

Playing the Field III: American Studies, Video Games, Immersion 20 – 23 May 2020

Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies

Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Germany

Proposal deadline: 31 October 2019

Call for Papers

We proudly invite proposals for academic papers for the third installment of “Playing the Field,” an international conference where scholars consider video games from an American Studies perspective. This year’s conference focuses on a signature characteristic of video games that invites considerations that reach far beyond their immediate context: immersion.

Even casual observers appreciate the ability of video games to provide compelling experiences. Consider passengers who play on their phones during their morning train commute; college students holding *Mario Kart* tournaments in their dorms; professionals unwinding after-hours; or children playing learning games on their parents’ tablet computers. To be immersed means inhabiting fully a space where the rules of behavior and modes of being are completely apparent. Compared to navigating the social world, being immersed in mediated environments—digital or otherwise—affords an intensified, optimal experience. Yet immersion also constitutes an ambivalent state of being, simultaneously connoting the intensification and narrowing of cognitive abilities. Immersive experiences promise authenticity but may also engender addiction.

In 2018, over 60% of Americans age 13 and older self-identified as gamers, with rates rising annually (Nielsen Company poll). Americans seem to flock to immersive, mediated experiences. They seek out overtly designed spaces like video games, theme parks, malls, and cruise ships but also supposedly natural (yet still framed and mediated) environs like national parks and metropolitan green belts. Considering immersion from an American Studies perspective means contemplating questions about the political and aesthetic significance of immersive experiences in the context of contemporary American life and its media history and forms:

- How do games involve players in specifically American narratives of personal or national exceptionalism, social and geographic mobility (e.g. e/immigration), market-centered economic and religious outlooks, as well as ethnic, gendered, and embodied typologies?
- Which identitarian and embodied experiences are (over-)represented, marginalized, or omitted (e.g. gender, gay and lesbian, trans and queer, disability)?
- How does immersion intersect with various forms of imperialism (cultural, economic, and military) as well as bio-political, environmental, and other institutional and political practices?
- How do immersive experiences perpetuate or debunk such ideas to allow critical reflection?
- How are players typed, empowered, coerced and implicated in these ideologies and practices during play?
- Is immersion itself culturally coded, when we consider, for example, depictions of American characters, geographies, and cultural themes within games produced in different or trans-national and -cultural contexts?
- How do games curtail or expand the spectrum of (mainstream) media experiences (e.g. serious games *That Dragon Cancer*)?
- What makes games immersive, absorbing, or even addictive, and how do we differentiate between these states?

To address these and other questions, we welcome paper proposals that focus but are not limited to specific games, genres, design principles, and player bases, but also papers that think and rethink games through established analytical paradigms in American and Cultural studies, such as mass culture, hegemony, ideology, gender, ethnicity, disability, as well as queer and LGBTQ studies.

Formal requirements

Please send a **350-word abstract** (MS Word or PDF format) and a **short biographical blurb** including your institutional affiliation (350 words) to Damien Schlarb (schlarbd@uni-mainz.de) by **31 October**.