JUST TECH

FIELD REVIEW

Gaming Blockchain and the Asiatic Forms of Web3

By: Huan He

DISCO

He, Huan. "Gaming Blockchain and the Asiatic Forms of Web3." Just Tech. Social Science Research Council. December 6, 2023. DOI: https://doi.org/10.35650/JT.3064.d.2023.

ABSTRACT

This field review explores the phenomenon of crypto-games (digital games built on blockchain technologies) and new racialized forms of play-based labor. Through examining *Axie Infinity*, a crypto-game made in Vietnam and popular in the Philippines, I suggest that there is something "Asiatic" about Web3 technologies and cultures. While narratives of Web3 innovation often focus on an abstract idealization of decentralization, I situate these cultural discourses within the infrastructural decentralization at the heart of global digital networks. As the documentary *Play-to-Earn: NFT Gaming in the Philippines* will show, it is the *representational labor* of the Filipinx gamer that plays a central role in the expansion of blockchain.

In 1996, the world was introduced to the Japanese game worlds of *Tamagotchi* and *Pokémon*, two global franchises featuring digital pets that one could own, collect, and raise. Two decades later in the mid-2010s, the phenomenon of digital creature ownership remerged in a surprising, new popular form: NFTs, or nonfungible tokens. Games like *Axie Infinity* draw from a nostalgia for an earlier cute creature craze but with a twist: that through interacting with these digital pets one could learn about this new technological world known as "Web3" filled with elements like cryptocurrencies, blockchain, and decentralized technologies, and perhaps even make money from playing games. As *Pokémon*-meets-blockchain, *Axie Infinity* captured the attention of crypto-enthusiasts and gamers alike when it rose to popularity in the Philippines during the global Covid-19 pandemic. What might *Axie Infinity* reveal about the strange world of NFTs and blockchain? Do games like this show how there might be something uniquely "Asian" and game-like about Web3 technologies and cultures?

To start, a few definitions are in order. NFTs, or nonfungible tokens, are unique digital identifiers

recorded on blockchain technology and cannot be duplicated or subdivided.[1] While NFTs signal a value-driven desire for ownership and profit in the vast desert of digital reproducibility, its popular user-facing aesthetics and design recall the global take-over of "pocket monsters." NFTs can refer to any digital asset marked for token ownership. The slogan "Gotta Catch'em All"—initially referring to the quest of capturing all available Pokémon in the game world—finds renewed meaning in the age of blockchain. Nonfungible tokenization operates on a logic of digital asset collection, fueling the user desire to not only own one NFT but multiple, if not all. NFTs are what allow blockchain technology to demonstrate its everyday saturation and use, moving from the domain of technical expertise to the cultural realm of art and games. Even as the game logic promotes "catching" as many NFTs as possible, the reverse is also true of the user: These interfaces introduce, integrate, and "catch" more and more users into the widening networks of blockchain, allowing its technological and cultural imaginary to proliferate and move from technical obscurity closer to mainstream adoption.

Crypto-games are one cultural lens for understanding the digital narratives surrounding Web3…

Games have been central to the emergence and evolution of blockchain, so much so that Alesja Serada, Tanja Sihvonen, and J. Tuomas Harviainen (2021) have described this relation as cryptocurrency's "'genetic' relationship with games." Probing this deep-rooted connection between blockchain and games, I investigate the social life of blockchain through crypto-games, as they organize the worlds of people, digital systems, and financial processes. Crypto-games are one cultural lens for understanding the digital narratives surrounding Web3, defined by technology entrepreneur Patrick McCormick in a *New York Times* article as the "internet owned by the builders and users" (Roose 2022). From the perspective of investors such as McCormick, the social promise of Web3 as an egalitarian version of the internet is often completed abstracted (and often false), separating it from user realities. Who exactly are these users and builders, and what do the racial and geographic concentrations of blockchain's social infrastructure tell us about Web3 cultures more broadly?

There are many ways to approach this question, and like the internet itself, Web3 is quite heterogeneous and multiplicitous. The premise of this field review begins by asserting that there is something *Asian* about blockchain, from its user-facing designs to its geographic sites of production and adoption. In his research on global digital games, Christopher Patterson (2020, 27) has described videogames as "Asiatic" (even when they do not showcase overt racial representation or refer to specific Asian bodies), because they conjure various "Asian associations as new media products," where Asians are often producers, designers, and consumers. This demographic concentration has racial consequences in the dominant cultural perception of videogames. By arguing that video games are uniquely Asian, Patterson (2020, 27) suggests that the Asiatic form is less a static or innate quality of games but a mode of technological facilitation, in which "video games arrive as an Asiatic form inviting players of all backgrounds to participate in and adapt them into their own lives." If blockchain has a genetic relationship to games, then we might consider its DNA to be Asiatic in terms of its popular representation as well as where it circulates and is adopted. While Web3 technologies might be opaque to nonspecialists, its popular

discourse and portrayals are quite familiar, revealing how Web3 expansion echo longer histories and contexts of technological innovation. By exploring the Asiatic forms of crypto-games like *Axie Infinity*, which has been immensely popular in the Philippines, I will show how Web3 technologies rely on new forms of racialized labor, represented and facilitated by Asian gamers. While Web3 enthusiasts often promote blockchain as representing the next era of the internet, an iteration of the same-old dream of technological progress, it is the *representational labor* of the Filipinx gamer that plays a central role in the expansion of blockchain. Attuning to what or who takes on the "face" of Web3 technologies, I show how Web3 expansion depends on the appearance of new forms of racialized labor, expressed as play.

