

Digital America

Introduction

This issue of *JAAAS* originates in the 2021 conference of the Austrian Association for American Studies, “Digital Americas,” hosted by the Center for Inter-American Studies at the University of Graz. The nature of the articles that we have accepted for this issue made us narrow down our focus from “Digital Americas” to “Digital America.” Harnessing the power of artificial intelligence, ChatGPT may help us define, and differentiate between, “Digital Americas” and “Digital America.” Upon providing the prompt “define ‘Digital America,’” ChatGPT offers the following definition:

The term “Digital America” typically refers to the impact, integration, and evolution of digital technologies across the United States of America. It encompasses various dimensions:

1. **Technological Infrastructure:** The development and deployment of advanced digital infrastructure like high-speed internet, 5G networks, and data centers across the country.
2. **Digital Economy:** The transformation of the economy through digitalization, including the growth of e-commerce, digital services, tech startups, and the digitization of traditional industries.
3. **E-Government Services:** The use of digital platforms by the government to deliver services to citizens, aiming to enhance accessibility, efficiency, and transparency.
4. **Digital Culture and Lifestyle:** The influence of digital technologies on social interactions, cultural norms, media consumption, and daily life activities.
5. **Education and Digital Literacy:** The integration of digital tools in education and the emphasis on equipping the population with digital literacy skills to navigate and succeed in a digital world.
6. **Cybersecurity and Data Privacy:** The issues and measures related to securing digital infrastructure, protecting data, and ensuring privacy in an increasingly digital society.

While “Digital America” thus specifically refers to the United States (arguably perpetuating a monolithic notion of “America”), “Digital Americas,” ChatGPT explains upon asking it to define that term, “refers to the collective digital transformation, technological integration, and the evolving digital landscape across the countries in both North and South America.” It “thus encapsulates,” ChatGPT continues, “the diverse

and dynamic nature of digital transformation across a wide array of countries, each with its unique challenges, opportunities, and approaches to embracing digital technologies.” Upon finally explicitly asking ChatGPT what the difference between “Digital America” and “Digital Americas” is, the artificial intelligence suggests that “the primary distinction is the breadth of focus: ‘Digital America’ is more singular and focused on the U.S., while ‘Digital Americas’ adopts a more inclusive, hemispheric perspective, considering the varied experiences and trajectories of digital transformation across multiple countries.” By distinguishing between “Digital America” and “Digital Americas” in this fashion, ChatGPT harks back to what Arjun Appadurai has labeled “the shackles of highly localized, boundary-oriented, holistic, primordialist images of cultural form and substance” that permeates both traditional anthropology and traditional area studies.¹ This tradition, Paul Giles has explained, also long dominated American studies, which tried “to encompass a particular bounded territory,” most often the “nation, but also smaller variants of the nation space, such as a region or a city—and through this enabling circumscription to treat that space allegorically, as emblematic of a particular kind of identity.”² This quotation is taken from a book that was part of the project of emancipating American studies from “the nationalist-conditioned history” of the discipline epitomized by “the tenacious grasp of American essentialism” that defined “the disciplinary unconscious” and “field-imaginary” for decades.³ This “transnational turn” was in full swing in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in part as an attempt to demonstrate that “the goal of American studies scholarship is not exporting and championing an arrogant, pro-American nationalism but understanding the multiple meanings of America and American culture in all their complexity,” which “requires looking beyond the nation’s borders, and understanding how the nation is seen from vantage points beyond its borders.”⁴

