



Anne-Marie Schleiner

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Piracy, Urban Art,
and Mobile Games

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Introduction: Transnational Play

Abstract

Transnational Play makes a case for approaching gameplay as a global industry and set of practices that also includes diverse participation from players and developers located within the global South, in nations outside of the First World. Such participation includes gameplay in cafés, games for regional and global causes like environmentalism, piracy and cheats, localization, urban playful art in Latin America, and the development of culturally unique mobile games. This book offers a reorientation of perspective on global play, while still acknowledging geographically distributed socioeconomic, racial, gender, and other inequities. Over the course of the inquiry, which includes a chapter dedicated to the cartography of the mobile augmented reality game Pokémon Go, I develop a theoretical line of argument critically informed by gender studies and intersectionality, post-colonialism, geopolitics, and game studies. This book looks at who develops, localizes, and consumes games, problematizing play as a diverse and contested transnational domain.

Keywords: globalized games, participatory gaming, post-colonialism, mobile games, global South, urban studies

Digital games are attracting new players. Yves Guillemot, French CEO of game publisher Ubisoft, told GamesBeat in an interview: 'It's a very interesting time for the industry, because the mobile is bringing in more and more casual people; Facebook brought new people too by using a new system to monetize' (Takahashi). Danish game researcher Jasper Juul, somewhat dramatically, dubbed this shift in player demographic: 'the casual revolution' (1). No longer the exclusive realm of a Personal Computer hardcore demographic of teenage boys versed in militant teamwork and digital combat, grandmothers, younger women, users of mobile phones and Facebook of any gender, are playing these shorter, more interruptible, and cartoonish games. Players navigate the uncertain outdoor terrain of augmented reality games

with their smartphones, collecting cartoon pocket monsters in parks and public plazas and deploying their creatures in digital turf wars. Although seldom included in North American, European, or Japanese studies, these trainers of Pokémon, overseers of digital farms on Facebook, virtual city builders, and argonauts of addictive puzzle challenges, are also located in the 'global South', in Latin America, in Africa, and in Southeast Asia.¹

We are only recently beginning to account for games and gameplay as global industries and practices in recent digital game scholarship. For instance, the anthology *Video Games Around the World* consists of brief yet informative historical contributions on game development from authors originating from thirty-nine distinct nations. The editor of the anthology, Canadian game researcher Mark J.P. Wolf writes, 'Small video game companies are appearing all around the world, each hoping for a hit that will bring it international attention and fame, both of which can grow faster due to the Internet' (1). And in *Cultural Code: Videogames and Latin America*, North American scholar of Latin American gaming, Philip Penix-Tadsen writes 'Videogames are being converted into cultural currency for an ever-increasing array of purposes throughout Latin America and the globe' (26).

To a certain extent, a transnational account had already been formulated in the 1980s of the forces that helped establish a global game industry headquartered primarily in the United States and Japan, developments usually framed as a series of both tensions and collaboration along a geopolitical axis of East vs. West, as I will discuss in '[Chapter One: Tilting the Axis of Global Play from East/West to South/North](#)'. Otherwise in most analysis of games, researchers tend to assume a North American and occasionally European or Japanese public, a 'Northern' audience of industry specialists, academics, and players. Especially players outside the First World, in both so-called emerging economies, and in poorer nations from the global South, have remained largely invisible to digital game studies.

One reason for the absence of diverse global players from otherwise thorough accounts such as Steven Kent's *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokémon—The Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*, and Aphra Kerr's *The Business and Culture of Digital Games: Gamework and Gameplay*, seems to be that only recently

1 I refer to the global South, despite important differences between regions and nations, as a unity which has in common such factors as a post-colonial legacy of global economic disadvantage, undeveloped infrastructures including limited access to the Internet, and a large portion of the population struggling with poverty and precarious living conditions.

have players or game ‘users’ come to carry comparable weight with the industry in reckonings of digital gaming. Even game scholarship written from a more critical, post-Marxist perspective on the business of ‘global capitalism and video games’, such as Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter’s *Games of Empire*, has been largely dismissive of games as a global medium. The authors write: ‘Most of the sales of this supposedly global media are in North America, Europe, and Japan, with the United States still the largest single market. Game culture is thus heavily concentrated in the developed, rich zones of advanced capitalism’(xvii). In their analysis, only players who live in the global North and legitimately purchase games count as participants of ‘game culture’.²

