Introduction

Touching Empire, Playing Theory

If literature was the artistic expression of empire throughout the age of colonization, and cinema was empire’s main force of ideological reshaping throughout the era of American military dominance (with its Hollywood endings and its Anglo-American standards of beauty and heroism), then video games are the main artistic expression of empire today, the open world empire. But in order to apprehend games as such, we must be able to play them erotically. That is, not as ideological narratives or as subconscious infiltration devices à la an episode of Black Mirror, but to understand games as players do—as mere playthings that afford new passions, pleasures, desires, and attachments, that place grave attention on our own positions in the world and make us conscious of our power over others.

Video games vastly outpace all other entertainment media in revenue and global reach. On the surface, games do not appear ideological, nor are they categorized as national products, yet their very existence has been conditioned upon the spread of militarized technology, the exploitation of racial and gendered labor hierarchies in their manufacture, and the techno-utopian associations of the digital. Games thus reflect the routes and power of information technology (IT). Like Europe’s East India Companies that pursued trade with Asia, IT companies are corporate harbingers of empire that create transnational circuits and produce systems of exploitation that do not seem explicitly tied to nationalist projects, even as they increasingly take on more of the sovereign state’s roles of surveillance, tracking, identifying, surveying, and censorship. Video games function as the artistic expression of this phenomenon, as products of it, and as attempts to stage discussions concerning how designers and digital cultures relate to the material processes that make games possible as network devices and as cutting-edge hardware. Games
discern how war and imperial violence proceed today under the signs of openness, transparency, and digital utopia.

The open world empire is our contemporary empire of information technology, drone warfare, permanent war, and massacres that occur with little scandal or protest. Most often, information technology companies are branded by images of idealistic white leaders who appear too pure and naive to enact the same imperial designs as the rampant bankers, factory owners, and colonial architects who came before them. Yet, games carry production chains that also include the slavery, rape, and violence that comes with gathering raw materials\(^2\) as well as the exploitation, bodily fatigue, environmental degradation, and suicide associated with Asian female sweatshop work.\(^3\) Following Mimi Nguyen’s casting of the US empire as an “Empire of Freedom” that instrumentalizes freedom as a universal value “to reinforce a politics of war, terror, and occupation,”\(^4\) video games train us to perceive a transnational, capitalist, and industrial form of empire, an “Open World Empire” where truth, openness, and transparency become elastic terms deployed within networks of forgetting and red herring scandals. Our enduring faith in transparency and scandal has a troubling history in the transpacific, particularly in American wars wherein exposures of the Pentagon papers during Vietnam and the Abu Ghraib scandal in Iraq did not end war (though they are often credited as doing so) but shifted the methods of waging war from a traditional “boots on the ground” strategy to one relying more on militarized technologies, which include massive aerial bombings in the case of Vietnam and drone warfare in the case of the War on Terror. In too many cases, exposure has yielded only calls for greater safety for “our boys,” resulting in reforms to replace the methods of warfare with even more distanced forms of killing and remote surveillance so that would-be scandals like the 7.6 million tons of explosives dropped on Indochina or the destruction of orphanages, hospitals, and wedding parties by drones can pass by as transparent already exposed events that evade the nature of scandal, keeping us well adjusted to our own injustices.

Openness brings to mind the technology of a flashlight refusing opacity, erasing the limitless capacity of the darkness, the sublime fear of the unknown, to reveal order, identity, and culpability. As Nguyen writes, the presumption of transparency reiterates “metaphysical fantasies of otherness as authentic resistance, or of sameness as common
The universal application of transparency and openness harbors forms of racism ("racializing surveillance") and suppresses the techniques of racialized peoples to present race as a form of technology that “one uses, even as one is used by it.” Yet in the academy, calls by IT industries for greater openness and transparency have been met lockstep by digital humanities disciplines that advance orthodoxies of openness by championing modes of research and teaching that are committed to open, public knowledge and that rely upon the collection of social media and big data. Since the incorporation of digital humanities into the Modern Language Association in 2011, its critics have become more outspoken, claiming that the field “prides itself as all-inclusive [and] interdisciplinary, but really only highlights certain perspectives.” While these critiques have pushed the field toward more critical studies that include greater awareness and accountability for gendered, racial, and sexual difference, they have also overlooked the field’s imperial dimensions. Though only three of the 188 digital humanities centers in the world reside in Asia, Asia has long functioned as the crucial transit point for the manufacture, engineering, development, and consumption of digital technology. The point here is not to refuse forms of transparency and open access but to ask to what extent imperial violence today hides not in darkness but in plain sight.

Gamers will recognize the “open world” not as an imperial strategy but as a meta-genre of AAA (blockbuster) video games like the Elder Scrolls series, the Fallout series, and the Grand Theft Auto series. These games emphasize the common values of the open world empire inaugurated by information technologies that reimagine the world as a space of openness and new frontiers. Open world video games, too, attempt to give players freedom, yet their freedom is defined not by capitalism (the freedom to own, buy, or sell) or by state rights (the freedom to live, to vote, to believe) but by a child’s freedom from the masters of control, a freedom to reinvent and experiment within a “magic circle” of play. Infamously, this open world freedom has revealed the perversity of the gamer, as games like Grand Theft Auto conjure a very different type of freedom than digital utopia suggests: the freedom to jack a taxi, to kill a cop, to have sex with prostitutes. This open world vision of freedom reiterates the desire to conquer and dominate foreign spaces and in many ways circles back to an old definition of freedom as travel and
dominance, a freedom that is imagined today by comparing the West with the “unfreedoms” that characterize Asian technology (China’s “great firewall”; production lines at assembling plants and microprocessor factories; the cyberpunk dystopia of Japan and Hong Kong; the e-waste in toxic rivers and garbage patches; the deaths of Asian gamers who are hopelessly addicted to video games). However, this “open” form of freedom also carries the potential to counteract neoliberal notions of freedom defined through the freedom to choose one’s own route of self-optimization. If the open world of information technology suggests the freedom of transparency and utopic futures, freedom in open world video games alludes to perverse, erotic forms of freedom, a sense of transforming the well adjusted into the maladjusted.

Gamers are well aware that the freedom in video games carries limits greater than the sweeping order of information technology would let on. Many games seek to dissolve notions of freedom and choice by expressing “player agency” as an easily susceptible fantasy, a fanciful disobedience that can only be experienced by deviating from the directed path. In the game *The Stanley Parable* (2011), the player takes the role of an office worker, Stanley, whose journey is narrated by a storyteller (voiced by Kevan Brighting) who reacts to the player’s seemingly free decisions with irritation and comical antipathy. In my playthrough, I meandered through an office building following instructions by the storyteller: “This is Stanley . . . Stanley left his office.”10 Obeying, I left the office. And I kept obeying, until I came to a set of two doors (see Figure I.1). “When Stanley came to a set of two open doors,” the narrator said, “he entered the door on his left.”

Of course, I knew what was happening. The narrator, the designer, whoever was behind the curtain, wanted me to go to the door on my right. The left door was a command, a clear-cut progression into someone else’s story. I, the open world gamer, wanted my own story. And, it must be said, I wanted to get a rise out of the narrator. Either way, it meant disobedience. The game, too, was in on the ruse, nudging me to the right in the most convincing way a game can: by telling me to go left. So I obeyed by disobeying, blindly following the crumb trails of disobedience by going right. The narrator burst into hysterics, prodding me to go back, to get on track for his story, but the more he pleaded in his
panicked and authoritative British accent, the more I refused. At some point I fell off a cargo lift and died.

I restarted the game, again went through the door on the right, leaped out of a window, and again died. I restarted again, went right again, perished again. Every new playthrough, I did the opposite of what the storyteller wanted. I walked up stairs when he wanted me to go down. I sat staring at a key combination even as he screamed the code at me. I spent twenty minutes standing still in a broom closet, just to hear him squirm. When I saw no new routes of disobedience left, I leaped down a six-story stairwell. “Feel really powerful now?” the narrator said as I bled out, dead.

