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Title

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Journal

Analog Game Studies, 13(2)

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Publication Date

2026-06-29

DOI

10.5070/V7.66384

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MAD ABOUT MAHJONG: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO ASIAN AMERICAN GAME SCHOLARS

Tara Fickle & Edmond Y. Chang

Abstract

What does it mean to adapt, repurpose, or reimagine an existing game? Where is the line between thoughtful and respectful modification and problematic appropriation and consumption? Why do games seem culturally or politically neutral even when they carry deep histories of race, migration, commodification, and power? In this case, what do we do about mahjong, a game which became popular in the United States after being brought from Shanghai and Beijing in the 1920s.¹ In the wake of debates about the appropriation of mahjong by white American game companies, game studies scholars Tara Fickle and Edmond Y. Chang discuss how mahjong functions as a site of diasporic identity formation, intergenerational connection, and gendered sociality. We explore mahjong's history as well as the communities, affects, and power relations that "gather around" it.

Keywords

mahjong, parlor games, gambling, Asian American, race, appropriation, whitewashing, commodification

On March 16, 2026, *The New York Times* published an article entitled "Playing Games with the Décor," which featured a handful of designs that featured "dedicated rooms at home for board games, jigsaw puzzles, and toys are making a comeback among the whimsical at heart."² Included among the chess boards, poker cards, and puzzle pieces is a segment on a Dallas-based company, *Oh My Mahjong*, that produces playful, colorful, and decorative tile sets with matching table settings and accessories (see Figure 1).

¹ Stanford Report, "From China to U.S., the Game of Mahjong Shaped Modern America, Says Stanford Scholar," *Stanford Department of History*, June 6, 2014, <https://history.stanford.edu/news/china-us-game-mahjong-shaped-modern-america-says-stanford-scholar>.

² Dina Cheney, "Playing Games with the Décor," *New York Times*, March 16, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/16/realestate/game-room-decor-mahjong-trend.html>.