Such a perspective presumes that due to widespread global poverty across the digital divide, the existence of Second and Third World developers and players is purely wishful thinking. For instance, while criticizing the application of Marshall McLuhan’s concept of the global village to gaming, the authors of *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture and Marketing* write, ‘It [the global village] skips over the divisions in wealth that separate young North American owners of PlayStation 2s and Xboxes, commanding what were once military levels of computing power from their homes, from the majority of the world’s children who can never afford such gadgets’ (Kline, Witheford, de Peuter 36). This well-intentioned critique of the hyperbole of the global village casts the entirety of the global South’s children outside of North America in a sadly passive, gadget-less light. The authors are probably unaware that in many parts of Latin America and Southeast Asia, and increasingly in Africa, game consoles which do not necessarily require Internet access, are a relatively accessible form of digital gameplay. Even if unable to afford their own console, players can go to a neighborhood game and Internet café to play what are often pirated console and computer games. Addressing this blind spot regarding gaming in the global South, Penix-Tadsen criticizes the lack of scholarship across a too rigidly defined ‘digital divide’: ‘Too frequently, we simply accept outdated characterizations of the global south as a massive technological backwater, strictly on the downside of the “digital divide” between hi-tech haves and have-nots, when the reality of technological acquisition and usage in Latin America tells a more nuanced tale’ (44). Looking more carefully at the practices of the world’s less privileged players is key for accounting for

² Dyer-Witheford and de Peuters premise in this book is that games are a ‘paradigmatic media of Empire’ composed of ‘two pillars’ of the ‘military and market’ evident in once popular American and European mainstream games like America’s Army and Second Life.



1. Game café, Mumbai, India, by Cory Doctorow, ShareAlike 2, Creative Commons, 2008; Digital Photograph.

gaming culture's general, transnational tendencies, and well as cultivating awareness of unique, local practices.

In addition to renting play time at public game cafés, players overcome the infrastructural challenges of the global South with the more recently, accessible mobile phone platform. Even when lacking basic services like water and electricity in the home, both older and younger gamers are spending more hours playing casual games on their phones. North American game researcher Adrienne Shaw's fieldwork on gaming in India indicated that the increased accessibility of mobile phones led most of the industry representatives she interviewed 'to focus on developing mobile and social networking games accessible on phones' (188).³ The first step toward ending an unwitting blindness toward the gameplay of the global South is a matter of knowing where to look, such as in small video game arcades and in Internet cafés, on consoles like Wii, Xbox, and PlayStation, for which pirated game copies can be purchased from mobile street vendors, and more recently on mobile phones, both older and newer ones. These localities and platforms for gameplay contrast with the home computers with high-speed Internet, or the latest smart phones and tablets, that are a staple of gameplay in more affluent nations.

³ The technical industry is also starting to take note of up and coming mobile users in the global South. For instance, Melinda Klayman, a User Experience designer based in Google's London offices, is conducting research on Indian women's usage of mobile phones, a population she refers to as India's 'Next Billion Users'.

Meanwhile, starting a few decades earlier, a neighboring field of media studies had taken note of game players in the global South. Information Communication Technology (I.C.T.) studies concerned with regional development and modernization have been some of the first research to observe digital gaming practices outside the First World. For instance, in the article 'Computer Games in the Developing World: The Value of Non-Instrumental Engagement with ICTs, or Taking Play Seriously,' Beth E. Kolko and Cynthia Putnam write of Central Asia: 'When schools are not wired and home access rates are low, game cafés are likely places for people's "first touch" with computers' (5). One shortcoming of such media literacy studies from a game researcher's perspective, is that they seldom directly analyze gaming culture, assuming that games merely serve as an entertaining entry point towards overall media literacy.

What can we learn from player practices in the global South? Must we assume that there is little to learn, that digital game developments flow only from one source outwards, exported from 'First World' industries situated in the technologically upscale North to the rest of the globe? Is gameplay in the global South therefore always a few steps behind digital game trends already surpassed in Internet wired, soon to be even faster 5G Northern nations like the United States and Canada, where for instance games are no longer played in venues like arcades and Internet cafés? On the contrary, I will make the case in this book that global game researchers would do well to query modernist assumptions about the First World, or what I refer to as the global North, inevitably steering progress and innovation in technical and digital fields such as gaming. In addition to following alternative paths to 'modernization', for instance bypassing home computers and adopting wide-spread mobile phone usage, the global South is taking the lead in other areas of game industry and ludic cultural development.