_The Stanley Parable_ captures the gamer’s strange desire to lash out, a desire that games yank out of otherwise motionless bodies. Open world gamers push buttons for no other reason than to see what nonsense they can conjure. Within every boundary is the desire to transgress that boundary, to leap from a window, to break the game. Games thus summon a definition of openness not as transparency and imperial claim over the foreign but as an openness akin to Michel Foucault’s sense of the “open game” of gay sex in _volume 2 of The History of Sexuality_. In contrast to the “closed” game of heterosexual marriage—with clearly
defined rules, boundaries, and legal consequences—the open game of gay relationships was open spatially (played in the open), open in attachment (not monogamous by default), open legally (beyond the law), and open metaphorically (as a feeling that anything can happen, as signs without clear meanings). Foucault considered these relationships as “open” games because they were outside traditional sexual boundaries, and therefore they tested one’s own self-perceptions as an ethical being capable of moral reasoning. Outside of the constraints of state and religious institutions, gay sex involved an openness that put weight and responsibility upon every action. As in *The Stanley Parable*, openness can form uncertain pathways, often resulting in wastes of time, in trolling those in authority for no other reason than personal pleasure. Yet the game forces us to question our own motives. The “open game” recasts openness not as transparency and the freedom to collect data but as an openness of opacity, of uncertainty, of risk, and of the consistent vexing of our relationships with others, which are not clearly defined and thus ask for more ethical and moral pondering.

*Open World Empire* takes up play as a form of erotics and applies it to an understanding of open imperial violence in our information-choked era of permanent war. As Chen Kuan-Hsing has argued, imperialization takes place not only in the colonies but within the empire itself, where national subjects must continuously be “imperialized” to think of themselves as endowed with the responsibilities deserving of empire. Like gamers, subjects of this empire are not really supposed to follow the instructions but to practice a form of freedom based on a meaningless gesture of adolescent rebellion, a disobedience where risk is deferred into distant places (in the imperial provinces), distant times (the slow warming of the Earth), and unlikely scenarios (the election of a reality television clown to US president). In misbehaving, subjects are not resisting a system but helping it thrive—a system that provides avatar personalities, each characterized by their own marginalization, alterity, and mode of resistance, where even the rich, powerful, and privileged are made to feel like victims. Video games participate within this thorny context by reinventing concepts of freedom and power through game-based interpretations of openness and erotic play.

Situated within the critical humanities fields of American studies, Asian American studies, critical game studies, and queer theory, *Open
World Empire explores how games enact playful protests against the power, identity, and order of information technology. While the open world empire relies on forms of self-administration manifested in rigorously calculated self-depictions on social media (where one’s value is measurable in likes and friends), the gaming open world evokes an anarchic self—unrestrained, messy, contradictory, not reliant upon political self-depictions but on bodily sensations and erotic engagements. “Erotics” thus distinguishes my understanding of games from dominant perspectives of “gamification,” which emphasize play as a type of progress and development, a notion “that most Westerners cherish” but is “more often assumed than demonstrated.” Erotics, as I will argue, preserves “some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood” and does not let our strange, addictive mischief go. More importantly, erotics opens us to other forms of disobedience: speaking truth to power; being queer in the face of a culture where power from both the authorities and the pulpit is aligned against queers; sticking up for migrants, refugees, and people of color, even if it means breaking the law or punching a Nazi in the face (there’s a game for that). At the heart of Open World Empire is an attempt to comprehend these gamer-like strains of disobedience within play; to trace how they flourish from the erotic sensations of a game to our opaque and distanced relationships to others; and to ask how, if we dare, we can be really, really, disobedient.

Games of Catch
The estimated 2.2 billion gamers around the world are not kids (they hold a mean age of thirty-one), nor are they male (men and women game near equally), nor are they American (the Asia-Pacific takes up 47 percent of revenue, led by mainland Chinese players, while Americans only make up 13 percent of revenue), nor are they interpolated into militaristic killing machines (shooting games make up only 25 percent of the US market). Despite these facts, games are still characterized as mere prosthetics of empire that train players in military tactics and whose designers are in league with US military recruiters. While this is undeniably true for a few games, the game industry’s flirtation with empire is in fact a much more dispersed story: the material resources for game hardware are often derived from African mines, where minerals like
coltan ore in the PlayStation 2 have been categorized as a conflict material that has propelled parts of the Republic of the Congo into civil war; game hardware is manufactured and processed in Asian sites like the Pearl River Delta, where workers labor under brutal conditions—stuffed into small dormitories, immured within company “campuses”—and work twelve-hour shifts; the most recognizably American game genre is militarized shooting games, many of which have been funded by the US military explicitly for recruitment and propaganda; the controls for combat drones or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are made to mimic video game controllers. These are troubling facts, none of which make games any more or less imperial than literature, music, or film. Still, games are unique in tracing these imperial contexts through the racial, gendered, and sexual norms associated with information technology and in their transpacific routes of circulation.

Despite the troubling violences that make games possible, games are rarely discussed as products of imperial routes. Instead, many game studies scholars continue to discuss games within a pure “ludic” language focused on existential questions of games and being (What is a game? What does it mean to play? Is a game more narrative or more game?). Perhaps the most common example of what it means to play a game comes from Markku Eskelinen in the first ever issue of Game Studies (2004), where he insisted that video games cannot be analyzed within national/racial/structural contexts because narrative and representation are only incidental. “If I throw a ball at you,” Eskelinen writes, “I don’t expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories.” Perhaps by focusing on the existential nature of “the game,” one misses the obvious narrative and contextual elements of “catching”: if I catch the ball, I am strong, fertile, straight, manly; if I stumble, I am childish, queer, a failure, a sissy. “Dropping the ball,” a common colloquialism for fucking up, conjures normative aspects of success, heterosexuality, and nationalism (our national sport), just like any game.

The decontextualizing methods of much game studies scholarship has obscured what video games are: commodities routed in transpacific processes of labor and resource extraction. Open World Empire diverges from a formalist tradition of game studies to see their transpacific networks as a rich site for fathoming the varied impact of information
technology, from the routes of microprocessor factories and assembling plants in Malaysia and China to the routes of intellectual property from Japan to the West. Games do not merely shape how we see empire in Asia but have facilitated its growth and formation through Cold War presumptions of technological ability (techno-Orientalism) and labor availability (colonial-era racial structures). By seeking to understand interactive gameplay experiences alongside the discourses of information technology that envelop them, I hope to unwedge the imperial attitudes within games discourses that see Asia as a space of manufacture/production and America as a site of development/design. Against the discursive ambit of games that presume their universality, Open World Empire explores how acts of play are made possible by a vast transpacific network of global exchange that partitions Asia into an open frontier of technological advancement.

While some games discourses have remained mired in questions of game being, others have contributed to the wider belief that games are to blame for much of society’s ills—from providing military training to creating capitalist drones. Such studies permit the American war industry to claim games as their own and ignore the various meanings that players themselves give to games, so that the true meaning of a game resides with the theorist, not the players. The pleasure that players take from games can then be reduced to mere ideological conditioning so that, as Richard Dyer wrote, “pleasure remains a forbidden term of reference, particularly on the left.” This “leftist” discourse permits the ideology of the war industry to frame an entire medium. Claiming games (and the pleasure received from them) as conduits for violence, capitalism, and misogyny ignores the nuances of game genres, some of which, like horror movies, westerns, superhero movies, etc., contain various depictions of violence no matter their political orientation. Attuned to these nuances, gamers themselves play within their own interpretive context, relying on no institutional authority to interpret a game’s meaning for them, permitting games to remain, as Alexander Galloway writes, a “lowbrow” medium, a “beautifully undisturbed processing of contemporary life, as yet unmarred by bourgeois exegeses of the format.” Games, unlike literature or a good French wine, demand no refinement, and thus their meanings are, for gamers, radically plural. Both formalist
game studies discourses and “leftist” discourses of games as mere ideology fall into what Anna Anthropy calls “a dangerous trap” because both “cede the right to decide the value of games to an authority that has nothing to do with games.” Fortunately, these discourses have so far remained irrelevant to most gamers, alongside dated stereotypes of gamers as zombielike addicts to capitalism, patriarchy, and militarism. Most game cultures refuse the mystification of so-called experts who would interpret the meanings of an otherwise pleasurable and erotic activity.

