

Millions were produced, a lot of money was made, and meanwhile the USSR collapsed. The last chapter reads like the final credits in a film biography, indicating where the main players are now and briefly summarizing Rogers and Pajitnov's partnership (based on long friendship) in forming The Tetris Company.

Brown's graphic novel covers much the same story, albeit in much broader strokes. His book begins with a prehistoric definition of games emerging from play and transforming into art (at the point of creation) and fun (at the point of consumption). This may be the weakest part of the book because it glosses over some particularly contentious material. After this introduction, Brown takes an ensemble approach to this history, cycling back to Pajitnov and his creative thinking several times, but skirting away from making any of the actors in this drama the hero. The content is elegantly organized into sections demarcated by a single back page with introductory portraits of the main characters who appear in the unfolding narrative. This is brilliant organizational strategy because there are simply so many powerful people in the story to keep track of, and it reminds the reader that games are not made in vacuums by nameless people. Real actors affect the production, distribution, and consumption of the game, and they are as thoughtful, selfish, giving, and petty as most other humans.

The strength of the graphic novel approach to the history of *Tetris* is that the reader can see examples from the game, the advertisements, and the meetings and parties referenced. Brown also uses the affordances of the comic page to represent the abstract thinking processes

of creation, relationships, and internal dialog from Pajitnov's articulation of games as the confluence of humanity and technology (pp. 67–68) to Stein's self-satisfied visage as he imagines all of the money he will make (illegally) licensing *Tetris*.

The only major critique I have of these two histories is not the fault of the authors; these are popular histories. However, I missed the typical academic citations for source information. This is especially pertinent because the two books do not always agree on their facts, providing different stories about the first time Rogers and Pajitnov met, for example. Ackerman does have a selected bibliography, but it is less a bibliography than a suggested reading list for those interested. Because of the nature of the graphic novel, Brown tends to skip large swaths of information, presenting sequential bites instead. I recommend reading these together because they complement each other. What I especially appreciated about these two books (in addition to a truly entertaining story) was the careful record of *Tetris* as a game that went through multiple iterations and an industrial account of the role of distribution in the creation of cultural texts.

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### **Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America**

*Phillip Penix-Tadsen*

Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016.

Acknowledgments, notes, references, and index. 333 pp.

\$53.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780262034050

Phillip Penix-Tadsen's objective with *Cultural Code* is to "bring together the critical vocabularies of game studies and Latin American cultural studies in order to offer the first synthetic theorization of the relationship between video games and culture" (p. 1). In this regard, the book takes on a valuable perspective from George Yúdice, that to understand the relationship between video games and culture—both how video games use culture and how culture makes use of video games—are equally important. In addition to Yúdice, the book is influenced by well-known Latin American cultural studies scholars like Beatriz Sarlo, Néstor García Canclini, and Jesús Martín Barbero. The influence of Latin American cultural studies makes the intellectual framework for the book unique. It gives Penix-Tadsen's analysis significance far beyond its regional boundaries.

From a game studies perspective, Penix-Tadsen's orientation toward Latin American scholarship highlights the influential work of Uruguayan scholar and game designer Gonzalo Frasca. Frasca's early scholarly work had a great deal of influence in the early days of the discipline but is now often overlooked. Through Frasca's scholarly and creative work, *Cultural Code* establishes the Latin American influences on the concept of the serious game and recalls the radically political stakes of serious games that he established by repurposing Augusto Boal and Paolo Freire to postulate the "videogames of the oppressed."

*Cultural Code* examines video games as visual representations and as computer code. In this sense it follows in the footsteps of Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* and other influential work

published by MIT Press in the Platform Studies series and Software Studies series. The book's engagement with video games as algorithms also turns to Frasca's early work on simulation and is illustrated through a close reading of *Tropico III*. But, Penix-Tadsen's reading significantly complicates Frasca's by offering a more nuanced position informed by the last decade of scholarship on algorithmic culture.

Penix-Tadsen also introduces the term "cultural ludology" to craft a position that draws on previous work exploring the visual, narrative, and algorithmic elements of video games. Cultural ludology examines both how culture gets incorporated into the mechanics of video games and how the cultural environment shapes the way video games are understood.

The book is organized into two sections. The first focuses on how culture uses video games. Chapter 1 explores the idiosyncratic elements of the material culture of the region, the particular distribution of software and hardware, and the contexts of play. Chapter 2 explores how video games are made politically expedient. This covers both how designers draw on the politics of the region to place their video games in a speculative, yet real-world, context and how various politicians in Latin America use gaming to exemplify various threats to health, safety, and culture. In chapter 3, Penix-Tadsen explores the regional contexts that shape game development in Latin America. This chapter features fascinating and relevant regional examples illustrated with a striking attention to detail.

In the second section of the book, Penix-Tadsen turns to the way video games use culture. In this section, the use-

fulness and originality of his approach are well illustrated. Chapter 4 establishes video games as a “unique semiotic domains of culture” and illustrates how the semiotics of the indigenous peoples of Latin America, colonial rule, and the hybrid culture of Latin America (such as *Día de Muertos*) are not just represented but also revealed in the algorithmic structures of video games (p. 146). The chapter also includes a particularly noteworthy analysis of how regionally produced and mainstream commercial video games incorporated the *favela* (slum) symbolically and algorithmically. Chapter 5 explores the topic of space in video games and has a particularly important discussion of how open world video games (exemplified by *Grand Theft Auto V*) allow for representations of multiculturalism. Chapter 6 grapples with the question of the algorithm, particularly the notion of verisimilitude in simulation.

At its best, the book discusses the unique cultural practices of Latin American players, how video games represent Latin America and Latino culture, and the growth of the video game industry in Latin America. Penix-Tadsen’s Latin America has fluid borders that encompass South and Central America and the Caribbean as well as the regions of the United States that have been most influenced by Latino

culture. These areas include the US–Mexican border and US cities that have substantial Latino populations, such as Los Angeles and Miami (which are themselves key centers for Latin American culture). Rather than focusing on only Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries, *Cultural Code* notably includes a discussion of Francophone Haiti.

As an exploration introducing new, original approaches to understanding the dynamic relationship between video games and culture, *Cultural Code* is a resounding success that illustrates the importance of examining the regional cultures of gaming. In this respect, the book is particularly relevant for scholars interested in Latin American media and culture but also for scholars who are interested in the social and cultural dimensions of video games. The book’s only weakness is its lack of engagement with the Zeebo, a console developed specifically for the Latin American market. But the many strengths of *Cultural Code* suggest it will have a well-deserved impact on the study of play, video games, and culture for years to come.

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