Introduction

_Ludo-Orientalism and the Gamification of Race_

In the summer of 2016, *Pokémon GO*, an augmented reality (AR) mobile game based on the beloved 1990s Japanese franchise, took the United States by storm. Initially praised for promoting exercise and fostering new friendships, the game’s novel lamination of virtual and real spaces soon exposed more insidious forms of social mapping. Minority players described being the target of suspicious glances while playing in predominantly white neighborhoods; suburban children were cautioned against straying into “bad” neighborhoods; an Asian American grandfather, the game’s first casualty, was shot for alleged trespassing while playing near a Virginia country club. Many popular and social media commentators saw these incidents as evidence of the de facto segregation that still defines how race and space are delimited in the United States. They rued the fact that real-life inequality shattered the ludic illusion: that racism had spoiled the game by making it _too_ real. For despite its cast of adorable, cartoonish “pocket monsters,” *Pokémon GO* counterintuitively provided a disturbingly realistic approximation of the racial and economic schisms of everyday life. “Let’s just go ahead and add *Pokémon GO* to the extremely long list of things white people can do without fear of being killed, while Black people have to realistically be wary,” game designer Omari Akil concluded in his much-cited article “*Pokémon GO* Is a Death Sentence If You Are a Black Man.”

But was this unwanted intrusion of reality simply an unfortunate contamination, an inadvertent “glitch” of the game? Didn’t *Pokémon GO*, by making distant travel a necessity for capturing Pokémon, in some sense actually _force_ players into such boundary-crossing enterprises? Did it not, by making requisite such discomfort as might otherwise be avoided or at least anticipated in daily life, actively reify the abstract fact of inequality with an unpleasantly vivid material reality? Akil’s
observation that the very premise of the game “asks me to put my life in danger if I choose to play it as it is intended and with enthusiasm” suggests that Pokémon GO was not simply a reflection of existing white privilege, but an active participant in augmenting the “reality” of racial difference—that is, our sense of race as a socially meaningful sign of human difference—by extending it into the realm of play. If, as Friedrich Schiller famously remarked, “man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays,” then in Pokémon GO nonwhite players encountered a “real-life” Pikachu and the fact of their own incomplete, “virtual” humanity in the very same moment.² For, like the Pokémon themselves, who only appeared on the game map when the player was within sufficiently close range, the social meaning of race “activated,” was put into play, only once players traversed spatial borders and became aware of being “out of place,” made to feel at once threatened and threatening.

If even a cute, seemingly “colorblind” game like Pokémon GO could be said to play a role in the way race acquires its meaning in everyday American life, grasping the implications of that kinship requires a radical revision of our current assumptions about games as innocent and fantastic escapes from the demands and toil of “real life.” This book topples that myth by demonstrating how games have actively shaped Americans’ thinking about race, progress, and inequality for over a century. To play a game, this book emphasizes, is not to free oneself from but rather to voluntarily subject oneself to arbitrary constraints. Although the nascent field of game studies has begun to attend more closely to the interpenetration of games and “real-world” political and economic relations, scholars have largely continued to challenge the notion of gameplay as racially free by focusing on the level of visual representation, such as the caricatures and stereotypes reproduced in video games like Grand Theft Auto or the number of skin shades available for avatars. Yet the overt “signs” of race that have historically constituted the horizons of our study of social politics in video games are epiphenomenal, on-screen symptoms of far more entrenched racial fictions encoded within. In a non-anthropocentric game like Pokémon GO, there are virtually no visible signs of race—at least, not in the limited way we have come to think of that term through corporeal qualities like skin color, hair, body type, accent, and so forth, and especially from within
a black-white binary. *The Race Card* extends our purview of games and play beyond that artificial binary, and below the surface, by examining the infrastructure of gaming as itself a raced project. In this respect, it builds on more syncretic “second wave” discussions of gaming representation that have emerged to resist the tendency to view representation as “pure content” separable from game mechanics, thereby loosening the grip of equally artificial binaries of aesthetics versus mechanics, image versus code, story versus game.3

The book focuses specifically on the experience of Asian Americans and the longer history of what I call ludo-Orientalism, wherein the design, marketing, and rhetoric of games shape how Asians as well as East-West relations are imagined and where notions of foreignness and racial hierarchies get reinforced. *The Race Card* argues that ludo-Orientalism has informed a range of social processes and policies that readers may not even think of as related to play, from the Japanese American internment to the globalization of Asian labor, while offering a window into the bigger picture of how race is played out both in and through games. That it was not a black man but an Asian American one who ultimately fulfilled Akil’s prophetic warning of *Pokémon GO*’s lethal consequences for nonwhite players is itself illustrative of this dynamic. For it is through the enduring Asian American experience of being made to feel like a “perpetual foreigner” regardless of birthplace or citizenship, of constantly being asked, “Where are you from?” that blackness and racial difference more broadly came to signify in *Pokémon GO* as a disorienting experience of spatial dislocation.4 Asian Americanness, that is, provided a model for the way minority players as a whole were made to experience their Otherness, even as the fact of the game’s Asian Otherness—its Japanese origins—receded to effective irrelevance. Such moments of doubled and occluded racial perception, in which Asian-ness becomes at once the most visible and the most attenuated sign of the convergence of racial and ludic fictions, constitute this book’s major sites of intervention.

Asians have had a long and equivocal intimacy with gaming in the American imagination, stereotyped on the one hand as humorless work-aholics afflicted by a racial allergy to all things fun and frivolous and yet, on the other, harboring a peerless global proclivity for gambling and games of chance.5 Framed as both the hardest of workers and the most
hardcore of players, play for the archetypal Asian is never “just” play: they practice violin until their fingers swell; play StarCraft until they drop dead in the middle of the internet café; consistently take home the gold, silver, and bronze at every eSports (professional video gaming) championship—and sometimes at the Olympics, too. Indeed, these ludo-racial dualities get at the very heart of what it means to be Asian in America, to be at once yellow peril and model minority, to be constantly misread through stereotypes of “all Asians looking alike.” Asian Americans and Asians are, obviously, not identical: it is, however, in being seen as interchangeable that the two labels, and the two processes of Asian American racialization and Orientalism, as Colleen Lye points out, have served similar epistemological functions, shaping the way Asian Americans are in turn made sense of at the level of both national and racial difference. Recognizing these contradictions thus requires acknowledging that they both exist as part of what Lye calls a single racial form, the coherence of which, I suggest, is itself dependent on a subtended ludic logic. At the same time, this book's transnational focus underscores how deeply the fortunes and perceptions of Asians and Asian Americans are intertwined, and the extent to which U.S.-Asian relations shape what it has historically meant and continues to mean to be Asian in America.