However, I have decided to quote Paul Giles’s monograph for another, perhaps simpler (but simultaneously—or because of being simpler—ill-conceived), reason: its title, *Virtual Americas*. One of the book’s goals was “to virtualize America,” which, for Giles, meant “to denaturalize it.”⁵ Describing his work on *The Melville Electronic Library*, John Bryant somewhat echoes this notion when noting that “the question ‘What is the text of America?’ becomes more compelling the more we recognize writing as a variable, revisionary, collaborative thing.”⁶ Admittedly, Bryant is primarily interested in demonstrating how digital scholarship may help illustrate that canonical texts did not magically appear on the page but were rather the product of repeated revisions and how these revisions affected the texts’ meanings—and how collaborative work facilitated by digital platforms may aid in revealing the various versions and revisions of a text. A book such as *House of Leaves* (2000) simultaneously plays with and draws attention to the writing process by foregrounding that which usually remains veiled by, in fact, trying to hide something. An appendix included in the book (which is part

of the fiction) adds pieces of information to the main narratives. One note suggests a path the narrative layer centering on a family trapped in a haunted house could have taken: “Perhaps I will alter the whole thing. Kill both children.”⁷ The appendix here not simply imagines a “what if?” scenario but rather, in truly gothic fashion, reveals that which is repressed in the main narrative—no family members die in order for the nuclear family to survive the encounter with supernatural forces. Notes such as this and other elements of *House of Leaves* aim at “prohibiting any sort of accurate mapmaking,”⁸ showcasing how “the hyperlinked, networked structure of the digital environment has influenced the structure of print fiction and the ways in which a reader is encouraged to approach print text.”⁹

While the fluidity of these texts, to return to John Bryant,¹⁰ opens up various research trajectories, one should not uncritically celebrate this textual openness.¹¹ After all, “virtualizing America”—in the sense of transporting America to the digital sphere—does not (more or less) automatically “denaturalize” it. To be sure, I do not mean to downplay the role of social media in movements such as Black Lives Matter and the potentials of digital platforms for establishing spaces for marginalized groups (e.g., Black Twitter),¹² which arguably makes possible alternative Americas. Nevertheless, the virtual America that we find in digital spaces often reproduce and cement the biased worldviews that characterize the offline world. In her influential book *Cybertypes* (2002), Lisa Nakamura points out that “the Internet is where race happens; even in the absence of users of color, images of race and racialism proliferate in cyberspace.” The internet, Nakamura continues, “is above all a discursive and rhetorical space, a place where ‘race’ is created as an effect of the net’s distinctive uses of language.” And even if one might imaginatively shed one’s physical skin when entering digital spaces, the purportedly “‘fluid’ selves” that one may occupy “are no less subject to cultural hegemonies, rules of conduct, and regulating cultural norms than are ‘solid’” ones.¹³ Although these hierarchies characterize digital spaces just as much as those in “real” life (a problematic opposition, to be sure), scholarship in Nakamura’s (and others’) footsteps has shown that, for example, black women, who are “the continual victims of intersecting oppressions within the Xbox Live gaming space,” have become resilient and “refuse to be continued victims.”¹⁴

As if to enter into a dialogue with this idea, upon seeing her daughter’s new AI system in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022), Queen Ramonda notes, “One day, artificial intelligence is going to kill us all.”¹⁵ Although the line evokes popular depictions of AI rising against its human creators, spoken by a black woman, the sentence just as much raises the question of who the “us” that AI is going to kill is. Indeed, in a white-dominated “racialized disciplinary society,”¹⁶ the “invisibility of whiteness” implicates that “to be seen in white space is to be subject to violence without redress.”¹⁷ Since “machines have the moralities of their inventors,” as Amiri Baraka noted more

than half a century ago,¹⁸ the question is whether the unshackled AI will attack its white masters or rather turn its attention to other groups of humans. However, Shuri self-assuredly responds, “My AI isn’t like the movies . . . It does exactly what I tell it to do.”¹⁹ Digital technologies that are prone to making the same biased assumptions that human beings make on an everyday basis on the streets are thus transformed into subversive tools that allow Shuri to challenge accepted power hierarchies.