Open World Empire makes no attempt to posit games as serious art—time itself will do that for us. Instead, this book seeks to take advantage of what will ultimately be a very brief and capacious period of gaming history before games are purged of their mercurial ardor and claimed by pedigreed experts as meaningful and artistic “works.” For now, we can still play with games as merely perverse objects. To do so, this book practices a “low theory” that collaborates with gamer cultures by apprehending how games work on the body and recognizes a game’s various meanings across a spectrum of contexts and audiences. Its research archive puts academic scholarship in dialogue with a range of user-created content that reveals discarded local knowledges and experiential insights from gamers themselves, from “Let’s Play” and Twitch videos, where gamers record themselves playing and commenting on games, to fan-based archives like online encyclopedias, YouTube comments, and forum posts, to popular magazines like Kotaku and Eurogamer. Whereas in literature courses one can presume that the teacher has read more than the students, no such presumption can be made in the world of gaming. Even after playing over fifty hours of a single game, a games researcher could then be expected to wade through an ocean of secondary reading/watching/listening in online forums, podcasts, game guides, YouTube channels, etc. Gamer expertise has been widely acknowledged by game companies, who solicit fan participation as a form of “playbour” that informs design decisions and program modification. Where a scholar might interpret video game representations as racist, violent, and misogynist, gamers well versed in reading the nuances of games and game discourses may interpret them as hyperbolic or self-parodying. When gamers are excluded from the archives, scholars miss the fact that their arguments concerning gamers as “interpolated” and subconsciously influenced by games are all too common topics of
debate within gamer cultures, and they are often more elaborate within these cultures because they come from a deep well of gameplay experiences. Gamer discourses can even be more sophisticated than academic discourses, since many gamer cultures are not allergic to debates about sexuality, diversity, gender, and racism in video games. Gamers are consistently “in the know” about a world that is altogether inaccessible to many scholars simply due to the lack of time.

There is one games discourse that gamers themselves do not stray very far from: that games are silly, frivolous, jocular, and erotic. As Anna Anthropy aptly writes, games are “an experience created by rules,” meaning that “the rules themselves aren’t the game, the interaction is!” Interactive experiences can be deeply personal and subjective, from experiences of erotic fulfillment to merely ways of killing time. Rather than try to justify these experiences to others by seeing them as progressive or educational, gamers are often the first to adopt frivolous and erotic sensibilities toward games. Anna Anthropy’s own game Mighty Jill Off incorporates the already erotic forms of gameplay and makes them explicitly, inescapably sexual. Mighty Jill Off inserts the basic “masocore” form of platform gameplay—where one is subjected to frequent deaths and extremely difficult jumping/timing—into a narrative about punishment between a leather-clad domme and her boot-fetish submissive (see Figure I.2). As a queering of the 1986 game Mighty Bomb Jack, Anthropy’s Mighty Jill Off pushes us to reimagine the entire genre of platform games, from Super Mario Bros. on, as games that have always carried dimensions of the erotic, the kinky, and the masochistic.

As Brendan Keogh writes, video games’ reputation as a form of “low” culture aligns them not with “creative works that engage the mind (literature, classic music, painting),” but with “‘lowly’ forms that evoke the body (pulp films, pop music, romance novels, pornography).” To get ahold of this ‘lowly’ form, I join Jack Halberstam and Lauren Berlant in treating a silly archive, what Berlant calls the materials that “frequently use the silliest, most banal and erratic logic imaginable to describe important things, like what constitutes intimate relations, political personhood, and national life.” Jack Halberstam would later refer to this archive as the materials that “do not make us better people or liberate us,” but “offer strange and anticapitalistic ways of being and acting and knowing” and that “harbor covert and overt
I hope to conceive of games as sensational artistic media that can ignite a sense of new possibilities. This begins by disecting the silly, the fun, and the pleasurable and treating play sensibly as play. “Play,” whether from a cat biting its young or a lover biting an ear, radically shifts the meanings of every act. This does not mean that violence or prejudice in a game are excusable or should be tolerated as mere parody, but that interactivity cannot be well understood without attending to the “open world” freedom play affords to test boundaries and to experiment with and against power in an environment where play remains inescapably playful.

In 2010, Adrienne Shaw criticized games studies for its lack of critical engagement and argued for a “critical cultural study of games” that compelled game scholars to adopt cultural studies modes of critical engagement and reflexivity. Thanks to work from Shaw and many others (Anna Anthropy, Anna Everett, Kishonna L. Gray, Soraya Murray, Lisa Nakamura, Bonnie Ruberg), the landscape of game studies is considerably more open to critical work than ever before, with many works having performed transformative critiques across the field (Games of Empire, Gaming at the Edge, Queer Game Studies, Gaming...
Representation). Following these giants, *Open World Empire* strives to understand interactive media in relation to discourses of information technology and the commodity routes that they create across the transpacific. In our current context, seeing gameplay as totally apolitical or as totally ideological buttresses discourses of information technology as godlike creators and erases the experiences of those who actually play these games. Video games shed light on the hierarchies built by information technology across the globe while also creatively reimagining spaces in Asia and North America through a frivolous style of playful protest, an “erotics of play,” wherein social meanings are construed through pleasure, passion, and intimacy.

Playing Sex

The place where queer subjects and games meet is also a space of erotic play.

—Bonnie Ruberg, “Queerness and Video Games: Queer Game Studies and New Perspectives through Play”

In the past decade, game studies has broadened to make room for works by and about minorities and queer folk, yet many of the presumptions of game studies has remained steadfast through the persistent idealization of play itself. Terms like “immersion,” “magic circle,” and “agency,” so commonly invoked in game studies, were conceived as direct refusals of what I am calling the erotic, or what Janet Murray, in her oft-cited book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, called the fallible methods of poststructural theory and “postmodern critics,” who Murray repudiated for their “stylistic (equi)vocation and philosophical detachment.” As one of game studies’ most cited texts, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* rejected a language of the body, intimacy, and opacity to instead rely on “rational” logics found in the positivistic discourses of cognitive psychology, analytical philosophy, and phenomenology. Murray enjoined values of transparency and openness to game studies by framing games as antithetical to the “postmodern” and its thinkers who use “jargon” (like the word “problematization”) for whom “confusion is not a bug but a feature.” Though many have faulted Murray’s work on games for privileging narrative, overstating player agency, or creating an “immersive fallacy,”
few have pointed out how her outright rejection of “the postmodern” has nothing to do with the experience of playing video games and in fact bounds the very act of play within serious forms of the rational and the philosophical.³⁹ Her polemic against “the postmodern” follows not gamer experience but an open world paradigm that sees interactive media as providing the utopic freedom of “player agency.”⁴⁰ To focus on erotics, pleasure, race, and empire are indeed antithetical to any project that seeks to shape the user as an agent of freedom and in turn disparages any who would limit that sense of freedom or reveal its structural underpinnings.