Race more broadly is indisputably and multifariously at play in today’s video and computer gaming cultures. Indeed, as a growing body of scholars in game studies has aptly demonstrated, there is hardly an aspect of the digital game industry in which race—functioning intersectionally with gender, sexuality, class, and other categories—does not play a crucial role. It shapes the form and content of on-screen representations, online player interactions (e.g., on Xbox Live), and game modifications; the dynamics of professional game tournaments, fan communities, and player-generated artifacts; the outsourced labor of global production and the privileged position of leisurely consumption; and the historical positioning of video games as the province of white heterosexual masculinity, what Ed Chang calls their “technonormativity.” The Race Card contributes to such scholarly conversations, particularly part II’s readings of specific video games and labor politics, in order to advance our understanding of games as, in David Leonard's terms, a racial compass. At the same time, the book demonstrates that this phenomenon is neither limited to nor the product of video games, but rather has a long and
important prehistory. While remaining attuned to N. Katherine Hayles’s dictum of medium-specific analysis, this book emphasizes the striking points of ludo-racial continuity between today’s video games and yesterday’s parlor games by situating these cultural artifacts within a long century of ludic euphemisms and Orientalist fantasies.

One of the most important and long-running of those euphemisms is that of life as a game. In his influential work *Gamer Theory*, equal parts manifesto and meta-commentary on digital games, McKenzie Wark describes the modern world as the quintessential “gamespace.” In Wark’s view, video games are not so much new as newly revelatory of the extent to which social reality resembles—but ultimately fails to produce the satisfaction and live up to the promises of—a massive game: “The digital game plays up everything that gamespace merely pretends to be: a fair fight, a level playing field, unfettered competition.” Lisa Nakamura further observes that since “the algorithms or set of rules that many Americans believe have governed access to the ‘good life’—defined as job security, a comfortable retirement, the right to be safe and secure and free from violence—have proven themselves broken, games appeal all the more because they embody this very promise.” In the afterword to the recent anthology *Gaming Representation*, Nakamura offers a fascinating discussion of this “cruelly optimistic” discourse of “procedural meritocracy” in digital games. The popular belief that players who suffer in-game discrimination or bias, particularly women and minorities, can “earn the right to question or change the rules by excelling at the game . . . leverag[ing] the mechanics of the game to create a win-condition for themselves and by implication for their gender, race, and sexuality,” is a deeply troubling replay of the model minority logic that has long characterized attitudes about Asian Americans. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Nakamura dubs such idealized players the “gamic model minority.” As Nakamura argues, “Believing in meritocratic play as the path to acceptance and respectability for minorities and women in sexist and racist gaming cultures is the cruelest kind of optimism . . . meritocratic ways of thinking about freedom from racism and sexism within games that make these things seem not rights at all, but rather privileges to be earned.” In other words, by carefully and critically reading today’s video games, we are able to discern the “reality” of the “real world”: its truths as well as its falsities.
Examining how Asian Americans have been variously vilified and celebrated not only within games but in racial discourses about “fair play” and meritocracy thus illustrates how games and play are instrumental to the social engineering of race relations. Asian Americans make visible the fact that games are a double-edged sword. They can be used to advocate for the equality of opportunity absent in the real world, but also to justify the inequality of outcome in which it is already abundant. Scholars of race in both the social sciences and the humanities have rightly noted how foundational racial thinking has been to contemporary neoliberalism’s ability to naturalize economic and other structural inequalities by making them appear fair. Yet, as this book demonstrates, the ludic plays as significant a role in this process as the racial, for it provides the very definition of fairness that neoliberalism cleaves to: wherein an individual’s or group’s position can be seen as “deserved” in the same way that the winner and loser of a footrace can be said to deserve their respective lots so long as they both started at the same line. It is precisely because Asian Americans’ emergence as a “model minority” is an embodiment of this logic—with the group’s economic success being offered as proof of race’s irrelevance to one’s ability to compete—that they offer a particularly privileged terrain through which to undertake a systematic examination of American society as what sociologist Georg Simmel pithily called “the game in which one ‘does as if’ all were equal.”

The point of this book is thus less that we need to take games seriously than that we need to recognize how serious a role they already play as a cultural episteme, in the Foucauldian sense of a general “politics of truth” for a particular epoch—and, further, to understand how games’ metaphorical saturation of every realm of “serious” social relations, from the game of warfare to romance to education to electoral politics, has, through the counterintuitive logic of cliché, allowed us to instead see them as inherently unserious, apolitical, and colorblind. For it is this tendency to overlook games that has also obscured the fact that gaming and racialization are already closely intertwined. For example, Pokémon GO’s use of GPS and AR technology is in some sense simply a digital version of a racial episteme that has served the objectives of conquest and exploitation for centuries. Colonial discourses have long interpellated nonwhite subjects through a programmatic logic that Charles Mills describes as a “circular indictment: You are what you are
in part because you originate from a certain kind of space, and that space has those properties in part because it is inhabited by creatures like yourself." Such is an uncannily apt description of the logic underlying the Pokémon GO universe itself. The 841 pocket monsters are divided into elemental types, each of which tend to “spawn” in specific areas or “biomes.” One has a much higher chance of encountering a Water-type Pokémon like Poliwa (a tadpole-like creature) near lakes and oceans, while a Steel-type Pokémon like Magnemite (a cycloptic metal sphere that “feeds” on electricity) can often be found near skyscrapers and railway stations. There is, in other words, an important and overlooked symmetry between the *racial* logic that undergirds spatialized systems of oppression and exploitation and the *ludic* logic crucial to securing our perception of games as games—that is, as a fantastic virtual world that is Other than the real world—and vice versa. Indeed, racialization itself might be understood as an analogously location-based technology that has been seamlessly automated into the interface of everyday life.

