them in a specifically transnational American context, where non-human animals, as Nyman argues, are "inseparable from Americanness" (17).

As the brief summary of the six case studies shows, *Equine Fictions* engages with an impressing breadth of materials, both in terms of cultural or national contexts and in terms of generic ones. Theoretically, the book is similarly characterized by breadth and diversity but Haraway's phrase "becoming with" is used in four of the six case studies, perhaps in its most developed form in the concluding chapter on *Horse Heaven,* and to some extent forms a theoretical through line. To a certain extent, the different readings of these diverse texts are clearly coherent, taking on related concerns of genre, of trauma and affect, as well as of nostalgia/memory/tradition within national frameworks. However, as a whole, the book comes across as a collection of loosely connected individual readings rather than as a tightly knit or evolving argument. This is understandable, given the fact that the book comprises pieces previously published separately, but it is nevertheless at times frustrating, given the clear potential that exists for developing such a sustained argument based on the readings performed. As for expectations of a challenge to anthropocentrism that the book's position within human-animal studies possibly raises, the promise is present but unfulfilled. Rather than being a shortcoming of *Equine Fictions* specifically, however, this points to the difficulty of the fields of literary and cultural studies, anthropocentric endeavors at the core, to find modes of analysis that can challenge the centrality of the human inner and outer world in transformative ways.

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John Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games & American Culture*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. 296 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4214-2870-3.

In *Gamer Nation: Video Games & American Culture*, John Wills sets out with a clear and, he argues, potentially ground-breaking thesis: namely that "America *is* a gamer nation" (3). Following in the footsteps of other influential studies with similar agendas of proving a specific commodity central to the recent development of the US, like Erik Schlosser's influential

Fast Food Nation (2001), Wills calls for a recognition of the role video games have played in shaping the nature of modern America. Over five chapters focusing on specific topics from the frontier and the Wild West, on to "Cold War Gaming," "9/11 Code" and the war on terror, Wills provides a meticulous and detailed survey of American games and American gaming from the middle of the twentieth-century up to and including present day. In doing so he points to a set of broader themes he believes to have shaped America as a "Gamer Nation." The book concludes with two additional chapters analyzing the *Grand Theft Auto* series and *Second Life* in the light of the lessons learned from the preceding five chapters.

Starting out with the thesis that the frontier stands as one of - if not indeed *the* - central trope of the first wave of video games, Wills introduces a largely convincing argument that "the act of 'frontiering' provided a core activity in early gameplay" (57). Similarly, Wills' argument that the Cold War and the war on terror would come to strongly influence gaming in the US as elsewhere is hardly to be denied. Overall, Wills presents a strong, insightful and thorough argument of the manner in which American ideals and ideology have shaped video gaming, and vice versa. In setting out to prove this thesis, Wills is, however, on occasion so eager to convince his readers that he is at risk of overplaying an otherwise strong hand. As a media and a form of entertainment that was primarily largely developed and marketed in the US, Wills is correct to identify video gaming as initially an American phenomenon strongly marked by American cultural preferences and, to some extent at least, American history. The closer we get to the present day of video gaming, which is an altogether far more global phenomenon, Wills' continued insistence on the specific American nature of gaming becomes a bit more strained.

"America is a nation of video gamers" (3), Wills points out, far more so than it is a nation of NFL fans, the televised games of which only draws on average of 17 million viewers. In contrast, 185 million Americans play video games. While these numbers are impressive, they are also somewhat misleading when they are not viewed in comparison to other "Gamer Nations," at least if the argument is that the US particularly gamified in comparison to other nations. What are the equivalent numbers, for instance, for Japan or Korea, nations in which a significant portion of the population also play video games, many of them excessively so? Similarly, when analyzing specific games, Wills is intent on seeing only what he identifies as peculiarly American elements of games that are arguably shaped by a wider set

of (global) influence and histories. In his otherwise excellent analysis of Sid Meier's *Civilization* series, for instance, Wills is so set on reading the game as promoting "a binary version of American exceptionalism" (51) that other aspects of the series are either ignored or brushed off as token window-dressing to multiculturalism. Wills does intermittently nod to influences from outside the US, admitting that in certain periods "The Gamer Nation seemed more in love with an Italian plumber addicted to mushrooms, lethal warriors engaged in *Mortal Kombat*, and a blue hedgehog with sports sneakers than with the American cowboy" (76). Yet such acknowledgments of video gaming as a global rather than an American phenomenon are few and far between.

This is a pity in a book otherwise presenting a strong and compelling argument. The cherry-picking that Wills can at times be accused of partaking in is not really necessary seeing as there is such a large amount of games available in which American themes and ideologies are so strongly present, as Wills is indeed also more than capable of proving. Furthermore, Wills' broader analyses of American culture in the light of video gaming culture and technology are more than enough to carry the book forward. Wills' excellent reappraisal of Jean Baudrillard's reading of America as simulation in the light of video gaming, for instance, or the fact that games like the *Grand Theft Auto* series have meant that the "boundaries of gaming appeared breached, as people drove in Los Angeles while thinking of Los Santos" (189) - the make-believe version of Los Angeles in the game world - are entirely convincing as well as thought-provoking. *Gamer Nation: Video Games & American Culture* can be warmly recommended to any scholar with an interest in gaming culture, as to any cultural studies scholar with an interest in contemporary America.

As a literary and cultural scholar rather than a historian, I must in conclusion also note that the style and balance of the book at times did make me wonder about the disciplinary differences that American Studies is so often perceived to be split into. For while the careful and thorough survey of video game culture is useful, with especially the inclusions of earlier and more obscure games being particularly helpful, it is a pity that Wills does not spend more time close-reading specific games, simply because he is mostly very adept at it.

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