies is recognizing the value of interrogating what has been called the hegemony of play (Fron et al., 2007)–the ways that video games and game cultures enact, enforce, and reinforce structures of power in and through society and technology. The CATS Lab represents a game studies that is eager to conduct or support research that not only brings attention to the issues of those who are marginalized or exploited in and by games, but also the systemic inequalities from which these issues emerge. Examining the politics of video games—who makes them, who is represented in them, who plays them—and confronting what is obviously wrong as well as what is messy and ambiguous is essential to uncovering insight into the fears, fantasies, anxieties, and even hopes that exist in our lived world (Murray, 2018). The politics of video games are the politics of the world.

As noted above, our writing of this piece coincided with *California* V. *Activision Blizzard*, yet another instance of systematic abuse toward women in the video game industry. This work was also written alongside a sudden uptick in harassment of marginalized streamers on Twitch through bots spewing racial slurs. Both of these episodes have been met by calls for corporate actors to do better and are only the latest in a long line of similar occurrences. These are only two examples of the strength and duration of processes of marginalization in video game design and in the participation of games culture; processes that games scholars have been sounding the alarm on for years (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Gray, 2012; Cote, 2020). However, for many of us it feels as if we are experiencing or encountering alarm fatigue in our communities. The landscape of video games continues to be revealed as one that is rough and inaccessible to women, people of color, people with disabilities—anyone who attempts a complaint (or who is perceived to be complaining) (Cote, 2020; Gray, 2020; Ahmed, 2021). Yet many industries, institutions, players, and even games scholars fail or even refuse to recognize this inequity due to their own entrenchment in an apolitical "academic distance" that supports exclusionism and reinforces norms of harm (Paul, 2018; Phillips, 2020a). In other words, inequality is *the point* (c.f. Serwer, 2018).

Of course, the examples above are primarily of systemic inequality in Western contexts. The impact of games and games culture connect society and technology worldwide, but this is not to say that the values, forms, and approaches toward games are uniform. In the aim of adding and complicating the field of games studies, its geographic and cultural embedded values must be addressed in their due course. It matters that a game is designed by an American, French, or Korean game studio, not merely in that the individuals working there provide their own unique and varied values into their work, but because they should not be forgotten when examined across the globalized spectrum of today's gaming environment. Despite game studies' increasing inclusion of feminist, queer, and postcolonial discourse, this departure or "re-centering" of games and their

design can lead to a diminished awareness of their development. New methodologies and theory will be required to enrich the discourse of the field by providing embedded, area-specific understandings of games that cannot otherwise be decoded. Penix-Tadsen's (2020) interviews with three generations of women game designers in South America are one recent example of work which presents such perspectives and experiences. Games have become a globalized medium, but their unique embedded cultural traits have been minimized by the marketplace. Patterson (2020) recognizes this when he describes the imperial legacy that positions the hegemonic metropole, in this instance the U.S., as the arbiter of creativity and design thinking in games, while Asia is subjected to the lowly craftsman labors of hardware and coding. Advancing how non-Western actors organize, collaborate, and develop games, game practices, and cultures will prove instrumental in developing a field of study that actually encompasses all games and all of game culture.

Reviewing examples like these and doing work that abuts these issues can result in the rather ominous feeling that games exist only to be a technology of abuse and of power, but we cannot give in to such pessimism. The insights garnered through a richer understanding of game culture can be leveraged to address a number of global social issues such as gender-based violence, anthropogenic climate change, and the continued exploitation of colonized or formerly colonized nations. And while it may be "harrowing, moving, crushing, and disturbing" there is a form of pleasure to be had in being the killjoy (Kocurek, 2020). Even so, it is too simple to say that hope, a promise to value human difference, and the right game designs are enough to solve all our problems. As Phillips (2020b) has observed, all too often the intent of diversity initiatives is to subsume difference into a system of unity that favors those already in power and which "halts the generative friction that produces power for the marginalized" (p. 173). This is part of why the future we envision is one where working on our discipline likely never ends. Even so, games are reflections of the world, and the ways players interact with games offer truths about what is taken for granted and reveal where the potential for "generative friction" may lie.