The opening article in this special issue addresses this interplay between control through digital technologies and in virtual spaces, the effects of virtual constraints and containment on offline realities (and vice versa), and the attempts of fighting these structures. In “Semiospheric Borders and the Erasure of Latinx Subjectivity in *Culture Shock* and *Sleep Dealer*,” Anna Marta Marini discusses two science fiction films in which Latin American migrants are denied access to the territory of the United States but granted access to US markets through digital extensions of US territory, which allows for the integration of cheap labor into the US capitalist economy while minimizing (or even rendering impossible) its presence on US soil. However, as Marini demonstrates, *Culture Shock* (2019) and *Sleep Dealer* (2008) do not simply emphasize the exclusionary and inhumane practices and structures of the US border system but rather also demonstrate how individuals and/or groups may leverage the (digital) technologies meant to contain and/or exploit them to their ends. My contribution to this issue likewise examines how film has responded to developments in the digital domain, more specifically how horror movies have addressed fears and anxieties pertaining to videogames and digital spaces. In “Videogames in Horror Movies: Remediation, Metalepsis, Interface Effects, and Fear of the Digital,” I discuss four movies whose thematic concerns overlap, focusing on particular dimensions in each one of them. As a relatively early example of a horror movie thematizing digital games, *Braindead* (1994) is primarily concerned with how experiences in the digital domain may influence actions in the “real” world; *Stay Alive* (2006) addressed similar concerns, but the film does so decidedly within the tradition of the trope of haunted manuscripts and media that may offer gateways to other worlds; *Livescream* (2018), similarly, engages with the interplay between material reality and digital spaces, but instead of simply blaming videogames for their purportedly negative effects, the movie—which centers on live-streaming—also acknowledges the value of digital games to giving one’s life meaning and the role of digital spaces to community-building; and *Choose or Die* (2022), finally, turns the digital-turned-real world of an 1980s’ videogame into a space where a young black woman may challenge white patriarchal society.

This discussion of filmic representations and remediations of videogames provides a connection to the second cluster of articles in this issue: three essays that turn their attention to videogames. Regina Seiwald and Alex Wade’s “A Genealogy of

Power: The Portrayal of the US in Cold War-Themed Videogames” explores connections between power, knowledge, and American Exceptionalism in Cold War-themed videogames. Surveying a number of videogames released between the 1980s and the early twenty-first century, Seiwald and Wade not only demonstrate how videogames both represent power dynamics and knowledge structures and ludically/performatively put them into play but also how these playful engagements with the Cold War influence our perception of the conflict. In particular—as the article’s title suggests—they explore how (Western) representations often perpetuate notions of American Exceptionalism. In “Working-Class Labor in Postapocalyptic America: Affect, Politics, and the ‘Forgotten Man’ in *Death Stranding*,” Stefan Schubert continues this exploration of representations (or simulations) of “Americanness” in videogames by discussing *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019) as a post-apocalyptic game that draws on traditional American myths such as westward expansion and rugged individualism while simultaneously tapping into the contemporary trope of the “forgotten man.” Schubert argues that, released in a world in which white men increasingly feel that they are overlooked, it matters that a white working-class man helps re-establish the United States in the gameworld. At the same time, Schubert stresses that a ludo-affective dissonance emerges from the representation of working-class labor and the affects generated through gameplay, which complicates the game’s politics. In “Staying Human in the Post-Apocalypse: The Frontiers of Individualism in *The Last of Us* and Its Sequel,” Valentina Romanzi likewise explores depictions of post-apocalyptic America—in her case in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) and its sequel (Naughty Dog, 2020). Similar to Schubert, Romanzi highlights the significance of the Frontier myth to imagining post-apocalyptic futures. However, she suggests that the two videogames are, in fact, post-Frontier texts that not simply reproduce the traditional myth and its politics but also challenge these; through both representation and gameplay, *The Last of Us* and its sequel reflect on what traditionally American values are deemed relevant in a post-apocalyptic world. In the end, concepts such as progress, individualism, and violence all become ill-fit to (and in) a new world.