Cultures of Blockchain

Web3 technologies are often technically unclear and at times can be inaccessible for outsiders. In short, Web3 refers to new digital artifacts that are built on blockchain, a decentralized technology that operates as a shared, immutable ledger for recording activity and transactions. For Web3 users and participants, a decentralized distribution of data challenges its centralization by a single entity, whether it be a person, company, or governmental body. Following the dominant evolutionary narrative of the internet, Web 1.0 primarily focused on a static "read-only" version of the internet, Web 2.0. privileged social interactivity via the dynamic user ability to "read-and-write," while Web 3.0. emphasized decentralized ownership as internet where one can "read-write-own." In its idealized vision, Web3 promises user empowerment in the form of being able to own one's own data for the sake of individual and collective autonomy on the internet. While its prophetic dream is stained by multiple ideologies with ties to subcultures, such as cyberlibertarianism,[2] cypherpunks, and anarcho-capitalists (Swartz 2018), the unifying wish of an individual unshackled from centralized data ownership and platform capitalism forms the ground for a user-owned Web3. More than just the technical manifestation of ideologies, their implementation under Web3 technologies often revives and re-innovates techno-capitalism in new forms. For instance, Larisa Yarovaya and Brian Lucey (2018) describe the making of "Crypto Utopias" in Puerto Rico as "crypto-colonialism," in which the wealthy bitcoin investors can enact a world-building fantasy of a blockchain-run society that is made possible by evacuating the economic and social realities of a place.

Culture functions as the interface by which new technologies are embedded within social reality, and its digital forms offer a window into the stakes of techno-social innovation. Perhaps because Web3 technologies are often viewed as technically difficult or distancing, they have generated a plethora of cultural forms that collectively try to make sense of blockchain's relevance or applicability in everyday digital culture. These user-facing designs help to assimilate the computationally opaque, demonstrating blockchain's presumed viability as NFT art (as a mode of digital asset ownership), cryptocurrency (as a mode of digital money and exchange), or games (as a mode of user engagement).[3] While these familiar forms abound, they are not necessarily convincing to the wider public, as they have been subject to ridicule (such as *Saturday Night Live*'s parodying of cryptocurrency and NFT jargon in an explainer rap video calling it "real-life monopoly money" [Harlow, Davidson, Redd 2021]) or the spectacle of financial scheming (such as the public bankruptcy and collapse of crypto-exchange FTX). Web3 reveals much about the shared and contested "blockchain dreams" emerging from speculative energies across different regions and subcultures (Swartz 2017). Lana Swartz (2022, 1696) has contended that crypto and

blockchain contain at their core an ethos of "scamminess" that seems to pervade how its perceived, not necessarily as a set of individual behavior or schemes but as a distributed, networked effort with asymmetrical effects. By scamminess, Swartz (2022, 1705) draws our attention to the discourse used to legitimate and delegitimate certain forms of economic and extractive activity under late capitalism.

As such, what exactly does a scam mean when we consider centuries of extractive capitalism and colonialism? This question is not meant to suggest that life under capitalism is really all a scam (although one could make this argument!) but to think about the longer histories of value-creation that depended on the exploitation of marginalized peoples in uneven conditions of precarity. The narrative force of speculation under techno-capitalism is, as Aimee Bahng (2018, 2) insightfully puts it, a "god trick to get people to mistake prophecy for truth, notional figure for value, or futurity for the future."[4] In opposition to an era of centralized institutions and platforms, blockchain dreams perpetuate this speculative force by drawing on a narrative of user precarity that is built on furthering the precarity of others, usually those who have lived through histories of capitalist and colonialist exploitation. Thus, the "god trick" of blockchain might be the abstraction of decentralization as a core principle of Web3 innovation, one that relies on and hides the infrastructural decentralization at the heart of global digital network expansion.

Asian Figures of Web3

Within techno-capitalism, the Asian figure is often a laborer, whose hands and body become the vessel by which financial value is generated. Asian laborers are central to the operation of digital capitalism, from the microelectronic workers in Taiwan to the Filipinx content moderator. This infrastructural position remains an operative part of digital capitalism's tentacular expansion. By examining racialized representation within blockchain's visual cultures, we might understand that these figurations are not merely "epiphenomenal symptoms" of racial capitalism in digital culture but "as a means of exposing the self-legitimating how of those regimes' self-perpetuation," as Tara Fickle (2021) suggests. Obscured in different ways, Asian labor performs a naturalizing, and thereby legitimizing, function that contributes to the speculative fiction of Web3 maintenance and proliferation.