*Pokémon GO*, in short, does not so much represent race as model its run-time behavior. Race functions here as what Ian Bogost has described as the “procedural logic” of video games, whereby the algorithms that make up the game’s software “[enforce] rules to generate some kind of representation, rather than authoring the representation itself.” This means more than just that racialization involves the imposition of rules about where people racially and spatially belong. While all games arguably have rules, not everything with rules is a game. It is, instead, the *difference* between the rules of the game and the rules governing other, non-gamespaces that matters. Mills reminds us that “in entering these (dark) spaces, one is entering a region normatively discontinuous with white political space, where *the rules are different* in ways ranging from differential funding (school resources, garbage collection, infrastructural repair) to the absence of police protection.” The rules of both “dark” and “white” spaces, in other words, do not simply impose different degrees of freedom or unequal resource allocation; they differentiate the spaces themselves as “dark” or “white.” The specific content of those rule systems is in some sense less important than the way that rules as such are functioning as an instrument for boundary making, securing the borders and hence the identity of each space. The game’s rules—its
ludic logic—themselves become a discursive tool: a means not simply of specifying different procedures but of interpreting difference and validating conclusions about the value of that difference.

By focusing on racialization in terms of its underlying ludic logic—the technologies that transform an imagined fiction into a social reality, a chance combination of alleles into a deterministic life course—*The Race Card* explains how arbitrary typologies of human difference are made to feel not only real but justified in the contemporary epoch. For the democratic fantasy of perfectly equal opportunity we pursue within games has its counterpart in the way we use the discourse of gaming to shore up national fictions about the United States as a “level playing field.” Indeed, gaming’s recent amelioration from social problem to social panacea—its rehabilitation from antisocial waste of time to the antidote for a “broken” reality—is only the latest example of Americans’ invocation of the ludic as a rhetorical tool to grapple with the anxieties and contradictions instigated by broader shifts in the structure of the economy and the relations among social groups within it. From the “gospel of play” used to shore up a fading Protestant work ethic in the late nineteenth century to the “fair play” of twenty-first-century neoliberalism, Americans have found in games and gaming discourse a powerful vehicle for resolving as well as exposing paradoxical cultural conceptions about the value of hard work as the key to class mobility as well as racial uplift.

**Ludo-Orientalism and Techno-Orientalism**

This book’s notion of ludo-Orientalism is related but not reducible to the more well-known concept of techno-Orientalism, which has in recent years been capacious deployed to address the fetishized, commodified intersection between technology and Asianness across a very wide range of phenomena. Scholars have used the term to explore the generic conventions of late twentieth-century science fiction or cyberpunk (and more recently, speculative and dystopian) literature; the literal mechanization of Asian bodies as cyborgs or machines; the development and manufacture of technology by Asian bodies and minds; and everything in between. In Asian American studies in particular, one finds a rich set of transnational, transmedial topics and
concerns, such as those collected in the recent *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media* and in contemporaneous work on science and speculative fiction, cinema, and even video games.20 Scholars like Vit Šisler, Philipp Reichmuth, and Stefan Werning have rigorously documented video games’ exotifying, functionalized representations of East Asia and the Middle East, particularly as they reflect the so-called military entertainment complex’s vision of a post-9/11 world order. Christopher B. Patterson profitably expands our understanding of techno-Orientalism as both transnational and “transethnic” while raising the visibility of Asian American game studies in a recent entry in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature and Culture.*21 Steve Choe and Se Young Kim have analyzed American and European responses to the chilling phenomenon of “Asian gamer death”—players who die as a result of addiction to, and in many cases at the very controls of, online games—as an example of the “discursive powers of techno-Orientalism” and its adaptive ability to quell anxieties about the perils of virtual escapism. Takeo Rivera has deployed an “erotohistoriographic” lens to productively examine how the “vicious techno-Orientalist representations” in video game franchises like *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* “[invoke] fears of dystopian transhumanism through a violent interplay of Asian bodies and cybernetics,” a trend made familiar through film productions like *Blade Runner* yet made especially problematic, Rivera notes, given that Asian American gamers constitute a significant (yet largely invisible) proportion of the online gaming community.22 These are just a few examples of the emergent, interdisciplinary scholarship building around the topological, transnational phenomenon this book refers to as ludo-Orientalism.

However, to be clear, what is meant by the “gaming technologies” of this book’s subtitle is not simply the computational medium or mechanics of video games as techno-Orientalist interfaces. Rather, *The Race Card* brings those insights to bear on the way that gaming, both digital and analog, is *used* in everyday life to provide alternative logics and modes of sense making, particularly as a means of justifying racial fictions and other arbitrary human typologies. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has drawn our attention to the way that race signifies not only through but as technology, “a technique that one uses, even as one is used by
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it—a carefully crafted, historically inflected system of tools, mediation, or enframing that builds history and identity. This definition of technology usefully broadens the scope of the term beyond the digital media of the contemporary moment. Gaming technologies—whether a game controller, a pair of dice, or even a metaphor like a “stacked deck”—all function as stand-alone “operating systems” that allow, and quite often require, users to operate the meaning-making machine in question without possessing detailed knowledge of its inner workings.

This is why I bring together, under a single rubric, games like Pokémon GO, poker, and mahjong; representations of such games in literary fiction; social attitudes about games in various historical moments; and, finally, gaming metaphors and idioms. There has been strikingly little overlap between these cultural forms in existing game studies scholarship, partly due to contentious debates in the early 2000s between “ludologists” and “narratologists” over games’ uniqueness and their autonomy from literature and other media. Despite compelling arguments by scholars like Henry Jenkins, Espen Aarseth, and critics of interactive fiction and role-playing games more broadly, the reigning methodological approach in game studies has involved treating gaming rhetoric as distinct from “real” games and to view play, representation, and storytelling as distinct, or even antagonistic, concerns.