For example, for a game to be deserving of attention, it need not take the form of a three-dimensional photo-realistic world crafted through Triple A streamlined production processes that requires extensive, Hollywood-scale game production, including teams of modelers, animators, level designers, and artificial intelligence programmers. Elegant design and innovative playability can also be observed in the games of smaller, emerging developers in the global South who are especially active makers of short, casual mobile games with relatively simple, 2-Dimensional cartoon graphics. While independent developers in the North gather and demo their games at industry conventions like the annual Game Developer Conventions in California and Europe, and at the Indiecade Awards in Los Angeles and Boston, some international developers, like Vietnamese Dong Nguyen, the



2. *Unblock Me* (2009) by Kira Games; Game Screenshot.

designer of *Flappy Birds*, distribute their games through mobile phone online marketplaces like Apple's 'App Store' and Android's 'Play Store'.

Developers like Kira-games in Northern Thailand incorporate local cultural influences into their mobile game design, such as the traditional wooden puzzles that are converted into digital puzzles in the globally popular *Unblock Me*. Osja Studio paint Kmeer heritage temples and mythology across the mobile levels of *Asva the Monkey*, combining Cambodian cultural inspirations with puzzle game conventions. Indonesian developers like Elven Games populate their games with characters and settings drawn from both mythological and contemporary Indonesian sources. A broadened cultural palette for game design inspiration, more immediate online distribution channels, the accessible mobile platform, and also the smaller-scaled development cycles for these independent games, are some of the conditions favorable to game development outside the global North.

While casual games are becoming more international, in terms of their development and especially in their consumption, larger Triple A game studios are still headquartered well within the global North, in California and Texas, in Canada, the U.K, Europe, and in Asia in South Korea and Japan. Yet even Triple A games, although costly and perhaps only made in English, Korean, or Japanese, are also played in the global South. Cottage industries of unsanctioned localizers and pirates do the translation and localization work that Northern publishers leave undone for many international players. And in some nations like Vietnam and Thailand, above-the-board localization outfits legally translate and customize games from the United States, Japan, South Korea, and increasingly from China. A transnational

approach to game analysis accounts for such international, cross-border movements of game culture, what I have elsewhere referred to as 'play material' (Schleiner, *Player's Power to Change the Game* 51). If not only the industry but also players matter, as potential consumers with buying power, as untapped markets, or as co-producers, as localizers, and even as illegal pirate participants of gaming, digital game scholarship would benefit from acknowledging players from the greater population of the globe, not only those located in the world's most affluent nations.

Innovative, environmentally and socially conscious, playful work in the global South has also been imagined and prototyped outside of the game industry, for instance by artists active in the field of Latin American public art. My Fourth Chapter, 'Ludic Recycling in Latin American Art' is based on interviews with Latin American artists who have been exemplary in their ludic practice over the last few decades. Crafted with reused material and old electronics, their artworks include Cambalache Collective's toy-like, mobile hand carts pushed through marginal neighborhoods of Bogota, Arcangel Constantini's interactive artworks repurposed from hacked game consoles in Mexico City, and Rene C. Hayashi's playgrounds constructed of recycled material for children living in peripheral shanty towns in Buenos Aires. These are deliberately low-technology, but innovatively conceptualized, often urban, metropolitan approaches to playful art. Such socially and environmentally engaged work from Latin America offers an instructive counter-example to the wasteful, rapid cycles of obsolescence within the mainstream digital game industry, which relies on consumers frequently updating and discarding their digital hardware of computers, and also now phones. And as income disparity and job precarity rise even within the global North, there are lessons to be learned from the socially engaged ludic practice of artists who have been working creatively, ecologically, and playfully with less privileged publics from within their own cities and regions.