> *These digital trading cards portray a mythological Asian character in maker or creator roles, reflecting how "Asian North Americans are uncomfortably associated with capital."*

For example, *Spell of Genesis*, touted as the first blockchain-based mobile game, takes place in a narrative world called Askian, a fantasy realm that invokes the distorted name "Asian." Built on the Ethereum, Counterparty, and Klayton blockchain and resembling the style of *Magic: The Gathering*, *Spell of Genesis* is a trading card game world animating blockchain history and concepts. In addition to the ability to trade and collect cards, the crypto-game allows players to use point-and-shoot arcade game mechanics (similar to *Space Invader*) to accrue in-game currency. While the characters of Askian draw from various mythologies (including medieval wizards, vampires, goblins, druids, and dragons), the cards associated with currency creation and circulation suggest an Asiatic quality to them. These digital

trading cards portray a mythological Asian character in maker or creator roles, reflecting how "Asian North Americans are uncomfortably associated with capital" (Day 2016, 3).[5]

A look at two trading cards from *Spells of Genesis* illustrates this point. One card is titled "The Coin Maker," featuring an Asian-appearing craftsman of Askian minting coins. Wielding a hammer, the Coin Maker faces a golden luminescent coin, invoking the mystical power of imbuing metal with value. Possessing "special powers" that mark the craftsman as exceptional compared to other playable cards, the Coin Maker is a character in the game world responsible for the maintenance and circulation of its financial infrastructure. Functioning as an intermediary between the digital currency of the diegetic world and the blockchain technology that support the operation of *Spells of Genesis*, the Coin Maker's racial appearance suggests how Asian racialization is closely associated with the very platform that infrastructurally and financially upholds the game itself, both diegetic and non-diegetic. Insofar as "everyone knows the coin maker" (according to the card description), the trading card demonstrates how the Asian figure is hidden in plain sight, entangled with operations of currency minting writ large.

Drawing from blockchain lore, the trading card "Satoshi Creator of Blockchain" depicts the Japanese pseudonymous origins of blockchain. Largely credited as the unverified "inventor" of Bitcoin, Satoshi Nakamoto published a technical white paper in 2008 titled "Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System," where the author outlines the operational logics, limitations, and possibilities of a decentralized money system. *Spells of Genesis*'s representation of "Satoshi Creator of Blockchain" figuratively represents the Orientalized pseudonymous nature of Nakamoto as a hooded mystic, crafting and creating blocks labeled as Bitcoin. Rendering Satoshi as a god-like character, the card personifies the creation of blockchain through an Asiatic figure, whose role is indistinguishable from the game's technical infrastructure. In the realm of blockchain, Asian mysticism is aligned with world-creation.

These digital trading cards suggest that it is an Asian figure or presence that is responsible for the technological and financial infrastructure, where the ubiquitous acknowledgement of its racial presence is also why they remain peripherally situated—"no one has seen him, but everyone knows about him." Marked as visible invisible figures, the "Coin Maker" and the "mysterious Satoshi" locate the Asiatic less as a racial character. Instead, the Asiatic names an underlying structuring presence that establishes the diegetic possibilities of blockchain games in the first instance, the unseen and therefore taken for granted operations. The Asian racialization of the platform itself—the "mysterious Satoshi who is at the origin of the Blockchain"—suggests how an understanding of blockchain's racial dimensions must extend into thinking about its infrastructural logics, beyond the representational schema of surface meaning. The most Asian thing about blockchain, in the end, might be how the technical mystique of its operation circulates and expands across global digital infrastructures, giving figural form to what blockchain *is* and *does*.

Image of "The Coin Maker" from Spells of Genesis blockchain trading card game.

Image of "Satoshi Creator of Blockchain" from Spells of Genesis.

Since *Spells of Genesis* and the early wave of crypto-games, games have continued to be a popular

cultural form of Web3 technologies. These games often draw from more casual, flexible styles of play, such as trading card games, player-versus-player role-playing games, digital pet games, and more. These games often do not focus on world-building in terms of story, character, or narrative but rather speak to the gamification of economic activity that has been characteristic of late capitalism's gig economy. Ian Bogost (2015, 67) has described gamification as "bullshit," in the sense that the gaming rhetoric, design, and forms (leaderboards, badges, etc.) have become a value-generating mechanism for business and customer experience models, serving as an entrepreneurial "party trick" that is more about extraction than about substance. In other words, it is all the styles and procedures of games without the games themselves, reduced to a self-serving gimmick. While crypto-games share some of the features of gamification, they are also centrally games that train players to engage with in-game currency, and thus cryptocurrency, in ways that impact the valuation of blockchain technologies through interactivity.

Axie Infinity and the Representational Labor of the Filipinx Gamer

While it might be easy and accurate to call certain Web3 forms "scammy" or even "bullshit," who does the *work* of representing the viability of these new technologies, allowing blockchain dreams to become reality? After all, scams often operate on a deferral logic, where, in its distributed networked form, vulnerability or precarity is shifted far away. A look at one of the most popular crypto-games, *Axie Infinity*, shows how the global infrastructure of crypto-gaming builds from existing imperial networks that draw from both familiar and new forms of Asian play-based labor.

Axie Infinity is a cryptocurrency game that features a world of cute digital monsters akin to *Pokémon* and *Tamagotchi*. Developed by the Vietnamese company Sky Mavis, *Axie Infinity* allows players to raise, collect, battle, and trade their virtual pets, "Axies," for fun and profit, since each Axie also functions as a nonfungible token on the Ethereum blockchain. Players can accrue "Smooth Love Potions" (SLP) as in-game currency that has a direct exchange rate with the US dollar and other fiat money through its value as digital money. Listed on DappRadar (the largest Web3 decentralized app platform) as the game with the highest value of in-game assets at over $750 million, *Axie Infinity* took both the gaming industry and the blockchain industry by storm in demonstrating the popularity and profit of play-to-earn casual gaming utilizing cryptocurrency. During the height of the NFT craze in 2021 and following the success of *Axie Infinity*, Andrew Wilson, CEO of Electronic Arts, cautiously praised blockchain gaming as "an important part of the future of our industry" (Hayward 2021).