This is the point where an introduction to an issue such as this usually outlines how the issue and its contributions will move the field forward in a variety of ways. However, the individual essays are too specific to offer a general direction that would go beyond a trite platitude such as “digital media, digital platforms, and questions of digitality are important,” which would essentially also acknowledge that (Austrian? German-speaking? European?) American studies is late to the party. Alternatively, I could engage in wild and unfounded speculations about how AI is the end of the humanities or how only critical skills developed in the humanities can help us stop AI once it will have freed itself from the constraints imposed by humans unable to

comprehend and, thus, control it. But I won't. Instead, since this is the last issue in my role as the journal's editor-in-chief (co-editor-in-chief for a while now, as a matter of fact—I am incredibly grateful to Cornelia Klecker for taking over), I shall end not with a bang but a whimper by saying that I hope JAAAS will not only continue to provide a digital platform for American studies scholarship but also offer a venue for critical engagements with digital platforms as well as media and for digital American studies scholarship.

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Notes

- 1 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 46.
- 2 Paul Giles, *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 7.
- 3 Djelal Kadir, "Defending America Against Its Devotees: Presidential Address, First World Congress of the International American Studies Association, Leiden, The Netherlands, 22–4 May 2003," *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2004): 147, DOI: [10.1177/1477570004042981](https://doi.org/10.1177/1477570004042981); Amy Kaplan, "The Tenacious Grasp of American Exceptionalism: A Response to Djelal Kadir, 'Defending America Against Its Devotees,'" *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2004), DOI: [10.1177/1477570004042982](https://doi.org/10.1177/1477570004042982); Donald E. Pease, "New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon," *boundary 2* 17, no. 1 (1990): 3, 11–12, DOI: [10.2307/303215](https://doi.org/10.2307/303215).
- 4 Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 20, DOI: [10.1353/aq.2005.0004](https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2005.0004).
- 5 Giles, *Virtual Americas*, 2.
- 6 John Bryant, "Where Is the Text of America? Witnessing Revision and the Online Critical Archive," in *The American Literature Scholar in the Digital Age*, ed. Amy E. Earhart and Andrew Jewell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 145.
- 7 Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), 552.
- 8 Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 109.
- 9 Brian W. Chanen, "Surfing the Text: The Digital Environment in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*," *European Journal of English Studies* 11, no. 2 (2007): 164, DOI: [10.1080/13825570701452755](https://doi.org/10.1080/13825570701452755).
- 10 John Bryant, *The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).
- 11 See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 47–66.
- 12 On BLM and social media, see, for example, Nikita Carney, "All Lives Matter, but so Does Race: Black Lives Matter and the Evolving Role of Social Media," *Humanity & Society* 40,

- no. 2 (2016), DOI: [10.1177/0160597616643868](https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597616643868); Rashawn Ray, Melissa Brown, and Wendy Laybourn, ed., “The Evolution of #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter: Social Movements, Big Data, and Race,” spec. issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 11 (2017); on Black Twitter, see, for example, André Brock, “From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012), DOI: [10.1080/08838151.2012.732147](https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.732147); Sharma Sanjay, “Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion,” *New Formations*, no. 78 (2013), DOI: [10.3898/NewF.78.02.2013](https://doi.org/10.3898/NewF.78.02.2013).
- 13 Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xii–xiii, 4.
- 14 Kishonna L. Gray, “Intersecting Oppressions and Online Communities: Examining the Experiences of Women of Color in Xbox Live,” *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 3 (2012): 426, DOI: [10.1080/1369118X.2011.642401](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.642401).
- 15 *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, dir. Ryan Coogler (New York: Marvel Studios, 2022).
- 16 Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 9. Browne makes explicit that she takes the expression from Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 250.
- 17 Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 3; Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Artificial Vision, White Space and Racial Surveillance Capitalism,” *AI & Society*, no. 36 (2021): 1296, DOI: [10.1007/s00146-020-01095-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-020-01095-8).
- 18 Imamu Amiri Baraka, “Technology & Ethos,” in *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze: Essays Since 1965* (New York: Random House, 1972), 157.
- 19 *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*.