Doing game studies in but not of the university

In imagining the future of game studies, we must reckon with its being largely contained within the walls of the university. In the context of this issue, we might begin to do so by asking: what future is there for game studies in an institution that elevates marginalized voices when it is good for optics but seldom offers adequate support for these individuals? Many studies have shown that the likelihood of one dropping out of postsecondary degree programs can be tied to intersectional vectors of privilege such as race, gender, and class (Estep, 2016; Sowell & King, 2008). As Ahmed (2014) notes of the individuals who push against this culture only to be swiftly pushed out, "when you expose a problem, you pose a problem" and the state of being a problem is not one that many can occupy for long within an institution as large as the university (para. 1).

For those of us who stay (either due to one's privilege, because "they cannot afford to leave," or because they have not lost the will to keep chipping away at those walls) and who do humanistic cultural critique, what future awaits us in an institutional culture that dismisses our work by recognizing only specific methods or the apparent infallibility

of "data" (Ahmed, 2016, para. 3)? Phillips uses the term "scholarly negging" to "name the strategy of emotional manipulation […] that created the early field imaginary of game studies" which they frame as "a masculinist response" to "a 'phantom' group of interlocutors" and which they argue has informed the growth of the discipline as we know it (2020a, para. 9). Under the guise of received notions such as "objectivity" and "academic rigor" the guiding principles of early game studies are steeped in misogyny and white supremacy that is only beginning to be reckoned with (Trammell, 2020). But to expose a problem is to pose a problem, and it is no coincidence that scholarship which works to disentangle academia from its fetid roots is seldom given institutional support. In a field such as ours whose best-funded research is either contracted by the U.S. military or else promises to build games that make "better" students, workers, and human beings, is the future of game studies a choice between hoping for tenure as you advocate for your underfunded advisees and designing better targeting systems for drones?

Queer game creators, too, have made their way into academia under the belief that—unlike the games industry—the academy will support and celebrate their artistic practice. However, in practice only a particular brand of scholarly output is allowed to stand as a marker of a junior scholar's worth. Established academics face similar dilemmas—rare are the publications which accept work that blurs the line between research and creation. What effect can such devaluing of creative work have other than pushing these makers to the margins of the university, or indeed out of it altogether? Anthropy (2012) has shown that our field owes its development not just to academics, but to an array of queer games makers who are immanently capable of operating outside academia. These are the people and spaces through which the future of games is being written. The question for academics is whether we will make space for their work in games studies or whether we will content ourselves with a crusty and willful obsolescence as change is built elsewhere.

While we recognize and often resonate with the despair felt by many around the innumerable issues which are endemic in academia, we do not see such feelings as an invitation to nihilism. Instead, we look to the work and words of thinkers like Moten and Harney, who encourage us to "sneak into the university and steal what one can […] to be in but not of" the institution (2013, p. 26). This theft is perhaps something that graduate students are uniquely positioned to do, given our already precarious positions pre-the constraints of the tenure track. We must also, as Keeling (2019) suggests, amplify junior or someday scholars whose "imaginative modes of scholarly production […] challenge interests served by existing measures of academic rigor" (p. 15). All too often, the important work of graduate students has been belittled and threatened due to both the culture of games and of academia (Kocurek, 2020; Phillips, 2020a). Some of us hope to join the wave of tenured critical scholars ourselves, to do work that reaches wider audiences and inspires deeper understanding of what the university is and a re-imagining of what it can be, work which we accept must be ongoing. Again, from Phillips: "Resolution, when predicated on the absence of complaint often serves to erase needs rather than to meet them" (2020b, p. 176). As a new generation of scholars gradually replaces the old guard, we commit ourselves to dismantling the toxic norms of the Ivory Tower through research, teaching, and mentorship, but this project, like any commitment to social justice, has no end-date.

Given these contending affects, we are reminded of Angela Davis' assertion that "we have to do the work even though we don't yet see a glimmer on the horizon that it's actually going to be possible" (2016, p. 29). While one may invite despair through a careful understanding of the global state of affairs, such knowledge is necessary for living and working as if the revolution will one day come. Keeling characterizes this temporality of "as if" as "a way of holding in reserve a radical imagination that approaches the limits of knowledge, not as a problem to be overcome, but as the condition of possibility" for meaningful change (2019, p. 14). An important part of acting as if change is attainable is the refusal to accept that it is not. Through continued efforts towards equity, sustainability, and self-reflexivity, our field has the opportunity to shake up existing academic mores, to be expansive, exploratory, creative, and challenging. While there is much to be done, we hope to be equal to the task of shaping and maintaining such a critical and intersectional feminist game studies.