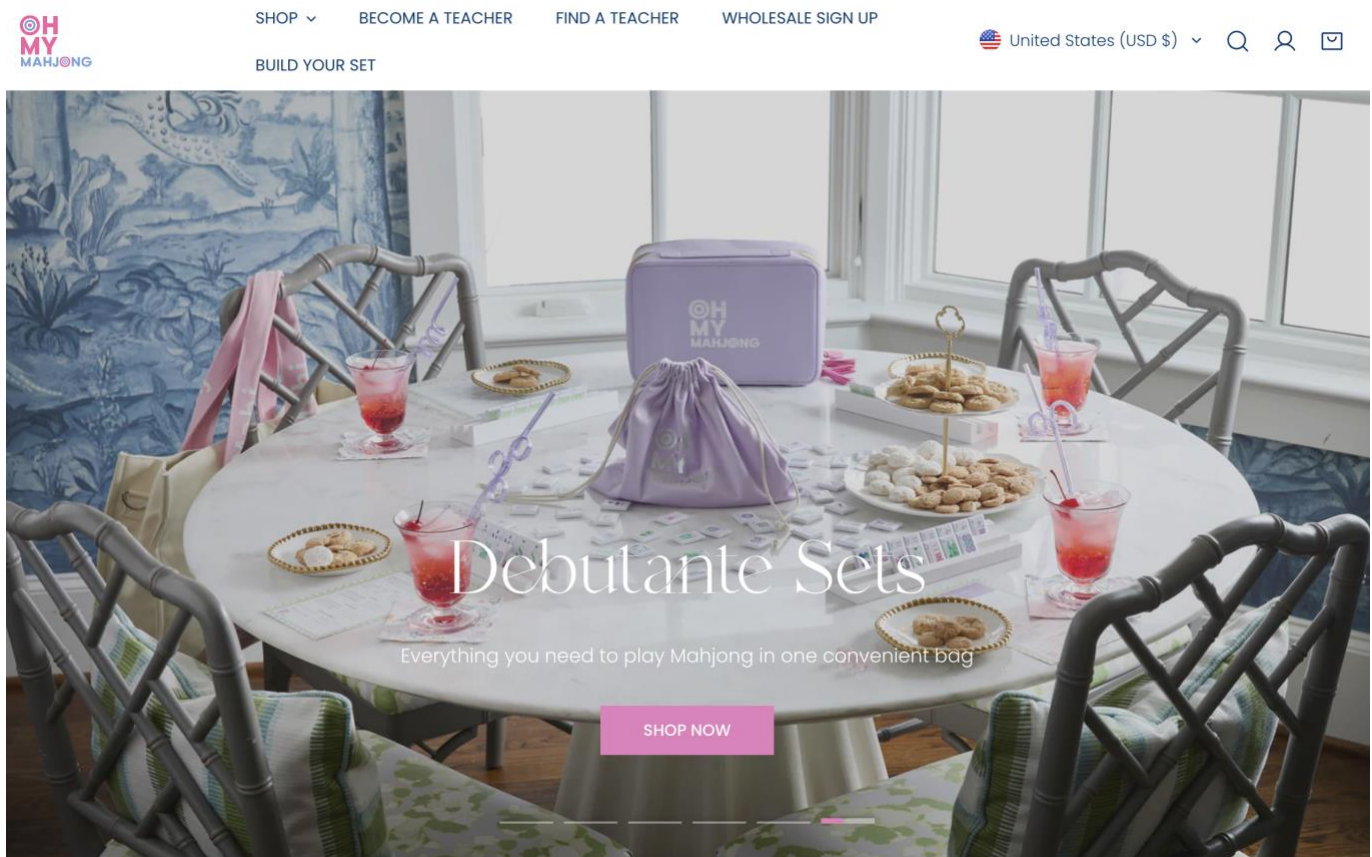


Figure 1: Screenshot of Oh My Mahjong website (2026).

The mahjong sets themselves retail between \$350 to \$500, with whimsical names like “Lagoon,” “Pearlescent,” “Glitterville,” and “Gatsby.” According to Megan Jett Trottier, founder and chief executive of the lifestyle company, “Mahjong is becoming this beautiful way of hosting — not just slapping a game on a table.”³ A week later, Instagram user Diet Prada posted the following image (see Figure 2) with the comment, “Wait, didn’t we do this already back in 2021?”⁴

³ As qtd. in Cheney, “Playing Games with the Décor.”

⁴ Diet Prada (@diet_prada), “Wait, didn’t we do this already back in 2021?,” Instagram, March 25, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DWUKMSBjpzw/>.



Figure 2: Screenshot of diet_prada Instagram feed (March 2026).

The sense of déjà vu was real. Oh My Mahjong joined a host of bespoke tile purveyors, which include other companies like My Fair Mahjong, Bespoke Mahjong, Peace Love Mahjong, and The Mahjong Line (all of which are based in Texas).⁵ The latter came under fire five years ago for their attempts to “respectfully refresh” and “bring mahjong to the stylish masses,”⁶ and once again in 2026 for the release of their “refreshed” sets, some of which did away with the traditional images on the mahjong tiles altogether (see Figure 3). According to an interview in *D Magazine*:

What [The Mahjong Line] did want was a modern take on a traditional Chinese set, where the mahjong suits of craks were represented by Chinese numerals, bams were represented by pieces of bamboo, and dots were represented by dots. That became The Minimal Line. They also wanted a decorative set based on plants, where craks were leaves, bams were still bamboo, dots were blueberries, and dragons were dragonflies. That became The Botanical Line.

For the third set, The Cheeky Line, they wanted something that was pure fun. Craks became lightning bolts, bams became the word “BAM!,” dots became bubbles, and flowers became sacks of flour.⁷

⁵ Taylor Prewitt, “Texas Launched a Glitzy Mahjong Revival. Not Everyone Is Happy About It.,” *Texas Monthly*, April 10, 2026, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/culture/controversial-mahjong-craze-born-in-dallas/>.