Murray’s wholesale rejection of “the postmodern” followed a logic of games as providing player agency. In turn, the pleasures, desires, and erotic drives of gameplay have haunted game studies as frivolous subjects for analysis.⁴¹ Another heavily cited text in the field, Bernard Suits’s The Grasshopper (1978), defined “a game” by naming erotics as its negation. “Playing games,” Suits wrote, “is different from sexual activity” because sex has no obvious winner and loser (said no queer person ever!).⁴² Yes, games deal in pleasures, passions, and desires, but sexual pleasures and erotic desires remain excluded from the definition of a game, reconstituting games, game culture, and developers as male “geeks” who remain pure, innocent, and innovative.⁴³ Erotics has thus suffered in game studies because of such “stereotypes about gaming, masculinity, and sex, evoking an immature, furtive, frustrated, and comically grotesque form of male sexuality.”⁴⁴ Since its inception, game studies has hesitated to discuss sex except as a “risk” that goes to characterize the perversity of Asian (particularly Japanese) cultures or as an “awkward” element that disrupts their main methodology.⁴⁵ Game platforms themselves, like Steam and the Apple digital store, often purge their catalogs of sexually explicit material, even as obscenely violent games remain bestsellers.⁴⁶ In the face of this open world paradigm against sex, erotics, and the postmodern, I ask: What if we changed our methodology to account for frivolous behavior and sexuality in the very act of playing? What if erotics did not disturb our method but defined it?

When not seen as progressive, militaristic, educational, or as providing player agency, gameplay emerges as a frivolous practice that resists easy incorporation into state and neoliberal attitudes, as it appears as a
self-indulgent waste of time. Sutton-Smith calls this discourse of games a “rhetoric of frivolity,” which sees gameplay as a useless escapism. Erotics, as Audre Lorde has pointed out, shares in this rhetoric of uselessness, as discourses of erotics have pathologized sensual feelings into “the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, [and] the plasticized sensation.” As Megan Condis argues, techno-utopic discourses seek to surpass erotics by trusting in virtual worlds to “mark the end of gender, and even of the body, as we know it.” In the context of our open world empire, the “trivial” erotic and the “frivolous” video game seem a destined pairing, especially if we see the erotic not as asking “what we do,” but as questioning “how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing.” Erotic perceptions of video games can shift modes of perception to more “acute” and “full” capacities to comprehend the social contexts through which video games are decoded.

In being construed as nonsexual, games discourses have divided play from fetish, immersion from love, interaction from intimacy, and pleasure from sex. Critics then remain suspicious of games that permit or encourage the indulgence of “perversity,” such as sadism, voyeurism, child homosexuality, and female objectification. Evidence for this suspicion manifested with the 1992 Sega game Night Trap, where players monitored full-motion video of a girls’ slumber party via hidden cameras (Night Trap, along with Mortal Kombat, sparked the creation of the Entertainment Software Rating Board [ESRB] rating system still in place today). The anxiety over gamer sexuality has been informed by, as Foucault might call it, a preoccupation with sex as a perverse pleasure, where the figure of the masturbating child or the homosexual adult lurks as anomalies to be normalized and disciplined. Gamers of course resemble both. As Amanda Phillips has argued, the pleasure of killing an enemy with a well-placed headshot has an erotic and sadistic undercurrent, while the tactile stimulation of the controller in games like Bayonetta can be read as clitoral stimulation. Despite the erasure of erotics as a form of play, the libido of games has lurked within its pleasure practices.

As a method, erotics does not focus on representations of sex and sexuality in erotic or pornographic games but on the erotic forms of play that emerge in games. As Brendan Keogh writes, “all videogames require
a body; some just ask that the player’s conscious attention be turned away from that body’s actions.” Similarly, all games engage the erotics of the body—pleasure, desire, sensation, bliss—but only some seek to make these erotics explicit by enveloping them (or interpreting them) with a sexual object. Just as Lorde saw erotics in everyday practices like “dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, or examining an idea,” playing a game can often feel erotic, even if we do not articulate it as such. Reading play as an erotic engagement makes no ontological or existential claims onto what “play” or “games” really are but evokes a particular cultural politics that resists discourses of information technology by asking how players are teased, provoked, and strung along. In this framework, gameplay is not merely erotic but also queer, as it disrupts narratives of purity and childhoodness that characterize the gamer. If play can take the form of a queer politics, it has the potential to expose “the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods.” As the dominant voices of game studies have remained antithetical to erotics, *Open World Empire* attempts to synthesize game studies with the “pluralizing” meanings that Murray so maligns. Seeking to free game meanings to the many player audiences (queer folk, Asian folk, folk of color), I argue that theorists should become more like gamers, those who can play erotically within and among contradictions. This sense of erotic play is not the usual sense of “play” as the opposite of “work” but instead sits beside the verb phrase “to use.” The transitive construction “to play with” invokes a mode of erotic engagement different from the extractive and colonial logics of “to use,” as in, to employ or deploy. “To play with” conjures a distractive logic, as one can also play with objects or people who have fallen into disuse or been made into refuse. These are the frivolous, the useless, remade by play.

An erotics of play focuses on the sensations and sensibilities within the interactive experiences of each gameworld. As many gaming scholars have argued (Aarseth, Bogost, Galloway), gameplay and rules form the game’s “dynamical meaning,” defined by game designer Jonathan Blow as “the meaning that grows out of exploring a game’s rules and boundaries.” Like genre conventions in literature, these dynamical meanings are not merely meaningful, but persuasive, as they offer
convincing routes for players to weigh decisions, or they can stir new modes of play. Ian Bogost calls this a form of “procedural rhetoric,” where the art of persuasion occurs “through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures.” Games, as a dynamic, rule-based medium, can “have a unique persuasive power” through the parameters of the game, the “processes it supports and excludes.” Open World Empire plays matchmaker to these game studies thinkers and queer theorists to consider how erotic interaction is informed by cultural and historical contexts. Here, accepting gameplay as frivolous opens the door to the unintentional, sporadic, and erotic meanings that grow out of playing a game. The persuasive grammar of games comes in the collaboration between the lifeworld of the player and the gameplay, which takes the form of core repetitive mechanics and inputs/outputs of the body.

Playing erotically can reveal the metadiscourses of games that recognize their own imperial contexts and confront us with the beguiling pleasures of imperial power. In his revision of Antonio Gramsci’s ideas, Stuart Hall famously claimed a “war of positions” was being fought on the frontlines of gender, sexual, and ethnic identities. For Hall, film and television were this war’s main ideological medium, as film had the power to construct “points of identification, those positionalities we call in retrospect our ‘cultural identities.’” Film audiences identified with and against protagonists, seeing through their gaze. Perhaps video games have eluded cultural studies theorists not because they are of less importance but because they don’t easily meld with an identity-based “war of positions,” except in games that are explicitly cinematic (the Assassin’s Creed series, Sleeping Dogs, the Grand Theft Auto series). The vast majority of games have little to say about identity and much more about the sensations, pleasures, and feelings of the body.

Video games provide fraying fantasies built upon production chains and hierarchical ordering systems, but they also stage a field of desires and pleasures within interactive experiences. The fantasy of the game becomes a space where one learns how to take pleasure in the taboo, the unspoken, the queer, and how to visualize the consequences of pleasure, even for those who seem severely distanced from it. As with sexual acts, the gravity of the fantasy doesn’t always dawn upon us until after the fact.
The Last Decade of Barthes, Foucault, Sedgwick

To proclaim yourself something is always to speak at the behest of a vengeful Other, to enter into his discourse. . . . what society will not tolerate is that I should be . . . nothing, or, rather, more precisely, that the something I am should be openly expressed as provisional, revocable, insignificant, inessential, in a word irrelevant. Just say “I am,” and you will be socially saved.