Recognizing multiple approaches to modernization, and accounting for innovation that emerges from the global South, including social and environmental innovation, that is either applicable elsewhere in the global South, or also is instructive for the global North, are arguments for discarding the implicit ranked elitism of the First, Second, and Third World tiers for differentiating global economic zones and conditions, while still acknowledging differing, inequitable conditions and challenges. Rather than strict adherence to the geographic boundaries of the Northern and Southern hemispheres, the opposition South vs. North is shaped by a view of economic world history that recognizes a global power imbalance since colonial powers laid claim to territories most of which have since become



3. *Paisajes Errantes* or Itinerant Landscapes in Managua, Nicaragua (2013), by Rene C. Hayashi in collaboration with Moisés Mora and Claudia Morales; Photograph.

'Second and Third World' nations. How game scholars and media researchers frame developments in a rapidly changing global industry influences where they see development. Geographic 'de-centering' work, undoing the cultural imperialism wrought by past and present 'empires' of the global North, from former European colonial powers, to later military and economic heavy-weights like the United States, is an ongoing process (Liboriussen and Martin).

Post-colonial scholars and transnational feminists have critiqued the lack of agency ascribed to inhabitants of the Third World by First World scholars and researchers, for example, a tendency among 'white feminists' to portray Third World women as powerless 'socio-economic victims' who lack the ability to make choices in their lives (Mohanty 23). As the humanities scholar Gayatri Spivak famously posed the question from a philosophical angle, in response to the work initiated by the historians of the Indian Subaltern Group, can the 'subaltern' speak for themselves (83)? Or should the more privileged attempt to speak for those they deem voiceless and lacking in agency, which could in this book be construed as a Northern academic writing of the concerns of game players outside the global North? I will grapple with these speaking agency issues in relation to other Northern 'speakers' over the course of this book, when I discuss Northern industry analysts who patronizingly counsel Southern nations to do more to combat game piracy, in the interest of protecting their own Northern Intellectual

Property, or when Northern Games for Change designers whom I discuss in [Chapter Six](#), either characterize the inhabitants of the global South as powerless victims, or alternately invest them with superpowers.

I will pause for a self-reflexive moment to locate myself within the global South vs. North framework animating this analysis. I am a white, Northern (United States and European) educated media artist, game scholar, and designer. My early life experiences in California and ethnic privilege have shaped my views. But I also conducted much of this research later as an adult when I was living abroad in Latin America and Southeast Asia for over a decade. The experience of having inhabited both international academic game studies and public activist art circles, in diverse national and linguistic regions, is useful for bridge building across disciplines and regions. For instance, while exhibiting as an artist and teaching game design in Mexico, I learned of ludic art that is inspirational and lauded within a vibrant, urban public art scene in Latin America and internationally, but also could contribute more to fields such as game studies, urban geography, and environmental studies. And later while living in Southeast Asia, I encountered culturally inspired approaches to independent game development that could in turn serve as models for game making elsewhere in the global South.

In addition to being informed from my own experiences within the global South, my research method attempts to mitigate my Northern bias when I build my arguments based on listening to and citing what Southern players, developers, and artists have said in live conversations, digital forums, interviews. Although my analysis is in this sense empirically influenced, also including ethnographic fieldwork and a play tour at the border of the United States and Mexico, as a writer I am not without my own agenda. My argumentation and theoretical optics in this book are drawn from post-colonialism, critiques of First World hegemony captured in the opposition of global South vs. North, post-Marxist critiques of neoliberal globalization, game scholarship and ludology, feminism, and gender studies. My past exploration of activist, artist, and augmented reality games in my first book, *The Player's Power to Change the Game*, although differing in approach and informed primarily by political philosophy and media art activism, can be read as a prequel to this newer book. For instance in [Chapters Three](#) and [Five](#) of *Transnational Play*, I continue to explore questions of player power in Augmented Reality Games and Games for Change. In this book, I am more interested in the transnational implications of these rapidly evolving play genres (Schleiner 61).

Like casual games intended for 'casual' entertainment, more serious Games for Change and educational games also lend themselves to production

while the conflict can only be defined or solved by external forces' ('Homo Ludens 2.0' 10). A game that relies on heroic foreigners to resolve what are characterized as local problems, reinforce stereotypes of incompetency and a lack of agency among the inhabitants of the global South.