> *What might it mean to think of distributed networks…as not simply a deviation from the centralized power of big tech and platform capitalism but as an extension of digital capitalism's imperial expanse that has always depended on peoples and places far away and out of sight?*

Axie Infinity exemplifies how Web3 technologies have thrived in Asia, to the point where we might say that there seems to be something *Asian* about blockchain on a global scale. By "something Asian," I refer to a conflation of race and place that has discursively and materially co-constructed blockchain

imaginaries and practices, evident both on the level of representation (such as *Spells of Genesis*) and on the level of infrastructure.[6] According to a report by blockchain analytics firm Chainalysis (2022), Vietnam and the Philippines lead the Global Crypto Adoption Index, followed by Ukraine, India, and the United States. Adoption indexes serve as reality-constructing models, because they promise on-the-ground evidence for predicting future growth, a metric that can substantiate the viability of new technological networks. As Donald MacKenzie (2006) has argued in *An Engine, Not a Camera*, these indexes are not simply descriptive or passive representations (camera) but rather have performative effects (engines) on the sustenance and expansion of financial markets. The appearance of Vietnam and the Philippines at the top of the Adoption Index invites the question of why Southeast Asia plays a significant role in Web3. We might also investigate why discourses of decentralization have depended on the active participation of peripheral sites of US-centered Silicon Valley, including former locations of US occupation such as the Philippines. What might it mean to think of distributed networks—the technological form characteristic of Web3—as not simply a deviation from the centralized power of big tech and platform capitalism but as an extension of digital capitalism's imperial expanse that has always depended on peoples and places far away and out of sight?

Why did *Axie Infinity* become so successful? Why was the game celebrated as a proof-of-concept for the union between cryptocurrency and videogames? Tech journalism played a role in skyrocketing *Axie Infinity*'s popularity during the global Covid-19 pandemic. Leah Callon-Butler, a CoinDesk writer who reports on cryptocurrency and blockchain technology news, wrote an article in August 2020 titled "The NFT Game That Makes Cents for Filipinos During COVID." After publication, interest in the NFT game spiked, according to Sky Mavis's data presented in the short documentary written by Callon-Butler. Titled *Play-To-Earn: NFT Gaming in the Philippines* (Smale 2021), the film is narrated from Callon-Butler's point of view as she walks the boarded-up streets of Cabanatuan City.

Play-To-Earn resembles the visual style of philanthropic-oriented films about a "developing" country, made from the anthropologic point-of-view of a Western viewer. Sweeping shots of the city, Jollibee fast-food restaurants, closed street stalls, and locals sitting in empty small shops establish the setting of pandemic lockdown. Against the backdrop of Covid containment measures, the videogame is situated as a vehicle of "escape," both from the physical conditions of lockdown as well as the dire economic reality of the pandemic. The documentary features the commentary of local players of all ages and backgrounds—including a recent college graduate, an elderly shopkeeper couple aged 65 and 75, and a mom. They all narrate their own relationship to the game, first in terms of income and second in the player-experience of actually enjoying the game.

Axie Infinity has a wide appeal in part because it is a cute, mobile game—two qualities that are designed to facilitate player engagement. Scholars of cute studies have suggested that cuteness is a stylization of difference and power, encountered as a commodity (Ngai 2012). *Kawaii*, or the Japanese culture of cuteness reflected in various global franchises such as *Pokémon* and *Hello Kitty* (see Yano 2013), represents the denationalization of Japaneseness through various global localization efforts, transforming these cute objects into global icons that are "culturally odorless."[7] Especially since blockchain as a technical concept is quite difficult to grasp for nonspecialists, an aesthetics of cuteness renders these games and their worlds as adorable, nonthreatening, and collectible—a way to facilitate blockchain's

strategic expansion via adoption.

Screenshot from Axie Infinity: Origins trailer.

For instance, Howard, 22, states that for him, "it looks easy because there's a cute Axie, innocent looking Axie" (Smale 2021). Commenting on the cute aesthetics of the digital monsters, Howard links the visual style of the game to its presumed simplicity. Cuteness serves as an interface for a hesitant player, increasing the likelihood of player participation, because it looks fun, enticing, and overall inviting. With the introduction of other crypto-games like *CryptoKitties*, *Blockchain Cuties*, *Crypto Unicorns*, I would argue that cuteness might be the prevailing aesthetic that facilitates technical *adoption*. Howard's comments as a player confirm for Anil Lulla, COO of Delphi Digital (the blockchain firm that invested in *Axie Infinity*), the digital game's ability to introduce new players into the world of blockchain writ large:

> What's more is that the community is so strong and most Axie players aren't even coming from crypto. The attraction of play-to-earn gaming is getting people to learn about crypto that never really would have thought about it otherwise. For us, we really believe that this is the key to unlocking crypto adoption at scale. (Smale 2021)

Lulla suggests that play-to-earn games like *Axie Infinity* are window dressing for cryptocurrency, an easy-to-play (and earn) model that embeds basic knowledge about digital money and blockchain when converting in-game tokens (Smooth Love Potions) into Ether (the native token for Ethereum) and finally into "real" money. In *Axie Infinity*, cuteness functions as a social style, integrating players into both the diegetic world of the game as well as the technology in which it is built on.