— Roland Barthes, “Preface’ to Renaud Camus, Tricks”

Traditionally, game studies has relied on frameworks concerning networks, machines, and simulation, rather than on the body, erotics, and queer desire. Though recently game scholars have called more attention onto affect, embodiment, and feeling,65 much of game studies continues to dismiss theories of erotics and sexual pleasure as anathema to analyzing video games, even as games and play are concepts that have been so integral to theories of sexuality.66 Seeking an alternative, anti-imperial method of game analysis focused on the erotic, Open World Empire will tease out a playpen of methods based on the work of three theorists who, in their last decade of life on this planet, sought to abandon many of the critique-driven epistemologies of their previous work to develop an arts of living erotically—through touch, feeling, and amorous relations. These are Roland Barthes, who died in 1980 after being knocked down by a laundry van; Michel Foucault, who died of HIV-related illness in 1984; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who died of cancer in 2009. These three theorists are often cited in queer theory, yet their contributions have always been difficult to reconcile, as their definitions of the queer and the erotic conflicted with their own obscure lifestyles and because much of their later work seemed to fetishize Asia. Yet in seeking to fathom erotics as a method, Open World Empire leans heavily on these three thinkers, for whom queerness was not merely an identity, nor a deviation from the heteronormative status quo, but an ethics drawn out of an orientalized ars erotica, an erotics of play rendered through the Asiatic.

The 2017 anthology Queer Game Studies strove to represent the field’s queer debates by welcoming chapters from game designers and critics
In 2018 and 2019, queer game studies discourse grew with the first ever issue of *Game Studies* devoted to “Queerness and Game Studies,” and with books by Bonnie Ruberg, Christopher A. Paul, and Megan Condis focusing on queer forms of play as an alternative to the “toxic masculinity” of some hypervisible gaming cultures. This emerging discourse has been crucial for perceiving multiple gaming cultures who relate to games in alternative—perhaps erotic—ways. Yet, thus far many queer gaming scholars have also reproduced the bare limitations of queer studies, what José Esteban Muñoz has described as an “antirelational” approach that treats sexuality as “a singular trope of difference,” and which Chandan Reddy echoes when he observes that for many queer studies scholars, sexuality “names the normative frames that organize our disciplinary and interdisciplinary inquiries into our past and into contemporary racial capitalism.” Indeed, in re-centering the field of game studies from Asia and Europe to the American academic landscape where queer theory has remained most grounded, entire analyses of Japanese games now have little to no recognition of their multiple audiences or of Japanese aesthetic design, instead relying upon American paradigms of gender and sexuality to treat a Japanese product. Furthermore, queer game studies has continued to practice a pronounced indifference to the process of game manufacture and the labor regimes involved in its production, seeing games as commodities to be reread by American consumers in queer ways. This absence of transnational labor regimes and universalizing of an American-centric gaze onto Asian products—which can broach into a queer Orientalism—is not inherent to queer theory, as Barthes, Butler, Sedgwick, Foucault, Warner, Berlant, Manalansan, and Muñoz (the list goes on) were and continue to be highly invested in transnational and capitalist dimensions of race, class, and sexuality. In video games a relational view of queerness remains of crucial importance, as its labor and creative processes are made possible through transpacific routes.

*Open World Empire* asks how games grant us ways to recognize the imperial and structural violences that produce game pleasure through the mythical seduction of an Asian-inflected and Asian-produced commodity. I focus on queer theorists before “queer studies” and “queer theory” became ingrained disciplines in order to question the ways in which queer studies, in the last two decades, has been devoted to
structural critiques of heteronormativity in a way that departs from these early figures, for whom normativity (and identity) were not reified concepts that easily figured into a “normative”/“resistant” binary centered within North America. I return then to Sedgwick’s own definition of queer, as referring to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.” This definition, which Nicholas De Villiers calls an “open” definition of queerness, does not attach itself to an American version of heteronormativity, nor to the homosexual subject, but invokes an open and vast plurality of perspectives and contexts wherein one person’s queer resistance could be another’s normative gaze and vice versa. I focus on these authors who seek to articulate and compare forms of queerness and normativity across history and geography and to infer how their theoretical totentanz conjures engagements less involved with critique and more attuned to intimacy and erotics. Open World Empire thus attempts not to include greater representations or recovery (though these are valuable buffs), but aims erotic play at untangling discourses of information technology, which preemptively celebrate the future of games as multicultural, tolerant, and LGBT-friendly. I ask then to what extent queer representation deadlocks the “cruel optimism” of a future-oriented equality granted by technological liberation.

By focusing on the last decades of Barthes, Foucault, and Sedgwick, I seek to understand how each thinker, after devoting their careers to critiquing social norms, myths, and ideologies, sought alternatives to the structured political epistemologies that had once preoccupied them. I read this as an attempt to challenge themselves (and their readers) by refusing the language of certainty any further recourse and denying the sphere of ideology critique as the theorist’s career-swallowing occupation. In The Use of Pleasure, volume 2 of Foucault’s History of Sexuality (1984), Foucault deviates from his previous historical research, which was “concerned with what might be true in the fields of learning,” and attempts “an analysis of the ‘games of truth,’” driven by “a curiosity” that “enables one to get free of oneself.” As a “thematic” of analysis, erotics opened up “a new way of conceiving oneself in one’s relation to one’s wife, to others, to events, and to civic and political activities—and
a different way of considering oneself as the subject of one's pleasures.”

In seeking alternative methods and themes, these theorists put trust in the powers of erotics both as a self-liberation and as a means of questioning the wider contexts in which pleasure takes place, including the role that pleasure plays in critique itself. Indeed, pleasure remains a major theme in comprehending erotics, where we do not have an ideological “suture” so much as what Tim Dean calls a means of “taking flight.”

I focus on the last decade of these thinkers not so much because they are “last” (they actually aren’t) but as a metaphor for a period after these writers’ perceived greatness, when their works had put them at the forefront of critical theory. What emerged for all three was a curiosity concerning otherness (Japanese, Greek, Asian, Buddhism) that offered what Foucault called a form of “straying afield of himself,” and of playing “games with oneself” that questioned if one can “think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees.” We find similar shifts in Roland Barthes who, after his “The Death of the Author” in 1967, shifted toward an attempt to write the body, culminating in his The Pleasure of the Text (1973), and A Lover’s Discourse (1977). We can also trace Eve Sedgwick’s turn after the success of Epistemology of the Closet in 1990 and the cancer diagnosis that immediately followed. Once hailed by Rolling Stone magazine as “the soft-spoken queen of the constructionists,” Sedgwick turned from constructs to feelings, touch, and erotics, a shift that she articulated in her 1995 manifesto, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading.” Here I ask a question that plays upon the seriousness of death and authorial greatness: Just what was with the “last decade” for these queer theorists, this time spent on “games,” “erotics,” and “touching”? Why did their writings undergo such a major shift that they would all later be accused of abandoning their politics (at least, their Marxist-oriented politics)? What was it about death that led to a greater focus on the body and its possibilities (even for Barthes, who was unaware of his impending death)? What was so important for these thinkers, I find, was an exploration of a queer art, an ars erotica, where one’s self could only be understood within its fragments. It is within their last decades that these thinkers turned from being critics to lifestyle philosophers, whose interests in Asia allowed them to comprehend new ways of acting, feeling, and imagining the future.
In returning to these scholars of queer lore, I also hope not to dismiss the many critiques of their work that have emerged over time: that they repeated themselves ad infinitum (see Barthes on Barthes), that they privileged the white European gaze (see Spivak), that they dismissed racial assemblages (see Weheliye), that they were Orientalist (see Mavor), that they overprioritized erotics and sexuality over “psychoanalytic truths” (see Siegel), that their attempts at “unknowing” signaled archival laziness (see Nussbaum), that they were not themselves queer according to whatever technical definition (see Weigman on Sedgwick’s hecklers), that they were closeted, obscurist, and unnecessarily opaque (see De Villiers). This book does not join in these public scoldings, nor does it rhapsodize the genius or conscience of these thinkers. Instead, I play with them as theoretical cooperative partners to discern how erotics emerges through the gaps, the faults, the obscure, the fetishistic, the Asiatic, and the inevitability of death. I treat their theoretical toolsets not to use them as surgical instruments for dissection but as toys for animating new possibilities and for reimagining our vexed imperial present. My playful readings then will append Barthes’s own “Death of the Author” with the Death of the Critic, to ask what can emerge from longingly hugging these theorists without plodding through structuralist/poststructuralist debates, or by becoming fluent in French, or by revisiting their diaries and public personas. With much shame (as shame constitutes queerness), Open World Empire plays with and alongside these thinkers in a way that might give theoretician gatekeepers a panic attack. For what better way to theorize play than to do so playfully?