On the other hand, the design of such Games for Change can also be overbalanced towards the locals' side in the attribution of agency. In [Chapter Six](#), 'The Absence of the Oppressor' I discuss *Evoke*, a game designed to spur entrepreneurial solutions to problems in Africa like 'water scarcity' and 'food insecurity'. Similar in orientation to self-help problem-solving literature and workshops, the game attempts to motivate and empower local players to resolve 'their' problems on their own. The prolific Californian game designer of *Evoke*, Jane McGonigal, once ambitiously proposed that gamers could 'solve world hunger' in an online Ted video lecture. McGonigal's occasional Californian collaborator Ken Eklund, with similar aspirations for the transformative, altruistic potential of gaming, predicted that 'it's entirely possible that a serious alternate reality game is going to be one of those revolutionary moments' (Cook). Gamifying the world's crises as problems for players to 'solve' is in line with a turn toward social engineering and life improvement gaming, from alternative reality games about energy usage, to citizen-science hack-a-thons that explore data sets on air pollution, discussed in such venues as the Playful Citizen symposium at Utrecht University in the Netherlands in 2012.

These matches between behavioral modification, technical design, and worthy global causes are both inspirational and at times well-implemented and effective. For instance, in 2007, several years before governments and scientists openly started attempting to address carbon emissions and global climate change in agreements such as the 2016 Paris accord, Eklund, together with McGonigal, designed the forward-thinking *World Without Oil*, a crowd-sourced game which invited players around the globe to speculate on ways to improve on their energy consumption habits. The international players of *World Without Oil* noted direct improvements of their everyday energy consumption habits after participating in the game. Positive change in such a game occurs through modification of the player's own behavior. But such gamification must also be thought through, especially when games are problematized in the global South or target Southern player-publics, the populations who are most predicted to be most severely affected by climate change, militant conflicts, and continuing economic disparities between North and South (Fourth National Climate Assessment). How should designers attribute the root causes of problems when they gamify—as primarily local or global? Who acts with agency and who is cast as the victim of a crisis?

A decade before the emergence of motivational, life betterment, and wellness gamification, a more ‘negative’, oppositional Games for Change approach was theorized by a designer from the global South. In [Chapter Six](#), I review Uruguayan game researcher and designer Gonzalo Frasca’s proposal for ‘the Videogames of the Oppressed’, for resistant games that simulate and practice resistance, including against oppression at a smaller, family unit scale, such as a gay child coming out against homophobic parents. As I discuss further in that chapter, Frasca’s model of Games for Change is directly indebted to other Latin American, resistant and counter-hegemonic, Marxist cultural and pedagogic work. These more oppositional, political approaches may again be a promising angle to explore for some applications of Games for Change, at times a better choice than motivational self-transformation, among other tactical approaches. Singaporean game designer Shao Han Tan adopts a similar critical approach to problem-solving via games, as I will discuss further in Chapter Seven’s tour of gaming in Southeast Asia, in game mastered, table-top scenarios, such as a game where players rehearse standing up to an exploitive boss. As Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe proposes, ‘it is only when division and antagonism are recognized as being ineradicable that it is possible to think in a properly political way’ (15).⁴ One possible avenue for playful change is through critical opposition.

At times this book is about outright tensions between South and North. Players in the global South are implementing creative tactics for overcoming economic and infrastructural obstacles to game literacy that are not always Northern sanctioned. For example, Vietnamese players of *Pokémon Go* intentionally falsely tagged densely urban neighborhoods of Ho Chi Min City on Google Maps as recreational park zones so that the game would generate more game characters in a Southeast Asian city with relatively few parks (‘Vietnam’s Pokémon Go Players Get Yellow Card’). And refusing to wait for the official release of the game in their nation, Malaysian *Pokémon Go* players figured out how to play an unofficial version of the game with localized characters with names like NasiLemakBungus and Maggi Goreng, influenced by regionally popular rice and noodle dishes (Lim).

Player-driven game labor, including cheats, piracy, game translations, customizations, and external-to-the game maps, turn the tables on who has a hand at shaping and experiencing digital game culture worldwide. Rather than dismissing such actions as merely the work of thieving pirates

4 In her later work, Chantal Mouffe distinguishes between agonistics and antagonism, arguing that when tension is openly acknowledged and addressed (agonistics) this can mitigate the eruption of agonistics into antagonism, or violent conflict.