⁶ Sara Li, “Mahjong Doesn’t Need to Be Updated for White People,” *Teen Vogue*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/mahjong-doesnt-need-to-be-updated-for-white-people-op-ed>.

⁷ Kathy Wise, “The Magnates of Mahjong,” *D Magazine*, February 19, 2026, <https://www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/2026/february-2026/the-magnates-of-mahjong/>.



Figure 3: Traditional mahjong set (from Wikimedia commons) and screenshot of The Mahjong Line's "Cheeky Set." Used for analytical purposes.

The 2021 backlash centered simultaneously on questions of appropriation—the fact that white women had created and were selling obscenely expensive mahjong sets—and on the particular language and logic of the “refresh” itself. To many Asian American critics, the company’s claim that the game needed to be made more stylish reproduced a familiar pattern: an Asian cultural practice becomes desirable once detached from the Asian people and histories that gave it meaning. The issue, then, was not simply that non-Chinese people were playing mahjong—American mahjong already had a long history of cross-cultural circulation—but that “modernization” apparently required stripping away Chinese characters and histories while preserving the marketable aura of the game. Journalist Sara Li put it pithily: “Mahjong Doesn’t Need to Be Updated for White People.” Historians like Annelise Heinz offered in-depth historical explanations about why this “refresh” reflected “serious errors in judgment rooted in a lack of knowledge about Asian Americans’ experiences both with the game and with a history of racism that the company’s language echoed.”⁸ Asian Americans emphasized how the issue was not simply a wholesale appropriation of cultural imagery but a question of authority: “who gets to profit off mahjong”⁹ and who is imagined as the new player—all critiques which the creators seemed genuinely stunned by.

As two Asian American game studies scholars with very different relationships to mahjong—one who grew up with it, one who had never played it—we were intrigued by the recurrence of the controversy. Why does this cycle of appropriation, apology, recuperation, and re-antagonism keep happening? Is there perhaps something about the current moment, when the vocabulary of “tradition,” “heritage,” and (gasp) “race” is even more fraught than usual, that we can learn by talking about mahjong? More broadly, what can we learn if we treat appropriation not as the end of the conversation but as the beginning of a broader inquiry into how games intersect with community, race, gender, and cultural memory? The following conversation asks why games so often appear culturally neutral, how communities have historically gathered around the game of mahjong, and what gets lost when those histories and communities are flattened into a lifestyle aesthetic.

⁸ Annelise Heinz, “An Open Letter to the Mahjong Community,” as qtd. by Nicole Wong, “History Is Repeating Itself,” *The Mahjong Project*, March 25, 2026, <https://www.themahjongproject.com/stories/history-is-repeating-itself>.

⁹ Ibid.

Again, we ask, why does history keep repeating itself?

* * *

Edmond Chang (EC): I've never played a hand of mahjong in my life. I've always wanted to learn. But I had friends that had mahjong sets in the house. And I remember playing *Mahjong Solitaire* on PC in the early 90s (which ignored not only the original rules but the cultural underpinnings as well). But most of my experience with mahjong was from popular culture—from film and media and books like Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*.

Tara Fickle (TF): Since "not playing" a game is itself still a relationship to that game, what then does mahjong mean to you?

EC: Growing up, my dad taught us Go instead of mahjong. When I went to Chinese school on the weekends, I was part of the Go club. We didn't play Chinese chess either. I am not sure why there was no mahjong.

These are things I will have to ask him about. Maybe there is some sort of hidden history or politics that I don't know about. Both of my parents are from Taiwan, but when they were growing up, Taiwan was occupied by the Japanese. So, hence, the game of Go, perhaps.

I remember my parents had get togethers all the time, but I don't ever remember the adults playing games while they were all together. Maybe cards. Mostly, it was a time for catching up and gossip and comparing families.

TF: Surprisingly, that doesn't actually sound so different from my experience growing up with mahjong, and also the reasons the game feels special to Chinese Americans: the sociality. Not *all* Chinese Americans, because it's not – this is where our different perspectives come in – but I think my experience growing up with mahjong was emblematic of a certain sector of second-generation Chinese Americans growing up in the 1980s and 90s.