Let’s Play Erotics

In human consciousness eroticism is that within man which calls his being in question.
—Georges Bataille, “Erotism, Death and Sensuality”

Erotics is an art of conceiving how pleasure, desire, and the interactive work upon the body as a way to master ourselves and to recognize how our pleasures impact others. In games these desires are often social and political—the desire for power, for self-optimization, for knowledge, the desire to dominate, and the pleasures of being dominated. Summarizing
Foucault, Amber Jamilla Musser writes that “desire” for Foucault was often “mired in a psychoanalytic concept of lack and anticipation,” while “pleasure” emerged as a form of creative possibility. Video games expose our troubling and sometimes violent desires while enticing us to pursue more creative and queer pleasures within the cordoned-off space of the gameworld, and it is through this realm of sandbox experimentation that we can fathom our erotic selves.

Barthes conceives of an “erotics of reading” in his *The Pleasure of the Text*, where Barthes calls a text of “pleasure” the text that “contents, fills, grants euphoria.” In volume 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault conceptualized erotics as a method to solve the ethical problem of the self’s relationship to itself, that is, to its desires, pleasures, and actions, what he calls (from the Greek) *aphrodisia*, an “open” concept of sexuality that includes its context and future consequences toward others. Sedgwick does not use the term “erotics,” but “touch” and “feeling” to grasp the body’s sensation-based relationship to a text. For Sedgwick, to “touch” is to remain open to other histories, other experiences, other ways of thinking. In turn, “touch” cannot be defined “in terms of structure” without making “a qualitative misrepresentation.” All three of these authors apprehend the erotic as a means of recognizing sensations that remain tied to fetish, play, and virtualizing the other for playful imaginings (Barthes wrote not about Japan but “that country I am calling Japan”).

For some who work in affect theory, erotics would belong to the “individualized” emotions, feelings or drives that Brian Masumi, in his landmark 1995 essay on affect theory, “The Autonomy of Affect,” saw as frivolous and irrelevant to a wider Marxist/feminist view of affect as revealing a “pre-ideological” structure. Erotics has thus far been an easy scapegoat, a merely asocial feeling or sensation that relies on Orientalist fetishization, the “other” to affect studies as much as it has been the “other” to discourses of game theory and information technology. Erotics, unlike these others, has no easy component to sociality, ideology, or the realm of the political, making it seem aberrant. But as Barthes, Foucault, and Sedgwick stress in their last decade, erotics was not a topic to be discussed or a feeling to be known so much as a means of engagement, an alternative mode of embodied interaction offering new ways to speak, to feel, to act, and, most pertinent for us: to play.
I here provide a brief genealogy of erotics as a form of play, made visible through the major “problems” that scholars often perceive within Barthes, Foucault, and Sedgwick: their obscure queer identities, their rejection of Marxist epistemologies, and their fetish for Asia. I treat these three “problems” as different avatars expressing a similar erotic sensibility. One’s refusal to meet an audience’s hunger for identity (on their terms) remains deeply connected to one’s refusal to reinvest in Marxist/materialist critiques, which can be refused only by looking outside, across oceans, to a distant and unknowable “Asia.” As these shifts and modes of identity are also very personal, I cannot claim that these perceived “problems” necessitate each other, but we can remove the injunction that would see them as separable (as if any theorist can just so happen to fetishize Asia). Through these “problems” I hope to unspool an erotic method of confronting otherness typified by “the Asiatic,” a playful engagement with Asia that exposes how notions of the erotic (like the exotic) bleed easily into the idealistic, the fetishistic, the Orientalist.

Barthes’s writing toyed with language by tracing its edges, reveling in its opacity, just as Barthes himself did not come “out of the closet” into a gay identity but preferred to inhabit an opaque sexuality, irreducible to a political identity. In “The Death of the Author” (1967), which signaled a turn from logic to the erotic, Barthes called writing itself “the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.” One could see Barthes’s later work as an attempt to return to this lost body, to keep the body within the act of writing and reading. It seems no coincidence that “The Death of the Author” was published the year after Barthes visited Tokyo (1966), where he began writing his book about Japan, Empire of Signs (1970). Indeed, Barthes’s writings of Japan as a stage for self-inquiry sounds remarkably similar to the insights of “The Death of the Author,” where Barthes as author(ity) is far removed by also removing Japan as a knowable object. In Empire of Signs, Barthes seeks not to “lovingly gaz[e] toward an Oriental essence,” but to understand how Japan, as a “fictive country,” has afforded him a situation of writing. It is also in Barthes’s later writings where he envisages pleasure as an erotic sensation that relies on imperial contexts so that the object of desire becomes a shadow of the power
relations through which that desire is experienced (“the scene,” as he calls it in *A Lover’s Discourse*). Fittingly, pleasure and desire become ludic, a part of a “game,” as Barthes calls it, that tethers opposing forms of fantasy, love, and truth. These later writings represent a period when Barthes, evading his own author function, became “too elusive or too playful” for many of his readers to support him, and he saw his own shifts not as a development from his prior work on ideology but as “a series of breaks or zigzags.”

Like Barthes, Foucault flirted well with obscurity and anonymity, often hiding his name in interviews like “The Masked Philosopher.” As with Barthes, Foucault’s shift to erotics is most manifest in his essay on the author, “What is an Author?” (1969), a response to Barthes’s “The Death of the Author,” and given the year before Foucault himself first went to Japan (1970). Foucault’s work also grew more attentive to “the flesh” after visits to Japan, particularly his second visit in 1978, where he presented a revised argument for his *History of Sexuality* that directed more attention onto erotics, pleasure, and otherness. Erotics for Foucault emerged as a way to account for the fragmented self of multiple, contradictory, and often inconsistent allegiances and preferences (gender, sexual, racial) and to sense how power operates alongside pleasure practices. Understanding our multiplicity through contradictory and unpleasant pleasures forces us, as Foucault sought in his *History of Sexuality*, to ask how we have been involved in other people’s lives and how we have been antagonist to those within our very household (wives, servants, boys) as well as to those living within our imperial provinces. Foucault’s decade-long project saw pleasure in Western societies within a discourse led by science (*scientia sexualis*), wherein erotic pleasure was confined to the pleasure of knowing something transparently and authentically. In contrast to the West’s *scientia sexualis*, Foucault theorized an *ars erotica*, or arts of erotics, that was not about forming identities or transparency but was an artful training in pleasure and its effects, a gamelike form of sexuality focused on the ethical boundaries of erotic exchange. Whereas sexuality in the West was akin to “the essentially narcissistic pleasures of self-confirmation or identity affirmation,” *ars erotica* was a form of Asian sexuality associated with the “ethos of silence” and pleasure practices of Eastern
cultures: “China, Japan, India, Rome, the Arabo-Moslem societies.”

These conceptual bases for erotics, formed out of fetishizations and orientalisms of Asian difference, pushed both Barthes and Foucault to focus on the body as an alternative to psychoanalytic diagnoses and identity-based forms of recognition.