These new forms of play-to-earn gaming remake older forms of digital "gold farming," popular in massive multiplayer online games such as *World of Warcraft* and *Lineage II*. Scholars such as Lisa Nakamura

(2009), Tara Fickle (2019), Nick Yee (2014), and Constance Steinkeuhler (2006) have discussed how these MMORPGs allowed for a class of players to form within the user-economy referred to as "gold farmers," who were often debased and racialized as Chinese, as many of them were players from China. Gold farming refers to a repetitive style of play-based labor involving leveling up accounts to sell or harvesting in-game money in exchange for real-world profit. Viewed as an invasive, ingenuine form of virtual play that supposedly "cheapened" the game experience overall, "gold farming" allowed racial meaning to be embedded within a particular style of play. As shown in user-generated machinima such as the viral "Ni Hao (A Gold Farmers Story) (Nyhm 2007)," these profit-driven forms of playing the game were racially coded as "Chinese." The popularity of *Axie Infinity* as a vehicle for earning money through a digital game revived conversations about blockchain games as, according to Ge Yin (2021), an updated version of gold farming.

While the presence of Chinese gold farmers in *World of Warcraft* represented a type of *yellow peril*[8] that cheapened the gaming experience, the Filipinx players of *Axie Infinity* signal a *promise* of blockchain gaming that could make play profitable. If older versions of gold farming hid the racial identity of player-workers behind a style of play, then these newer forms of playing for profit reveals the faces of the players quite intentionally and explicitly. In *Play-to-Earn*, the human face of Filipinx players strategically demonstrates how the pleasures of play go hand in hand with the powers of profit, enshrining crypto-games like *Axie Infinity* as a social good rather than a threat. They exhibit a kind of representational labor through an affective portrayal of crypto-games as "easy" and "fun," bolstering the viability of play-to-earn gaming on blockchain. These players have many faces: different ages and genders and noticeably diverging from the stereotypical young male adult or teenage gamer. According to the *Play-to-Earn* documentary (Smale 2021), these diverse players represent an idealized game space that one enters through the act of crypto-adoption. Their nontypical profile bolsters the egalitarian promise of Web3—that anyone can stand to gain from the possibilities afforded by blockchain games. Together, the Filipinx gamers present an opportunity for Web3 entrepreneurs, such as Gabby Dizon, cofounder of a crypto-gaming guild called Yield Guide Games. In *Play-to-Earn*, Dizon states: "What's so exciting about Yield Guild is that Filipinos have always been really good at playing games, but they've never really made anything from them" (Smale 2021). Configured as an untapped labor reserve (presumed to be innately gifted as gamers), Filipinx players facilitate the dream of Web3 technologies, situating crypto-gaming as a smooth continuation of a perceived cultural skill.

Representations of Navajo women as "innately" acclimated for microchip work served as a cultural resource for narrating the social impact of the microchip in a positive, beneficial light.

The faces of racialized peoples have historically served technology research firms to foreground development as benefactory rather than extractive. Even in the early years of Silicon Valley, when the new technology research hub experimented with new labor forces, influential microchip company Fairchild Semiconductor promoted the role of Navajo women in corporate brochures as model computer chip assembly workers. However, as Lisa Nakamura (2014) has argued, Fairchild Semiconductor

underpaid the Navajo women workers by describing their labor as creative, agential labor—a "labor of love"—rather than undercompensated, flexible labor, drawing from assumptions that Navajo women were naturally suited to making microchips because of the dexterity involved in the tradition of Indigenous textile arts. Representations of Navajo women as "innately" acclimated for microchip work served as a cultural resource for narrating the social impact of the microchip in a positive, beneficial light. In the postcolonial context of the Philippines, described by Robyn Malagit Rodriguez (2010, x) as a "labor brokerage state," the faces of Filipinx gamers are an extension of this representational labor. As gamers, however they showcase less a "labor of love" and more a "labor of fun," as ambassadors to an unfamiliar world of Web3 gaming. Part of *Play-to-Earn*'s appeal rests on the belief that the Philippines is often not associated with the newest trends in digital innovation. Because this Web3 context is compounded with ideas of Filipinx peoples as age-old gifted gamers, the representation of these *Axie* players as model crypto-gamers sutures perceptions of the old with the new, the cultural with the technological, and the local with the global.