Yet the embedded mechanics of video games and the overlooked predominance of game tropes in national culture—as the two ends of the spectrum of gaming technologies—share a far greater ideological and historical intimacy than has been acknowledged. Just as the visual, on-screen representations of race in video games are epiphenomenal to their embedded, programmatic logic, the “freedoms” that games allow us in play are only meaningful when understood in relation to what we can’t do—or rather, will not risk doing—outside of play due to socially and legally imposed constraints. Games are escapes not because they are more free, but because they are differently constrained: their rules provide a substitute for existing relations of power and systems of valorization, swapping out one set of rules for another. It is, in fact, precisely the fictions about games that we cleave to—the fantasy that games are a liberatory “exodus” from daily life rather than a “more radical simulacrum” of it, to invoke the claims of Edward Castronova and
Jean Baudrillard, respectively—and the social contradictions we subsequently use the language of games to resolve that provide some of the most compelling evidence for the necessity of a more capacious definition of the term “game.”

Such capaciousness counterintuitively offers a means of resolving certain contradictions inherent to game studies, where scholars have for decades struggled to find a precise definition for gaming. As Roger Caillois, one of the founding fathers of game studies, lamented in 1958, “The multitude and infinite variety of games at first causes one to despair of discovering a principle of classification capable of subsuming them under a small number of well-defined categories.” The ludic taxonomy he proposed—a four-part matrix of games divided into competition, chance, mimicry, and vertigo, which is discussed in detail in chapter 4—is instructive not only for its content but for what it reveals about the precariousness of the venture itself: for, as Jacques Ehrmann has noted, Caillois consistently falls “victim [to] his own categories” from the very moment he articulates them, forced to gloss over the contradictions and aporias they are founded on.

The problem is not restricted to the academic study of games, which is distinguished mainly in its recognizing as a problem the broader cultural ease with which we almost as a matter of instinct are able to recognize “games” when we see them, and accordingly invoke the term to describe a dizzying variety of activities, behavioral patterns, and systems ranging from the material to the virtual, the stylistic to the conceptual, the wholesome to the illicit. The definition Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, and later Caillois, arrived at was of games as voluntary, rule-bound, undetermined (i.e., with uncertain outcome), economically disinterested activities set apart from “ordinary life.” As useful as this definition continues to be, it does not change the fact that games are, in the end, simply those things that people call games. “Game” itself, from that perspective, is essentially a classification system, a way of categorizing human activities and expressions according to the (equally nebulous) binary of “serious” and “playful.” And, like the equally artificial classification system of race with which it is intertwined—which categorizes human beings, at the broadest level, into the binary of “white” and “nonwhite” (and more specifically, “black”)—such ludic distinctions are neither natural nor neutral.
Rather they are, in implicit ways we are often entirely unconscious of, a means of creating hierarchies and differential systems of value, and of disciplining and legitimizing precarious and arbitrary divisions. Asian Americans’ liminality within a black-white binary—their falling, as simultaneous “model minorities” and “honorary whites,” out of bounds of the constructed color line—is, in fact, part of why the ludic has figured so prominently in their characterization. And it is also, I suggest, why Asian American writers and literary scholars have repeatedly seized on the critical potential of the ludic to destabilize that larger system and expose its exceptions. For the literary representation of Asian American bodies is inextricable from issues of their racial representation in the American body politic as well as in the national imagination—a formal entanglement that mirrors, and is mirrored by, the ludic multiplicity we have been discussing.

The Game of Representation

“Asian American,” like “game,” is a precarious fiction: an “openly catachrestic” category, in Colleen Lye’s words, that not only amalgamates a massive range of ethnic, linguistic, class, and generational differences but is problematically intertwined with externally imposed stereotypes of Asians all looking alike. As Frank Chin candidly put the problem, “What if all the whites were to vanish from the American hemisphere, right now? . . . What do we Asian Americans, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Indo-Chinese, and Korean Americans have to hold us together? What is ‘Asian America,’ ‘Chinese America,’ and ‘Japanese America’?”

Chin’s answer to this question? Aiiiiieee!—not coincidentally, the name of the Asian American literary anthology he co-edited and in which this commentary appears. For Asian American literature has long been the site through which these difficult questions have surfaced and been struggled with: the place, in other words, where “Aiiiiieee!” as a racist media representation of Asian American voices becomes intertwined with the Asian American authorial voice and the representational burdens of “authenticity” and stereotype busting with which these writers are encumbered. It is also where, in an effort to articulate the paradoxes and tensions of strategic essentialism—where “Asian American”
becomes a category at once potentially liberating and constraining—we also find the ludic being explicitly invoked.

Take, for example, Mark Chiang’s compelling description of Asian American literary and political identity as moves in what he calls the “game of representation”:³³

For Asian Americans, it is not the represented who choose the representatives but the representatives who choose one another and themselves, through a process of mutual recognition and contestation. In other words, anyone can declare himself or herself to be an Asian American and thus a representative, but that person becomes a representative only when recognized as such. This recognition typically takes the form of identifying someone as either an ally or an opponent in the struggle over representative legitimacy, for disputing one’s claim as a representative also implies recognition that one is in the game and must be taken seriously. The indeterminacy of this situation is compounded for those outside the game who lack the means of recognition and are therefore incapable of distinguishing among various claims to representative status.³⁴

Here we have a very different understanding of racialization as itself a game of representation, rather than as the product of in-game representation that video game scholars have tended to see it as.³⁵ Chiang brings Pierre Bourdieu’s insights into the competitive games we play in everyday life for the prize of social and cultural capital in conversation with Louis Althusser’s famous example of interpellation to emphasize how, as Chiang puts it, “the subject is not simply an effect of ideology but (re)produces ideology by playing the game.”³⁶ “Asian American,” in short, functions as both an immaterial form of capital—one inextricable from “real” economic capital—and a form of ideological (re)production, a means of putting race into play.