Eve Sedgwick wrote plainly about her sexuality, identifying herself as a married woman who had “vanilla sex, on a weekly basis, in the missionary position, in daylight,” yet she, too, carried an obscured relationship to queerness by refusing the terms through which queer identities were understood. At the third annual Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference at Yale in 1989, Sedgwick was repeatedly interrupted by detractors who doggedly demanded for her sexual orientation (“Are you a lesbian?”). Asked to account for herself on the majority’s terms, her answers were never satisfactory. As José Muñoz writes, Sedgwick’s decision to characterize herself as a married woman was not an effort to be transparent but to “show how conventional language failed to grasp her own fundamental sense of queerness.” This distrust in language signaled Sedgwick’s “turn” from criticism and ideology in her monumental essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” (1995), where she criticized “paranoid readings” as methods that overvalued transparency and exposure while seeing pleasure and self-nourishment as merely systemic within a global order. As an alternative, Sedgwick conceived of “reparative readings” that did not expose, identify, or seek certainty, but conferred “plentitude on an object” when “the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture.” Indeed, as with Barthes and Foucault, Sedgwick’s thinking in her later years was inspired by Asian philosophies and cultures, particularly Buddhism, which provided a means of seeing Western “knowingness” as paranoid. For Sedgwick, prominent forms of leftist critique were “not simply impoverished but belligerently, even willfully so, as [they drew] their political credibility from the pretense ‘to know’ the truth about ‘reality,’ no matter how differently conceived.” Buddhism meanwhile offered “the apparent tautology of learning what you already know . . . [as] a deliberate and defining practice.” Like Barthes and Foucault, Sedgwick’s later career marked a radical turn from methods of ideological critique to erotic methods that opened texts to greater understandings of touch, pleasure, and sensation.
The Asiatic

[W]e can’t have our erotic life—a desiring life—without involving ourselves in the messy terrain of racist practice.
—Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*

It’s no coincidence that the methods of erotics found in Barthes, Foucault, and Sedgwick were formed through intense and intimate relations with “the Orient.” Even in their acute awareness of the pitfalls of Orientalism, these thinkers’ later works sought to untangle their erotic selves through confrontations with the Asian other—the other that Asia afforded them, what I will call throughout this book “the Asiatic”: a style or form recognized as Asianish but that remains adaptable, fluid, and outside of the authentic/inauthentic binary. The Asiatic is a “cybertype” in Lisa Nakamura’s sense of a racial form shifting “into the realm of the ‘virtual,’ a place not without its own laws and hierarchies.” As virtual, the Asiatic does not strive for realness but plays upon the real.

Video games are Asiatic even when they contain no explicit racial representations, as they are manufactured and innovated upon in Asian contexts and remain colored by Asian associations as new media products, where “the Asian subject is perceived to be, simultaneously, producer (as cheapened labor), designer (as innovators), and fluent consumer (as subjects that are “one” with the apparatus).” In her book *The Race Card*, Tara Fickle examines how the infrastructure of gaming is itself a raced project, operating on the “ludo-racial” presumptions that Asians are naturally oriented toward games. I thus call games Asiatic not to reduce games into an East/West binary where all Western players are Orientalist but to account for the inescapability of Asian associations in games and to trace their transpacific imperial contexts. Similar to yoga, tea drinking, and meditation, video games arrive as an Asiatic form inviting players of all backgrounds to participate in and adapt them into their own lives. As I expand upon in chapter 1, the Asiatic sees race as verb rather than object, as something done rather than something known, made approachable in the game’s interactive medium for players “who can more readily assimilate and accommodate whatever objects they encounter.” It is a means of grasping race through “the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control.”
The erotic methods conceived by Barthes, Foucault, and Sedgwick are too Asiatic, as they are a practice that emerges by comparing “scientific” and “paranoid” modes of Western thinking with those perceived to be common across Asia. These writers’ erotic methods were developed and tested through their confrontations with the Asiatic, as we see in Barthes’s two travelogues *Empire of Signs* and *Travels in China*, Foucault’s interviews with Zen Buddhists and reliance on Asia as a contemporary example of *ars erotica*, and Sedgwick’s *A Dialogue on Love*, which takes liberal use of Japanese poetry forms, her visual art using Eastern textiles, and her essays and courses on Buddhism. Rather than merely cast an Orientalist label onto these works, a far more interesting angle is to ask how these writers’ intimate connections to Asia provided a very different view of the ideology critique common in Marxism, which had taken the role of a state religion in Russia, China, North Korea, Cambodia, and Vietnam, where it was increasingly associated with warfare, starvation, and genocide.\textsuperscript{115} The Western defenses of Marxism claiming that Asians had falsely interpreted Marx (see Althusser\textsuperscript{116}) or were merely responding to American propaganda (see Chomsky\textsuperscript{117}) can seem disingenuous once one engages intimately (erotically) with the overwhelming loss of life in Asia, where one could no longer say (as Slavoj Žižek often does) that Marxism was a catastrophe in Asia and add the word “but.”\textsuperscript{118} For all three theorists, their attachments to Asia provided an opportunity for thinking erotically. In seeing the inevitable gambit of such an affordance, whether Orientalist, reductive, or just plain inaccurate, each theorist also saw Asia as “not-Asia,” as a virtual form, as Asiatic. In so doing, they sought to nurture erotic methods as both a way of reading and as an ethics for conceiving of better relations with others.

The Erotics of Games

Get over here!
—Scorpion, *Mortal Kombat*

This book traffics in ideas of erotic play, salvaging pleasure from its casual invocation as an immoral danger at risk of capitalist and imperial complicity. At the same time, I hope to also distance my use of erotics from psychoanalytic discourses seeking to revise pleasure into a form
more compatible with “moral virtue or progressive social change.” Whether discussed or not, whether aggrandized or ignored, erotics persists, even in digital technology meant to free us from our bodies. Erotics offers a means of discussing interactive media’s play with the body without needing to invoke a structural metadiscourse that would restrain erotics as a mere supplement to empire, capitalism, consumerism, and the binding powers of affect. No matter one’s politics, pleasures have a habit of transgressing rules of good and evil, ideological and frivolous, dominant and resistant. Erotics demystifies pleasure by developing tactics and strategies to master our desiring selves.

I see the pleasures of gaming as erotic rather than sexual in the way Barthes, Foucault, and Sedgwick also discussed feelings associated with attachment, love, drift, bliss, and ecstasy, as similar to sexual sensations. If taste can be figured through the sexual (an orgasmic strawberry, a tantalizing mug of hot chocolate), why not the “aiming,” “shooting,” and “mashing” of video games? In *Empire of Signs*, Barthes saw the Japanese game pachinko—a precursor to arcade games—as distinctly erotic, whereas the Western game of pinball was distinctly sexual. Unlike the “pinup girl” seen in pinball, the pachinko machine contained no visual representations of sex and was a “collective and solitary game” full of “varied clientele” with a revenue comparable to “all the department stores in Japan.” Pachinko’s only interactive moment was in its “initial dispatch,” which made the player extremely sensitive to “the force the thumb imparts,” making the hand “that of an artist” that directs the ball with “the sole flash of its impetus.” If successful, this nuanced act of muscle memory results in being “symbolically spattered with money.” Here we have a game that is not about sex or sexuality but still tantalizes, teases, and sensitizes the body, training the player into an artful erotics of play.

Like pachinko, video games are an erotics with or without sex. The slow reveal of a scroll panel in *Super Mario Bros.* is the tease of the stripper without flesh; the well-placed headshot in *Counter-Strike* is an orgasmic lunge; the sneaking in *Metal Gear Solid* is a vacillating flirtation; the decisions made in *Mass Effect* are the uncertainty of cruise. To read games erotically opens games into various forms of parody, burlesque, kink, and camp. But more importantly, erotics helps us understand what we mean when we call a game “fun,” when we say that it gives us pleasure, even when we are horrified, stressed, or bored while playing. Erotics develops
a language for fun and pleasure that captures the excess meanings these words hide, how they transgress moral/ethical/normative boundaries. These erotics are not always queer, though they can emerge from disobedience (turning right when being told to turn left) and they can be interpreted through queer lenses (catching a baseball as a sign of being a “catcher”). Yet erotics can also be troublingly normative, in that it can exceed our political attitudes and empowered identities, often leading us back to the very thing we thought we were resisting.