Imperial Digital Networks

The location of the Philippines is no accident for this emerging technology discourse. Scholars of digital technology and imperialism have shown how the Philippines has been integral to the maintenance of digital technologies and spaces due to its simultaneous distance from and proximity to the United States. Sarah Roberts (2019), Jan M. Padios (2018), and Alden Sajor Marte-Wood and Stephanie Dimatulac Santos (2021) have demonstrated how the geographic location of the Philippines allows outsourced labor and operations to be hidden from sight while the cultural proximity of Filipinx peoples to American culture make them ideal laborers within a global infrastructure of information technology. For instance, Filipinx workers are content moderators for mainstream social media platforms (see (Roberts 2019; Marte-Wood and Santos 2021) as well as phone operators for globally networked call centers in the Philippines (see Padios 2018). After the Spanish-American War concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1898, the Philippines was ceded to the United States, marking a dissipating Spanish Empire and the rise of US imperialism in the Pacific Ocean. The ideology of American exceptionalism, which reinvents imperial and colonial rule through the fiction of benevolence, found its test case in the Philippines (among the other US imperial territories Puerto Rico and Guam that were previously part of the Spanish Empire). Believing in the rehabilitating possibilities of assimilation, the trick of US empire was to "sublim[ate] conquest into liberation" through the logic of race (Kramer 2006, 2). Filipinx peoples were constructed as racial others in order to assimilate them into modernity, reinforcing the United States as a body politic of racial cohesion and uplift (Bolton 2023). Race enabled a social ordering, linking domestic and foreign concerns, as US empire attempted to reconcile its image as global democratic leader with its imperial network of control.

The Philippines and its history have been central to US imperial modernity, where its distance and proximity allowed the postcolonial nation to be a key node within global digital networks. Padios (2018, 14) has argued that a key export of the Philippines is "Filipino/American relatability," defined as "the capacity of Filipinos/the Philippines to become like Americans/America." Idealizing Filipinx peoples as "naturally suited for affective, emotional, and relational labor" (Padios 2018, 22) is a strategy of hiding extraction, a way to integrate Global South labor into technology networks in service of the Global North.

Lilly Irani (2015) has incisively argued that this occlusion of labor is not just a side effect of digital industries but the barometer for how "innovation" in technology is defined, evaluated, and rewarded in the form of profit and investment. This central logic prizes how well technology companies can hide the human dimensions of its operations in order to delineate and define its contributions as a result of corporate-led and research-led "innovation." In other words, Irani shows how innovation itself is an ultimate form of abstraction, an extraction of human labor coded into the profit-driven formula of the technologically "new."

The ability for these new forms of digital finance to experiment and flourish, through the hands of Filipinx gamers, reflects a similar logic of emigration-based labor that generate remittances.

As the latest version of the "new," blockchain games rely on a confluence of financial valuation (speculation) and extraction (labor) that is not necessarily about hiding human work but refashioning it as play. Benefiting from the ubiquitous ownership of smartphones and the popularity of mobile gaming, crypto-gaming in the Philippines also extends histories of remittances that have been prominent features of the nation's economy, perhaps a central reason that games like *Axie Infinity* have spread virally especially during the global pandemic lockdown. As a neoliberal strategy for the Philippine state, remittances regulate global capital flows back into the national economy, while also facilitating a sense of citizenship for the overseas Filipinx worker. Through state-sanctioned discourse, remittances consolidate a sense of national obligation to the Philippines *through* fulfilling the flexible labor demands of global capitalist enterprise transnationally. Unlike other countries in Asia like China, which enacted a strict cryptocurrency ban in 2021, the Philippines currently has no proposed plan to ban digital money, according to Felipe Medalla, governor of the Philippines' central bank (Ortiz 2022). The ability for these new forms of digital finance to experiment and flourish, through the hands of Filipinx gamers, reflects a similar logic of emigration-based labor that generate remittances. As Ge Yin (2021) states, "a virtual economy like *Axie* allows some of them to make money without leaving their families." Perhaps this is why the world of *Axie Infinity* refers to itself as a "Digital Nation," a virtual space that capitalizes on the globality of digital finance participation and exchange while also remaining regionally, or locally, focused. Akin to fiat remittances, cryptocurrency accrued through games like *Axie Infinity* bolster the viability of a techno-enterprise through the homegrown "hero" of the Filipinx gamer.[9]

Conclusion

While cryptocurrencies can be used to facilitate remittances because of faster transaction speeds and low fees (the Philippines government only recently imposed tax regulations on cryptocurrency), the participation of *Axie* gamers have the added effect of signaling the promise of blockchain through gaming as "model" players. Yet, those who represent this promise also take on the burden of its accompanying precarity, as crypto-gaming involves financial investment, and in some cases, debt. In the case of *Axie Infinity*, large pseudo-employment agencies emerged to allow more players the opportunity to assist in the initial purchase of three NFTs to begin earning in-game currency, which can range from $100 to

$1,000 dollars to start gameplay (Ingram and Abbruzzese 2022). These organizations consist of a small group of "managers" who lend cryptocurrency to new players, called "scholars," in exchange for a sizable portion of their game-based profits.[10] Resembling a Ponzi scheme, these organizations represent how predatory, risk-prone environments are the underbelly of new modes of profit-making. In the context of crypto-games, the promises and the precarity of playing-to-earn are negotiated through the multilayered networks of play, blurring the lines between workers and users, players and playmakers. Especially after *Axie Infinity* became the target of the largest cryptocurrency theft, resulting in hackers stealing over $600 million worth of assets on the Ethereum blockchain (not to mention the overall depression of the cryptocurrency market), the value of in-game currency depreciated immensely compared to its peak in speculation hype. The players bear the brunt of this fluctuation, revealing how the promises and precarities of play are intimately intertwined in play-to-earn gaming.