In other words, if Asian American representation is itself a game, then the ludic here becomes a way of representing the problematics of representation in the first place: that is, by giving it expression in the form of a game. Here, as in so many other places, the term “game” is one we tend to read over or through, as a throwaway metaphor meant merely to connote a sense of conflict, competition, and strategy. Yet,
as we will see throughout this book, such a perception limits our ability to recognize the critical potential, as well as the disciplinary perils, of gaming discourse. Indeed, the very fact that we so effortlessly gloss over a phrase like the “game of representation” is itself, like our ability to effortlessly deploy the word “game,” a peculiar and important phenomenon. After all, as anyone who has tried to apply traditional interpretative frameworks to decode a term like the “race card” quickly discovers, it does not, in fact, function very well at all as a metaphor, in the sense that we are stymied when posing queries like “Is race like a joker or a deuce?” or “What does the rest of the deck look like?” And yet, such questions and hence contradictions rarely arise: not because we are “lazy” readers or speakers, but because these ludic idioms make a kind of inherent sense to us. We respond to a phrase like the “race card” as we do to anything we call a game, immediately grasping—or at least thinking we are grasping—the intended meaning. It seems like a “logical” connection.

And it is: but only because games are wholly guided by their self-determined, self-enclosed, absolute logic. Hence their sense cannot be adequately expressed through the language of other logical systems: this is why the “race card” looks like nonsense by the general standards of figurative language use. And it is also part of what makes ludic logic so powerful as a conceptual technology. It allows us to make sense out of what looks like nonsense, but also to render meaningless what might normally be considered highly deterministic aspects of a situation: for example, the difference between a chess piece made of gold and one made of wood, or a recent Chinese immigrant and a sansei (third-generation Japanese American). For it is these same “rules of irrelevance,” to use Erving Goffman’s phrase, which make racial representation, Asian American or otherwise, not simply a contest or a feud but a game. The game of strategic essentialism, of which Asian American representation is one particular version, works by flattening particular differences between individuals and reifying other, arguably equally arbitrary, similarities in order to ideationally construct the sense of coherence crucial for making meaningful political moves, for getting into the game. To speak of the game of representation, then, is not merely to observe the similar ways in which political
representation and games work: it is to recognize that games provide the logic that allows a fiction like “Asian American” to function as a politically meaningful category in the first place.

Reading the Magic Circle

The perception of Asian Americans as inherently “unplayful” has effectively migrated from cultural stereotype to a methodological injunction in Asian Americanist scholarship, where, with few exceptions, sociological and humanistic accounts of Asian American racial formation have focused exclusively on the realms of labor and law. This association with labor is certainly not without basis. But we need to better understand what work is being constructed against and through—particularly as the perceived antithesis of play and leisure. In doing so, we discover how variable and complex are the representational meanings of both work and play. This complexity becomes visible once we augment the political and economic stakes of the game of representation to include its literary stakes—to shift, that is, from the particular kinds of fictions that gaming technologies license to the way they teach us how to read those fictions. For if material games license immersive fictions for their players, representing something as a game—“gamifying” it—can also imbue the representation with certain essential features that games are understood to possess.

Among these is the ludic integrity and sanctity known as the “magic circle,” a term Johan Huizinga described as a membrane that encloses in-game activities and distinguishes them from out-of-game ones, as “forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain.” In this book, I use the term “magic circle” to refer both to the physically isolated, dedicated locations of many games, and to the metaphysical frame enclosing them: the invisible contextual scaffolding that allows in-game actions, as sociologist Gregory Bateson observed, to mean something other than what they would signify in daily reality. This conversion is most often made visible as shifts in language—in blackjack, to say “hit me” is not to invite a physical assault—or in legality—the actions performed on the on-screen football field or within games like Grand Theft Auto are the same that, if conducted in real life, would lead to a charge of battery or worse. The magic circle of the playground or the
video game is thus intended to function as what Bateson calls a meta-communicative message, tacitly informing the players (and spectator) that what is occurring is play rather than “real” life.41

The message “this is play,” whether explicitly stated or instead implicitly communicated through, for example, a puppy’s playful nip as opposed to a bite, is not only descriptive but also didactic. It provides the receiver with instructions for how to understand the events occurring inside the magic circle—just as a picture frame, in Bateson’s example, “tells the viewer that he is not to use the same sort of thinking in interpreting the picture that he might use in interpreting the wallpaper outside of the frame.”42 That it seems strange to speak of “interpreting” wallpaper is in part the point: the frame, in other words, differentiates picture from wallpaper by placing the former in the realm of interpretation and the latter in the instrumentalized realm of what we might call “social fact.” This phrase comes from Colleen Lye’s critique of Asian American literary studies and its tendency toward reading practices that have elsewhere been described as “historical instrumentalism.” That is, as Jiqi Ling and Sau-ling Wong (who pioneered the concept of the “Asian American Homo Ludens”) have cogently noted, we too often instrumentalize Asian American texts in terms of necessity and extravagance (a dyad Wong draws from Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior), limiting the bulk of critical discussion to only “the useful parts” of such scenes, particularly in terms of their perceived authenticity and historical “realism.”43 In short, we reduce such texts to the status of wallpaper rather than picture, subordinating the work of interpretation to that of fact-checking.

The public outcry that followed the 2011 publication of Amy Chua’s Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother suggests that the perception of Asian American writers as always already outside the magic circle has profoundly shaped the way these texts are read by Americans as a whole. For it is precisely the inclination to “believe in” Asian American texts—to regard them as “real,” nonfiction stories—that has led reviewers to praise an explicitly fictional work like Woman Warrior for its “authenticity” and “honesty”—or to reprimand one like Tiger Mother for its “misleading” portrayal of Asian parenting and its putative “endorsement” of child abuse. Chua responded to critics’ subsequent excoriation of these “Chinese” parenting practices—which included threatening to
burn her daughters’ stuffed animals and never allowing them to “attend a sleepover” or “get any grade less than an A”—by insisting that *Tiger Mother* was a “satirical memoir. It’s intentionally self-incriminating. . . . [It’s] supposed to be funny, partly self-parody.” Yet Chua’s reframing of the issue as a “genre problem” utterly failed to satisfy critics’ skepticism, which, as Chua herself observed, boiled down to the question “When we read your book, how do we know what to believe and what not to believe?”

