Aditya Deshbandhu, **The 21st Century in 100 Games**, London, UK: Routledge India, 2024, 220 pp., $46.99 (paperback).

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As a casual gamer myself, I was excited to pick up **The 21st Century in 100 Games** by Aditya Deshbandhu to see which games he chose to describe the age we live in. What I read was an insightful exploration of the contemporary world through the lens of 100 video games announced, launched, and played since the turn of the century. Dr. Deshbandhu adopts a tri-pronged perspective—reviewer, academic, and industry observer—to study games as ludo-narratological artifacts and situates them in a societal context, examining their impact on players, reviewers, the gaming community, and the larger gaming industry. This book is essential for readers interested in video games, new media, digital cultures, cultural studies, communication and media studies, creative industries, and media history, providing a comprehensive understanding of video games as sociocultural artifacts and their impact on contemporary society.
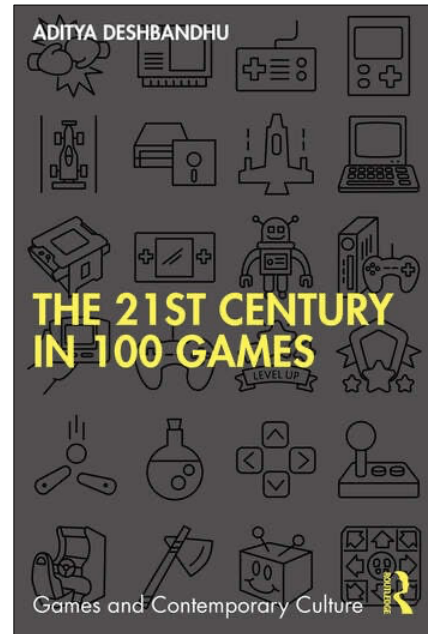
The author's primary contribution is the design and employment of the innovative Autoethnographic Ludo-Narratological Interpretative (ALNI) framework, combining autoethnography, game studies methods, and close reading, making this a multifaceted approach contributing to our understanding of video games as artifacts that reflect and shape contemporary society. Reviews of games that the author has published in a leading newspaper of India for the last six years (Game On, Telangana Today) are used as units of analysis to understand the evolving nature of games and their impact on players and society (p. 40). This exhaustive methodology allows for a nuanced exploration of video games and highlights the interconnectedness of online and offline experiences, the evolution of game development and monetization strategies, and the role of games in transmedia storytelling. Readers receive new insights into the impact of video games on culture, technology, and social interactions, making it a valuable resource for academics, game developers, and players alike.

The book begins with an introduction where the author reflects on the challenges of writing during the pandemic and the process of connecting his weekly columns into a cohesive narrative. It emphasizes the importance of understanding media historiography, the complexity of remembering media, and the need for innovative approaches to archival work. The key point made in the introduction is the importance of understanding video games within their historical and societal contexts. By using the ALNI framework, the book aims to analyze games through both intimate and public memory and

experience, setting the stage for a wide-ranging exploration of how video games reflect and shape contemporary society.

In chapter 1, "Attempting a Ludological History: How Do We Remember Games?", Deshbandhu provides the conceptual underpinnings for the book and explores how video games can be remembered and studied. He discusses historiographical approaches, referencing E. H. Carr and Dipesh Chakrabarty and highlights the importance of achieving a balance between fact and interpretation. He critiques traditional historical methods and argues for a more holistic approach that includes personal and experiential dimensions. He examines the limitations of categorizing games by genre, mechanics, and player engagement, advocating for a rigorous framework that integrates autoethnography, game studies methods, and close reading to capture the multifaceted nature of video games and their impact on society. This chapter discusses the importance of capturing both playable and nonplayable experiences as part of the memories players form. It examines how these memories reflect larger national or global events.

In chapter 2, "Towards a Public History: Capturing Experiences and Shared Memories," Deshbandhu applies concepts mentioned above and builds on the experiential dimension of video games, emphasizing the need to capture both personal and shared memories. It highlights the importance of game reviews as a method that can be employed in the form of an archival tool and analytical instrument. It also demonstrates a methodological framework combining autoethnography and formal gameplay analysis to tell the story of the 21st century through games. I draw attention to figures 2.1 (the review as an aggregation of the 12 evaluative parameters, compiled by the author from autoethnographic reflexivity; p. 42) and 2.2 (the ALNI framework as visualized and conceptualized by the author; p. 45) as application of the concepts mentioned in the previous chapter and as key contributions to scholarship by the author.