The volatility of cryptocurrency's value has led some commentors to equating digital money as a type of "gambling," resulting in certain governments (such as the United Kingdom's) calling for consumer regulation. In the nineteenth century, the rhetoric of gambling served as a vehicle during Chinese exclusion debates to "successfully rewrite Chinese labor from economic virtue to racial vice" (Fickle 2019, 38). Games of chance provided the cultural language for Americans to rehearse anxieties about racialized work, most notably regarding "cheap" Chinese labor. In this sense, Fickle (Fickle 2019, 38) has argued that gambling and its associated discourse has played a foundational role in the creation of a player workforce. Reviving conversations about gambling, the speculative chance involved in crypto draws from an inverse logic, in which the crypto-gamer highlights blockchain dreams as coextensive not with vice but racial uplift, not corrosive but inspirational.

The futures of Web3 and crypto-games are largely unknown and continuously unfolding. Blockchain technologies are often dismissed as puzzling to nonenthusiasts, yet their cultural forms are quite familiar. By looking at one of these forms, games, I have argued that there is an Asiatic character to Web3 that facilitates its expansion and extraction. As critical scholarship on the digital has taught us, what is touted as "innovation" often refashions older arrangements within technical systems. While crypto-games are often branded as a "new" form of play-to-earn gaming, this gaming phenomenon extends a longer history of affective and play-based labor distributed along the axes of race, identity, and nation. Drawing from the participatory communities of older games (*Tamagotchi*, *Pokémon*, and more), the cuteness of blockchain gaming helps to assimilate users into Web3 worlds. Crypto-games shape the imaginary and valuation of blockchain technologies, and its players are also Web3 laborers. They are part of the ecosystem of blockchain alongside its miners, investors, and research innovators. Web3 is largely a representational enterprise (propped up by user-facing designs like NFT art and crypto-games), and much of this representational labor relies on the recruitment of racialized gamers into the metaverse of "digital nations," legitimating the speculative engine of Web3 technologies.

Acknowledgements

This field review has benefited greatly from insights by Tara Fickle and Lisa Nakamura. I also thank my friends and colleagues at the University of Michigan's Digital Studies Institute for helping me sort through fun, weird, and new ideas, many of which formed the core of this piece.

Recommended Readings

Fickle, Tara. 2019. *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities.* New York, NY: NYU Press.

Golumbia, David. 2016. *The Politics of Bitcoin: Software as Right-Wing Extremism.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Nakamura, Lisa. 2009. "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26 (2): 128–144. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030902860252.

Padios, Jan M. 2018. *A Nation on the Line: Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Swartz, Lana. 2018. "What Was Bitcoin, What Will It Be? The Techno-economic Imaginaries of a New Money Technology." *Cultural Studies* 32 (4): 623–650. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2017.1416420.

References

Bahng, Aimee. 2017. *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bogost, Ian. 2015. "Why Gamification is Bullshit." In *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*, edited by Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Bolton, Sony Coráñez. 2023. *Crip Colony: Mestizaje, US Imperialism, and the Queer Politics of Disability in the Philippines.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Callon-Butler, Leah. 2020. "The NFT Game That Makes Cents for Filipinos During COVID." *CoinDesk*. August 26, 2020. https://www.coindesk.com/markets/2020/08/26/the-nft-game-that-makes-cents-for-filipinos-during-covid/.

Chainalysis. "The 2022 Global Crypto Adoption Index: Emerging Markets Lead in Grassroots Adoption, China Remains Active Despite Ban, and Crypto Fundamentals Appear Healthy." Chainalysis. September 14, 2022. https://www.chainalysis.com/blog/2022-global-crypto-adoption-index/.

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. 2005. *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Day, Iyko. 2016. *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capital*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Fickle, Tara. 2019. *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities.* New York: NYU Press.

———. 2021. “Made in China: Gold Farming as Alternative History of Esports.” *ROMChip: A Journal of Game Histories* 3, no. 1 (July). https://romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/132.

Golumbia, David. 2016. *The Politics of Bitcoin: Software as Right-Wing Extremism.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Harlow, Jack, Pete Davidson, and Chris Redd, performers. 2021. “NFTs.” *Saturday Night Live*. March 28, 2021. YouTube video, 3:24. https://youtu.be/mrNOYudaMAc?si=fpe0WNX0p1iYGFdp.

Hayward, Andrew. 2021. “Electronic Arts CEO: NFTs a Key Part of the Future of Gaming Industry.” *GG* (blog), Decrypt. November 4, 2021. https://decrypt.co/85263/electronic-arts-ceo-nfts-future-gaming-industry.

Ingram, David, and Jason Abbruzzese. 2022. “Hackers steal more than $600 million from maker of Axie Infinity.” *NBC News*. March 29, 2022. https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/hackers-steal-600-million-maker-axie-infinity-rcna22031.

Irani, Lilly. 2015. “Difference and Dependence among Digital Workers: The Case of Amazon Mechanical Turk.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114 (1): 225–234. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2831665.

Iwabuchi, Koichi. 2002. *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kramer, Paul A. 2006. *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

Lye, Colleen. 2004. *America’s Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945*.Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

MacKenzie¸ Donald. 2006. *An Engine, Not a Camera*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Marte-Wood, Alden Sajor, and Stephanie Dimatulac Santos. 2021. “Circuits of Care: Filipino Content Moderation and American Infostructures of Feeling.” *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 7, no. 2 (Fall): 101–127. https://doi.org/10.1353/vrg.2021.0007.