The magic circle Bateson and Huizinga described as the result of a straightforward, almost automatic boundary-drawing exercise is, as Chua’s fruitless requests for playful consideration suggest, itself a representational privilege of the non-racialized. This is, once again, a ludic site where what it means to represent and be read as a representative of “Asian America” models the way such circumscribed ways of reading afflict minority expression as a whole. For if magic circles, in Huizinga’s account, are “temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart,” then what it means to be Asian American, in classic works like Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and John Okada’s *No-No Boy*, is to struggle to map the difference between these two worlds, to, as Kingston put it, “figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America.”

The magic circle has traditionally been regarded as a liberating, pleasurable demonstration of the extent to which fictional narratives can feel real despite the fact—or more properly, because of the fact—that they are fabricated or imaginary. But there is an Other side to this story. For Kingston’s narrator and so many others, being Asian American is inextricable from the maddening incapacity to tell fact from fiction: to distinguish, as she puts it, between “real” and “made-up” stories, to be able to “tell a joke from real life.” Life becomes a game one plays at playing: in the words of Chinese American author Jade Snow Wong, “a constant puzzle” that “no one ever troubled to explain,” a guessing game with all the breath-holding tension of Hasbro’s *Operation* where “you figure out what you got hit for and don’t do it again if you figured correctly.” One is not provided with the rules beforehand but forced, as one often is in contemporary video games, to deduce the rules through the very act of playing. The connection is made even more explicit in recent works like Gene Yang and Thien Pham’s graphic novel *Level Up*, where the arcade
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classic *Pac-Man* is used to represent the quintessential Asian American experience of being “a little yellow man running through a maze,” chased by ghosts (fig. I.1).49

Non-Playing Characters

While playful figures like the confidence man, the trickster, or the “signifying monkey” have greatly shaped the ways we read, teach, and evaluate American literature, particularly the genres of Native American and African American literature, this has definitively not been the case for Asian American literature. In that sense, examining games in Asian American literature allows us not simply to contest false assumptions about the “non-playing characters” of the Asian American canon but to reevaluate what it means for ethnic bodies and texts to be seen as “playful” in the
first place. That is, literary critics like Henry Louis Gates Jr. have compellingly illustrated how play in African American texts can function as a means of escaping one’s liminality—or more properly, exploiting the blind spots it creates—by “gaming” the system. Insofar as these subversive games have themselves subsequently been read as representative of an African American literary tradition, however, they risk being once again reduced to the status of wallpaper. Indeed, we might understand the comparatively instrumentalist ways in which games in Anglophone literature have historically been read as pure allegories—I am thinking here of the famous chess scene in Thomas Middleton’s Women Beware Women, or the poker game in William Faulkner’s short story “Was”—as part of a similarly reductive racializing logic, one that both writers clearly grasped in their strategic use of parlor games to represent the constrained agency created by race, class, and gender dynamics.

In short, literature is a crucial site to examine ludo-racial dynamics. Stuart Moulthrop recently observed of contemporary game studies that “it has become unfashionable to speak of antipathy between games and stories, after some defining schoolyard moments in which early ludologists faced down their literary harassers, winning a grudgingly respectful truce.” Although it is now acceptable to speak of games as stories, one is struck by the unaffected status of games in stories. Literary representations of games have never engendered analogous territorial disputes, with both parties evidently perceiving them as the rightful and obvious province of literary studies. Yet the games found in stories, even more than the stories found in games, constitute a kind of semi-autonomous borderland between ludology and narratology, resembling “real” games in their dynamics but literature in their execution. This formal problematic of being both-yet-neither is arguably part of why games feature so prominently in Asian American literature as expressions of racial liminality.

Games in Asian American literature are where the “invisibles” of race and culture become especially apprehensible to both character and reader. They serve a narrative function analogous to the ¶ function button in word processing software (currently called “Show Invisibles” in Apple Pages or “Show Editing Marks” in Microsoft Word), rendering visible the white spaces that we generally perceive simply as the absence between words, but which in fact lend structure and hence sense
to chaotic undifferentiated series of letters. Yet this in-text “activation” of race by way of games is, as we saw in Pokémon GO, a profoundly disorienting experience, making it difficult to read the forest for the trees. Indeed, Asian American writers consistently draw our attention to games as sites where racial, cultural, linguistic, and economic differences are not erased but magnified: and which, not coincidentally, tend to crop up in these texts precisely at the moments where the characters’ interpretive faculties are most compromised.

The use of the playground as the stage for racialized trauma—the dramatic revelation of being “Asian Americanized”—found in Jade Snow Wong’s Fifth Chinese Daughter, one of the earliest and most influential Asian American works of the mid-twentieth century, is a convention found throughout Asian American bildungsromans. In the book, Jade Snow’s earliest inklings of being “different” are a direct result of her aberrant relationship to normative notions of American child’s play. Relegated to the sidelines at an after-school game of softball—“Jade Snow did not do well in such games because Mama always discouraged physically active games as unbecoming for girls”—Jade Snow is struck by a stray ball.52 Her teacher, a young Caucasian American woman, rushes to hug the injured girl, who is dumbstruck by the unfamiliar physical intimacy, for her own parents “never embraced her impulsively when she required consolation.” The “wonderful comfort” of the teacher’s arms, however, soon turns to “embarrassment” and then to “panic”; fleeing the ball field, Jade Snow returns home weighted with the newfound burden of consciousness that “foreign’ American ways were not only generally and vaguely different from their Chinese ways, but that they were specifically different, and the specific differences would involve a choice of action.”53

This zero-sum conception of Asian and “foreign” American practices—and of the effect they have on the way one plays—is further dramatized in Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club, when one of the Chinese immigrant women scoffs at her American-born niece’s claim to know how to play mahjong from having been taught by Jewish friends:

“Entirely different kind of playing,” [Lindo] said in her English explanation voice. “Jewish mah jong, they watch only for their own tile, play only with their own eyes.”
Then she switched to Chinese: “Chinese mah jong, you must play using your head, very tricky. You must watch what everybody else throws away and keep that in your head as well. And if nobody plays well, then the game becomes like Jewish mah jong. Why play? There’s no strategy.”