In chapter 3, "Dedicated for Gaming: Transformation for Play," Deshbandhu examines the transformative impact of specific video games on the gaming industry and player expectations by focusing on three cases. The first case is how games like "Crysis" popularized dedicated graphics hardware and influenced visual computing (p. 49). The second case explores the role of "Assassin's Creed" in subverting and re-creating historical narratives. The third case includes "Witcher 3" and "Zelda" and how they revolutionized role-playing games (RPGs) by integrating RPG elements into mainstream games (p. 49). Deshbandhu demonstrates how these transformations have shaped game development, hardware evolution, and the broader societal context in which these games are produced and played. It underscores the interconnectedness of game design, technological advancements, and cultural impact, providing a detailed understanding of the evolution of gaming in the 21st century.

The strength of chapter 4, "When the Magic Fades: The Search for Redemption," lies in its detailed examination of the consequences of failed video games on the industry, developers, and players. It analyzes four major cases: "Cyberpunk 2077" (p. 72), "Star Citizen" (p. 77), "Anthem" (p. 81), and "Battlefield 2042" (p. 85). The chapter explores how these games, despite grand expectations, were launched in broken states, leading to significant backlash. It discusses the consequences of these failures on developers, players, and the broader gaming community. Deshbandhu highlights the importance of

understanding game development as a form of labor and social practice, and the ramifications of unmet promises in the gaming industry. Overall, the chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges in the gaming industry, highlighting the need for more sustainable and transparent development practices.

Chapter 5, "New Ways of Monetization: The Service Turn in Games," explores the evolution of free-to-play (F2P) games and their monetization strategies. It examines the impact of microtransactions, advergaming, and the freemium model on the gaming industry. The chapter discusses the balance between paying and nonpaying players, highlighting the introduction of the battle/season pass as a democratizing tool. It also introduces the concept of the "collector," a new player category focused on acquiring cosmetic items. Deshbandhu analyzes how these monetization strategies shape player engagement, game development, and the broader societal context. These themes collectively provide a thorough understanding of the financial models underpinning F2P games and their impact on both the gaming industry and player behavior.

The main contribution of chapter 6, "Games as Transmedia: Aggregation and Activation," is its exploration of how video games transcend their original medium to become integral parts of larger narrative universes. Deshbandhu examines how games like "Arcane," "Halo" (p. 139), "Spiderman," "Miles Morales," and "The Guardians of the Galaxy" (p. 125) extend their narratives into other media forms, creating interconnected storytelling experiences. Through the integration of video game elements into streaming platforms and other media, using examples like "Black Mirror: Bandersnatch" and "Minecraft's Story Mode" (p. 136), he emphasizes challenges and opportunities of transmedia storytelling, illustrating how games contribute to and are influenced by broader cultural narratives. By analyzing these cases, he underscores the significance of video games in shaping and being shaped by transmedia ecosystems, offering a detailed understanding of their role in contemporary and participatory cultures.

Deshbandhu illustrates the transformative role of video games during the pandemic, highlighting their significance in maintaining social connections, providing entertainment, and adapting to new societal challenges in chapter 7, "New Heights and Challenges: Video Games in a Pandemic." He highlights the popularity of casual games and introduces the concept of ludic socializing, discussing the success of games like "Pokémon Go" and "Flight Simulator" (p. 156), which integrate real-time data to create immersive experiences, and "Minecraft" and "Roblox" (p. 160), which were repurposed for virtual events, including concerts and graduation ceremonies, becoming essential platforms for social interaction, productivity, and leisure in a time of isolation. Deshbandhu demonstrates how the creation of these experiences blurred the boundaries between the online and the offline, culminating in the industry's ability to integrate events from the offline and physical world into the game world, something the author calls, "live games."

The key point made in the conclusion is that video games reflect the times in which they were created. The book highlights the complex cycles of encoding and decoding messages within games, where reality and virtual worlds intersect. The author underscores the interconnectedness of online and offline experiences, suggesting that games can offer insights into broader social phenomena. This book joins an elite club focusing on game histories (e.g., *Digital Games as History* [Chapman, 2016] and *Debugging Game History* [Lowood & Guins, 2024]). While many histories of gaming explore technological and social

trajectories or shifts in play's societal relationship, Deshbandhu's book departs from tradition by introducing the ALNI framework. This innovative approach builds on and extends current scholarship, offering a new way to conceive game history.

References

Chapman, A. (2016). *Digital games as history: How videogames represent the past and offer access to historical practice*. London, UK: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781315732060

Lowood, H., & Guins, R. (Eds.). (2024). *Debugging game history: A critical lexicon*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.