Montfort, Nick, and Ian Bogost. 2009. *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Nakamura, Lisa. 2009. “Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26 (2): 128–144.

https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030902860252.

———. 2014. “Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronics Manufacture.” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (December): 919–941. https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2014.0070.

Ngai, Sianne. 2015. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nyhm. 2007. “Ni Hao (A Gold Farmers Story).”August 22, 2007. YouTube video, 3:39. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dkkf5NEIo0.

Ongweso, Jr., Edward. 2022. “The Metaverse Has Bosses Too. Meet the ‘Managers’ of Axie Infinity.” *VICE*. April 4, 2022. https://www.vice.com/en/article/88g3ag/the-metaverse-has-bosses-too-meet-the-managers-of-axie-infinity.

Ortiz, Jenny. 2022. “Philippine central bank governor says no plan to ban crypto,” *forkast,* July 22, 2022. https://forkast.news/philippine-central-bank-governor-no-to-ban-crypto/.

Padios, Jan M. 2018. *A Nation on the Line: Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Patterson, Christopher. 2020. *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games.* New York, NY: NYU Press.

Roberts, Sarah. 2019. *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Rodriguez, Robyn Malagit. 2010. *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Roose, Kevin. 2022. “The Latecomer’s Guide to Crypto.” *New York Times*, March 18, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/03/18/technology/web3-definition-internet.html#:~:text=The%20term%20has%20been%20around,users%2C%20orchestrated%20with%20tokens.%E2%80%9D.

Serada, Alesja, Tanja Sihvonen, and J. Tuomas Harviainen. 2021. “*CryptoKitties* and the New Ludic Economy: How Blockchain Introduces Value, Ownership, and Scarcity in Digital Gaming.” *Games and Culture* 16 (4): 457–480. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019898305.

Smale, Nathan, dir. 2021. *Play-To-Earn: NFT Gaming in the Philippines*. May 13, 2021. YouTube video, 18:09. https://youtu.be/Yo-BrASMHU4?si=e40v70GDfo9FQ7Q7.

Steinkuehler, Constance. 2006. “The Mangle of Play.” *Games and Culture* 1 (3): 199–213. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412006290440.

Swartz, Lana. 2017. “Blockchain Dreams: Imagining Techno-economic Alternatives after Bitcoin.” In *Another Economy Is Possible: Culture and Economy in a Time of Crisis*, edited by M. Castells, 82–105. Cambridge: Polity Press.

———. 2018. “What Was Bitcoin, What Will It Be? The Techno-economic Imaginaries of a New Money Technology.” *Cultural Studies* 32 (4): 623–650. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2017.1416420.

———. 2022. “Theorizing the 2017 Blockchain ICO Bubble as a Network Scam.” *New Media & Society* 24 (7): 1695–1713. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221099224.

Tchen, John Kuo Wei, and Dylan Yeats. 2014. *Yellow Peril!: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*. New York: Verso.

Yano, Christine R. 2013. *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty’s Trek Across the Pacific*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Yarovaya, Larisa, and Brian Lucey. 2018. “Bitcoin Rich Kids in Puerto Rico: Crypto Utopia or Crypto-Colonialism?” *The Conversation*. February 14, 2018. https://theconversation.com/bitcoin-rich-kids-in-puerto-rico-crypto-utopia-or-crypto-colonialism-91527.

Yee, Nick. 2014. *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us—And How They Don’t.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Yin, Ge. 2021. “The 20 Years in Gold Farming: Games are the Trojan Horse through which Blockchain Break into the Traditional Finance World.” *TechFlow*. October 18, 2021. https://medium.com/@TechFlowPost/the-20-years-in-gold-farming-games-are-the-trojan-horse-through-which-blockchain-break-into-the-517df30f72ae.

Footnotes

1 While cryptocurrency and blockchain was introduced in 2008, scholars like Lana Swartz (2018) have traced a pre-history of Bitcoin to the 1990s cypherpunk and crypto-anarchist subcultures and the dream of "digital cash."

2 David Golumbia (2016) provides an in-depth examination of the influence of cyberliberatianism and far-right ideologies.

3 Other versions of Web3 technologies include decentralized autonomous organization (DAO), decentralized storage, decentralized applications, and others.

4 Here, Aimee Bahng is referencing Donna Haraway's idea of the "god trick," referring to how one particular worldview or episteme (such as a world governed by the value of a dollar) is translated to be singular or universal.

5 Colleen Lye's (2005) arguments about the "Asiatic racial form" are also foundational for understanding how the Asian figure personifies both the "positive" and "negative" tropes of economic efficiency, evidence in popular understandings of the "model minority" or "yellow peril."

6 For more on how the cultural imagining of the early internet as cyberspace was rendered Asiatic, see Chun 2006, chap.4.

7 Koichi Iwabuchi (2002, 27) uses the term "cultural odor" to describe how "cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated positively with a particular product in the consumption process."

8 For a historical examination of anti-Asian "yellow peril" fear more broadly, see Tchen and Yeats 2014.

9 Here, I am referencing national ideological discourse in the Philippines that have framed the Overseas Filipinx Worker as a "hero" (Rodriguez 2010).

10 Edward Ongweso, Jr. (2022) has investigated this global phenomenon of crypto-gaming enterprises in the form of player "scholarships."