When Lindo’s own daughter, Waverly, is learning to play chess and confounds her brother with constant questioning of the rules—“But why do [pawns] go crossways to take other men? Why aren’t there any women and children?”—the ludic logic of Asian American assimilation is made unmistakable:

My mother patted the flour off her hands. “Let me see book,” she said quietly. She scanned the pages quickly, not reading the foreign English symbols, seeming to search deliberately for nothing in particular.

“This American rules,” she concluded at last. “Every time people come out from foreign country, must know rules. You not know, judge say, too bad, go back. They not telling you why so you can use their way go forward. They say, don’t know why, you find out yourself. But they knowing all the time. Better you take it, find out why yourself.” She tossed her head back with a satisfied smile.

It is precisely through scenes like these, where Asian American writers’ representations of games constitute a doubling of the game of Asian American representation, that we can begin to discern the “American rules” that keep the race card in play.

Operating System

The Race Card’s organization formally mirrors the critical analysis developed in its chapters, emphasizing how ludo-Orientalism functions as a nation-building discourse which defines the United States and the “West” in relation to abstract game ideals of fairness and freedom; as a racializing discourse that makes Asian difference meaningful by characterizing it in gaming terms, and that Asian American artists, activists, and game designers also play with and at times subvert; and as a contingent, protean discourse that produces different outcomes for different ethnic, temporal, spatial, and generic configurations.
The book’s structure is guided by the formally playful, ludic logic of a six-sided die. The opposing faces of modern dice, as a rule, add up to seven: that is, 1 and 6 are arranged on opposite sides, as are 2 and 5, and 3 and 4. Thus, on the single-step progression of numerical sequence (1, 2, 3, etc.) we have a secondary ordered coherence created by a common sum (1+6 = 7, 2+5 = 7, 3+4 = 7).

Such is the oppositional yet complementary coherence implicitly at play in this book: chapter 1 examines the intersection of racialized play and labor in the context of nineteenth-century Chinese American gold miners; chapter 6, in the context of twenty-first-century gold farmers, players of World of Warcraft who make a living acquiring in-game virtual currency and selling it for real money to (mostly Western) players looking to accelerate the tedious “grind” of the leveling-up process.

Chapter 1, “Evening the Odds through Asian Exclusion,” uncovers the influential role of gambling in the passage of late nineteenth-century immigration laws barring Asian laborers. Although historians have long treated Asian American gambling as a minor phenomenon or exaggerated stereotype, gambling was a significant source of recreation and revenue for Chinese American communities and, further, took center stage in exclusion debates. Exclusionists depicted Chinese Americans as “inveterate gamblers” and dissolute cheaters whose “cheap labor” constituted not only unfair competition for other immigrant laborers but an affront to the “fair play” on which U.S. democracy was ostensibly founded. This chapter analyzes the congressional and literary record of these debates to show how ludo-Orientalist rhetoric crucially elevated economic arguments to the transcendent realm of ethics and ideals. By aligning (white) American values with ludic ideals and Asian immigrants with the degradation of these ideals, exclusionist rhetoric
weaponized Asian Americans’ association with gambling, a process made possible in part through the “misreading” of satirical works like Bret Harte’s “The Heathen Chinee.” This first chapter also sets the stage for the rest of the book by showing how Orientalist fictions about Asiatic threats are inextricable from national fictions about the United States as an idealized gamespace.

Chapter 6, “Game Over? Internet Addiction, Gold Farming, and the Race Card in a Post-Racial Age,” shows how the recent gold farming controversy revived “cheap play” as a tool for condemning Chinese “cheap labor,” powerfully informing how internet gaming addiction is itself culturally and spatially represented in popular and psychiatric discourse. Twenty-first-century American anxieties about ludic immersion, compounded by the nation’s own destabilized position in the global economy, have led American game developers as well as medical professionals to pathologize gold farming as exclusionists had Chinese gambling: symptomatic of an “Asian” psychosis that fails to respect normative boundaries between play and work, virtual and real world.

Chapters 2 and 5, in turn, examine the mid-century ludic discourses and twenty-first-century traces of World War II and the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor through the game-theoretical logic underlying Japanese American internment narratives and the atomic history underlying the Japanese Pokémon franchise. Chapter 2, “Just Deserts: A Game Theory of the Japanese American Internment,” argues that the lay understanding of games as fair and unbiased allowed World War II military officials to invoke game theory to resolve the thorny contradictions of imprisoning American citizens on racial grounds. A branch of applied mathematics that would eventually form the backbone of 1950s U.S. foreign policy as a “scientific” means of predicting enemy behavior, game theory has often been considered a defining discourse of Cold War America. Juxtaposing internment-era novels and military correspondence alongside game theory textbooks and popular media accounts, this chapter reveals, however, that a decade before it was applied to the “red menace,” game theory amplified and then neutralized the threat posed by the “inscrutable intentions” of one hundred thousand Japanese Americans by reframing their fervent claims of U.S. loyalty as little more than a bluff.

I read the literary works in chapter 2 alongside the military documents because, first, they illustrate the symmetry of the problem that
Asian racial difference created for both the U.S. government and Japanese Americans even before the internment and the loyalty questionnaire: that of a zero-sum conception of Asian and American identity. And second, because they show how that problem, although it seemed to be one of military necessity or of conscience, was from a formal perspective about issues of representing or accounting authentically for the interiority of Asian individuals, and in particular the role of race as chance (how to “read” or represent it). In other words, game theory was a response not just to a military threat but to a literary problem with which Asian American writers (and readers of Asian American fiction) have also struggled.