In his 1977 inaugural lecture at the College de France, Barthes exhorted listeners to revise literary interpretation anew. As an effect of deconstruction, postcolonial writing, and Barthes’s own poststructural thought, literature had been desacralized, and in that moment there was no better time to open literature up. “This is the moment,” Barthes advised, “to deal with it.” Toward an open literature, Barthes conceived an erotics of reading. Absent of a single entrusted institutional interpretative community for video games, we can say that the lack of recognition of games as “real art” and its consistent dismissal as a frivolous waste of time conjures a similar moment “to deal with it.” Yet in response to these dismissals, gamers and scholars alike have sought to “sacralize” games with single narrative meanings or to brand games as belonging only to a male counterculture (#GamerGate). With this caveat, Open World Empire sees the act of game playing as an opening rather than a closing of meaning. To pry from this crevice, we must refuse depictions of the player as passively accepting games as either a benefactor for agency and education or as an all-consuming leviathan that takes away critical thought. If we allow it, games can open us to be something other than what we were told we were. Games can break us, can unravel our presumptions about the world, by making plain our desires, pleasures, and powers within it.

What Follows

The chapters that follow were written within a precarious seven-year period in which I taught at five different institutions, applied for over three hundred academic jobs (and was denied by nearly all of them), immigrated to three different countries, started a family, and traversed the transpacific numerous times to gather research and lock in support wherever I could find it. Over these seven years, video games were a
consistent space to recuperate, to be frivolous and nonsensical, passionate and erotic, illogical and loopy. The chapters thus work in a loop, beginning and ending with reflections on Asia as a construct within the open world empire, from “Asiatic” forms of play (chapter 1) to Asia as a “virtual other” (chapter 6). The choice of games will also appear idiosyncratic, as my archive consists of “AAA” or mainstream industry games, independent games, massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), horror games, and first-person shooters. This hodgepodge of game texts restricts this study from offering a definitive form of play and keeps it from reducing game audiences to particular “game cultures” gathered around a genre or a brand. Rather—as Foucault said of his own goals as a writer—this book invites the reader to wander peripatetically, to slip into a kind of experience that “prevents us from always being the same, or from having the same kind of relationship with things and with others that we had before reading.”

It is in the tradition of Barthes, Foucault, and Sedgwick, as well as games journalists and scholars like Anna Anthropy, Brian Keogh, and Steve Swink, that each chapter also draws on my own erotic experiences with games, detailing my own vested relationship with them and the pleasures that they afford.

Chapter 1 argues that video games, unlike literature and film, are most often depicted as a form of global art, free of ideologies and nationalist boundaries. I treat the games Street Fighter II, League of Legends, and Overwatch to comprehend how these “global games” are played as gateways into “the Asiatic,” a playful form of Asianish representation that straddles notions of the queer, the exotic, the bizarre and the Orientalist. Building from the Asiatic, chapters 2 and 3 examine games within a broader discourse of information technology and global empire, first by tracing the discourses of authorship, design, and otherness in Japanese, white, and Asian American producers (chapter 2), and then by exploring how role-playing games like Mass Effect and Guild Wars 2 make visible (and hold players accountable) to regimes of labor and capitalist accumulation by yoking forms of erotic power play (chapter 3). Whereas the open world empire presumes a transparent self, the erotic forms of play in these chapters center the player’s ambivalent affinities toward global empire and their relationships with others within its grasp.

The book’s second half breaks from the first half’s modes of critique to ask how the atrocities and violent consequences of empire can
be perceived through erotic and reparative engagements. Playing with Eve Sedgwick’s concepts of “texture” and Barthes’s notions of pleasure and bliss, I attempt to meditate upon the very real pleasures of domination. Chapters 4 and 5 work as a pair to invoke a form of play as “touch” that sees the game as “text(ure)” and the interactive moment as positioning our bodies into postures ready for expression, reaction, and reception. Chapter 4 explores how *Alien: Isolation* (2014) disrupts our casual “plunge” posture to postures of vulnerability and dread, which enforce new understandings of the social anxieties stoked by political and social marginalizations. Chapter 5 explores how the open world first-person shooting games in the *Far Cry* series engages players in repetitive “game loops” (jump, run, aim, shoot) to provide what Roland Barthes calls “pleasure” and “bliss,” forms of erotic play that secure and unsettle the player’s identity and social world. Chapter 6 provides a conclusive stringing together of erotics, empire, and play by focusing on experiences of virtual travel and cartography in the Pacific Islands. Thinking through erotic methods found in the Asian confrontations of Barthes, Foucault, and Sedgwick, I argue that the modes of erotics in interactive media entice players to reimagine the world outside of the imperial forms of mapping, surveillance, and war.

**The System Only Screams in Total Brightness**

To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings.’ . . . The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us . . . In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.

—Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays*

*Open World Empire* was written through forms of settlement inside America as well as circuits of travel within its prior colonies (the Philippines, Hawai‘i), its sub-empires (South Korea, Taiwan), its complicit nations (Canada), its competing empire (China), and that empire’s contemporary colony (Hong Kong). The chapters thus attempt to comprehend the larger context of video games in a world structured by
our interactions with technology on all levels—the communications of social media that toughens mass protests as well as mass surveillance; the aerial technology that enables transpacific travel and Google Maps as well as drones and spy satellites. If empire today is shaped through the developments and circuits of information technology, video games are the open world empire screaming through the language of play. To hear these screams we must no longer make ourselves transparent, identity-based beings, but, as Sontag writes, we must “recover our senses” through an erotics that stresses our perceptions to “see more, to hear more, to feel more.”

As Sontag’s oeuvre shows, erotics does not merely celebrate the interactions of the body but heightens one’s conscience through nourishment. Or, as Sharon Holland writes, to practice erotic methods means also “enlist[ing] the erotic as a possible harbinger of the established order.” Erotics does not evade empire by focusing on the body, but through the body it makes empire’s presence palpable. Video games, too, have not been in any way immune to militarization and capitalist incorporation, at least, no more than any other entertainment medium. But as anyone who has played Portal 2, Hotline Miami, Papers, Please, This War of Mine, September 12th, Civilization, Final Fantasy VII, or Shadow of the Colossus well knows, video games do not mess around with making the player feel responsible, complicit, and guilt-ridden over their own relation to empire.

By simulating the processes and providing the pleasures of our open world empire, video games stage conversations about how to think ethically about American power in the world without the nationalist impulse to launder imperial history or deny its erotic sensations (and thus disavow its very existence). In the open world, the screams of empire are no longer distanced into the colonies or behind the camera. They are muffled by the cacophonic noise of facts, knowledges, exposures, certainties, and all that form a “game of truth,” whose volume drowns out the screams even when they come from our own mouths. These truths are not censored, covered up, or blacked out. They are endlessly heaved into view, stark in total brightness, and available at the click of a button.

Video games offer no liberation from our empire. To use Sedgwick’s own Asiatic language, games do not expose anything new but merely help us recognize what we already know. If there is a reparative function
of games, it is not in the utopic or in the gathering of new information but in making normative (rather than exceptional) America’s undeniable attachment to perpetual war and imperial preservation. By letting us relish in the pleasures of power and privilege, video games reckon with our erotic selves, with our own motives and attachments as perpetrators, enablers, settlers. To have a real conversation about our responsibilities as an empire, to help us live within it and flourish as one can, we must face up to that pithy excuse that I use when I realize I’ve wasted the day playing *Overwatch*: “there was something about it, I suppose, that gave me pleasure.”