The game studies regarded as still to come

When we imagine the future, we can work both towards and against it. We can think of no better way to conclude our analysis than by reaffirming the future that we are working towards and the futures that we are not.

In sitting down to collaboratively write this piece, we discussed what the concept "the future of game studies" meant to each of us, much of which was translated into the set of concerns and considerations outlined above. One aspect of our discussion that has yet to be made explicit, however, is the relation between *futurity* and *necessity*. By this, we do not mean to ask whether game studies itself is necessary, although our desire for self-reflexivity means that such a question is not wholly unwarranted. While the environmental impact of video games (Chang, 2019) may lead one to ask whether these media objects and the leisure they provide are worth exacerbating the threat to our extinction, we maintain that there is something fundamentally useful about the societal notion that video games are unproductive wastes of time (Goetz, 2017). It may be that the same set of neoliberal, capitalist logics by which we measure productivity and utility is in fact superfluous, if not actively detrimental, to our ecological and sociocultural flourishing. This is, in part, why we are skeptical of any future of games which justifies itself according to efficiency or profitability.

In the CATS Lab, all of us have played a part in courses, initiatives, and projects that have sought to reshape the way people think about, engage with, or design games and game platforms. When we speak of futurity and necessity, then, we see ourselves as reframing the prompt of this special issue and asking, "What do we believe is necessary for game studies to have a future?" And, in a sense, our research, our writing, and our creative work all embody our own answers to this question. Those of us who have worked together to write this piece as members of the CATS Lab are: Amanda, a digital anthropologist who has conducted feminist research as an intern at Twitch and changed conversations about gender and labor within the company; Rainforest, a critical media theorist who researches slowness in games and collaborates with others to dismantle academia's barriers to entry in his service work as an editor and conference co-organizer; Kat, a critical archives scholar and internet historian who researches queer histories of computing in times of crisis from a background of art history, performance

studies, and previous work as a tech and games journalist; Ian, who is a sociologist who researches alternative histories of play and cultural reproduction of inequities within the video game community; Ryan Rose, a queer-game-maker turned games studies scholar whose work (both academic and artistic) explores themes of queerness, comfort/discomfort, and monstrosity; and Will, a Koreanist, who utilizes area studies methodologies to critique and design new games around cultural histories from a non-Western perspective.

We offer this list not to tally up our accomplishments, but to offer insights into what game studies scholars are capable of, both within and despite the landscape of the discipline we have outlined in this piece. While each of us is proud of our individual work, what we have shown through this piece and reified for ourselves through the process of writing it, is that the future of game studies lies in collaboration, not just at the level of any single lab but across research networks, academic disciplines, and nations. What is most necessary for game studies to have a future is a shared commitment and orientation to research that, regardless of method or framework, attends to the very real social power of games.

We maintain that the intersections that we have identified between critical theory, queer theory, area studies, feminist analysis, critical race theory, and beyond are necessary for the field to produce "good" research; however, it is impractical to suggest that every researcher incorporate every body of literature into their work just as it is unrealistic to assume that any one analytic lens can cover the breadth of a given topic. Game studies must therefore embrace a multitude of methodologies and approaches to the study of games, their development, and their cultural importance, including many that were not cited here and still others which lie beyond our authorial frames of reference. Our aim in writing this has not been to designate any endpoints.

In many ways, the future is always in question, shaped by the reality of who has the power to dictate what will come to pass. This paper has been a call to resist the futures that will exist if games studies abides harassment and exploitation in the games industry, shirks its responsibility to attend to marginalized communities including those outside of Western contexts, and succumbs to interdisciplinary in-fighting against the backdrop of the university apparatus, but is has not been a list of reasons to be frozen by pessimism. When we imagine the future, we can work both towards and against it. The future that we desire for game culture and game studies must be balanced between the critical and the hopeful, between righteous fury and attentive care. We have an earnest and galvanizing hope for the possibility of what our field may yet become if we embrace the work that must be done in the name of the game studies that we regard as still to come, and as a rising group of scholars we are ready to fight for that future.

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