Chapter 5, “Mobile Frontiers: Pokémon after Pearl Harbor,” reveals the unacknowledged legacy of Japanese racial ideologies, imperialist ambitions, and wartime losses that lurk beneath the game screen. Whereas U.S. military officials during World War II rationalized internment on the basis of an imagined transnationality linking Japanese Americans to imperial Japan, Japanese video game developers like Nintendo have developed sophisticated marketing and aesthetic strategies to erase signs of any Japanese “cultural odor” from their products. The illusion of ahistorical universality crucially buttressed the fantasy of Pokémon GO as a truly “free” game, masking the invasive and dehumanizing data mining structures that make it enormously profitable for its developers. At the same time, Pokémon and other “cute” character franchises have become instrumental ambassadors in soft power efforts to increase the value of Japan’s “global domestic cool” in the international (and especially Western) eye through a series of national branding campaigns.

Finally, Chapters 3 and 4 function as the bridge connecting the two parts of the book. At issue in both chapters are how Asian Americans and East Asia, respectively, served as ludic models closely associated with games of chance. Chapter 3, “Against the Odds: From Model Minority to Model Majority,” uses games of chance to illustrate the overlooked kinship between the appeal that hardworking Asian Americans held for white sociologists and the appeal that gambling held for Asian Americans. In other words, the chapter emphasizes again the formal symmetry between the way both parties were using gambling to try to rationalize larger paradoxes in cultural theories of race and economic mobility by reframing immigration and social mobility as risk-taking opportunities.
Gambling served an ideational narrative function, which is made clear through its representations in both literary and journalistic fictions: to gamble is not just to wager money on an uncertain outcome, but to tell a story to yourself about what could happen (“What would I do if I won the lottery?”), or to explain why something did happen (“It was bad luck,” or conversely, “The game is fixed!”). The model minority myth, from that perspective, was essentially a racialized version of the gambling narrative, wherein Asian Americans modeled a new way of representing and explaining the relationship between past and future, merit and heredity.

In model minority discourse, Asian Americans were held up as heroic gamblers in order to discipline other minorities as well as working-class whites. In the foundational ludic theories examined in chapter 4—namely Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* and Roger Caillois’s *Man, Play, and Games*—Orientalist notions of the mystical East and rational West profoundly structured the way Huizinga conceptualized the relation between “play” and “ordinary life,” and Caillois the taxonomic division of games into the binary of competition (agon) and chance (alea). Chapters 3 and 4 thus both, individually, revise our understanding of the foundational narratives that have become the bedrock of Asian American studies and game studies, respectively. Chapter 3 leverages the theoretical potential of ludo-Orientalism to upend the reigning assumption that the model minority myth involved the banishment of Asian associations with gambling in favor of hard work; and chapter 4, to upend similarly entrenched assumptions about game theories (and games) as inherently disinterested, universal intellectual inquiries having nothing at all to do with race and culture.

Reorienting our perception of signal moments in modern U.S. race relations, *The Race Card* develops a new set of critical terms for understanding the literature as well as the legislation that emerged from these agonistic struggles. The book offers a pointedly new approach to both Asian American racialization and the “gamified” discourses of daily life, going beyond the explicitly visual and textual stereotypes through which people have traditionally challenged the idea of gameplay as racially free as well as exposed the “techno-Orientalist” intersection between Asian and machine.

In attending to race as it becomes automated and algorithmic rather than visually expressed, *The Race Card* not only redresses game studies’
traditional focus on visual representations by disaggregating inequality’s on-screen symptoms from the racial ideologies encoded within, but contributes to a broader conversation in social and cultural studies about media as a doubling or “modalization” of the world carried on through the literary formalist approaches of Mark Seltzer’s *The Official World* and N. Katherine Hayles’s *How We Became Posthuman.* At the same time, it offers a corrective to the implicit assumption that the overwhelming amount of data we all produce and consume on a daily basis is somehow, in its “rawness” or virtuality, free from the concrete inequalities and highly stratified social systems through which these streams of zeroes and ones flow. The book thus charts a new course in game scholarship, directing our focus away from games as empowering vehicles that allow people to inhabit new identities, and toward how games themselves are used as instruments of “soft power” to advance political agendas and discipline national subjects.

But what of the reader who does not read the foregoing pages and who will, therefore, remain ignorant of the intricate ludic logic underlying its structure? What will they miss—and what, in turn, is the reward for those who have taken the time to read these pages? The same thing lost or gained by those who know that the opposite sides of a die add up to seven. That knowledge is, from one perspective, meaningless: it has no effect on a player’s ability to roll dice or the dice’s ability to generate random numbers. This is because dice are like the ludic and racial technologies this book looks at as a whole: operating systems that obviate the need (and, in many cases, the ability) for the user to understand the system’s internal workings. That is precisely how such systems are able to function semiautomatically, to “autocorrect” and update, to endure so long as the hardware allows. To be ignorant of a die’s (or this book’s) formal organization is thus, in that sense, simply to allow these systems to perform their disciplinary work as quietly and invisibly as they always have.

To be aware of a die’s underlying logic, on the other hand, is to be counterintuitively drawn further into the game, seduced by a rationale that seems objective and inevitable: of course that makes sense, we think; the numbers *must* be arranged that way, otherwise they would not add up to seven. The internal consistency created by the system itself, in other words, comes to signify as evidence of its nonarbitrariness. This is the ludo-Orientalist dynamic we will see repeated throughout
this book: in the “obvious” kinship between Asian Americans and Asian nationals; the perception of Occident and Orient as antithetical yet complementary cultures; and, of course, in the way the book itself draws our attention to the overlooked symmetry between seemingly divergent cultural forms. The payoff, then, lies in recognizing all of these as equally arbitrary discursive fictions that nonetheless powerfully shape the way we think about race and games. Even more, they reveal how gamification and racialization work in tandem as mutually constitutive ways of orienting ourselves to and through difference. These are the technologies we use to make things add up, seem equal, and otherwise distribute value across the borders of the magic circle.