This is why, like you said, it's become so popular in movies and films from *The Joy Luck Club* [bestselling 1989 Chinese American novel by Amy Tan, about four daughters and four mothers who play mahjong together] to *In the Mood for Love* to *Crazy Rich Asians*.

My family, like the ones in some of those films, immigrated to California from Hong Kong after fleeing China, and the Japanese army, during the [Sino-Japanese] war. When I was growing up, mahjong was a special opportunity for women to get together, especially women of different generations: daughters, moms, aunties, grandmothers.

And for my generation, the daughters' generation, I feel like mahjong became a way for young Chinese Americans to kind of, well, become Chinese American; through getting to play but not being ever taught the game formally. It was the first experience I remember of being exposed to Chinese characters, and it's how I learned Chinese numerals. When I was an adult myself, mahjong was like a common vocabulary with other Chinese Americans. It was fun to see the variants, hear the different dialects and different words used for different plays. One of the more benign examples of being interpellated, I guess.

Just watching and being near the game and the players: it's so sentimental, so sensory, which is why it makes for such good Asian American narrative fodder. The tactility of it, when you were allowed to play a hand when a grownup stepped away for a minute, and the sounds of the tiles clacking together, the smells of the food, the chatter late into the night, and the laughter. For me, the fact that it was mostly women playing and laughing together was something that, growing up, felt rare and special. My mom, my aunts, my grandma; they worked really hard and they didn't laugh that much, or at least I don't remember it, so it felt like a really special time.

EC: I love the game pieces, the tiles. I like the tactile, affective qualities of the tiles. They are really lovely. I love the sound of mahjong being played.

TF: Beyond the tactility, part of what makes mahjong especially compelling to me is that gambling is such is an innate component to the game and hence, like we said earlier, to ideas about being Chinese and Chinese American. But this wasn't gambling in the traditional sense but in a familial one—a few pennies here, a few quarters there depending on the value of a winner's hand rather than antes and bets. Unlike poker, a "winner" is marked by how much money they have at the end, not whether they win or lose an individual round. It's not about betting to win a big pot.

For me, like learning the numbers, mahjong then became an introduction to the idea that gambling wasn't inherently negative. That's not to say that gambling addiction isn't a very serious problem in Chinese and Asian cultures—in fact that's part of the problem, that gambling is normalized so addiction is downplayed. But that normalization of gambling, watching my family play with chips and then pay out the winner with cash from coin purses at the end of the night, I think that was the start of my interest in the significance of gaming for immigrant communities. This is really the kernel of my research and later writing about this in relation to mahjong and early anti-Chinese immigration debates in California, and also about the popularity of gambling among Japanese Americans pre- and post-camp.¹⁰ Gambling offers an alternate form of cultural participation, a relationship to money—the idea of becoming rich, instantly—that you can't really have in daily life where you just work your wage job. Even as a little kid I felt this about people like my grandparents, who immigrated as adults and worked as what they called "domestics" for rich white families and relied on them to get sponsored as immigrants. Mahjong and video poker and scratch-lotto tickets and Las Vegas, these were just part of our lives.

And I remember being surprised, as I grew up, at how many people didn't feel that way, who found gambling at home or going to casinos seedy or low class. To me, the attitude was instead: why wouldn't you pay for the pleasure of the possibility?

EC: Yes, yes. These mechanics, these mechanisms have fully crept into video games and other spaces—like gacha games, claw machines, even the blind box trend. Everything is turning into a loot box.

TF: Yes. And it also feels like why game studies has valuable things to say about gambling. People who are working on gambling, we're not often talking to people who are working on video games, and vice versa. Partially maybe it's a split between video game studies and non-digital or analog, especially parlor game studies. But this seems so unfortunate, and you can really see it now because we can be caught flat-footed sometimes when something like prediction markets or sports betting comes up, even though these are all about gamification.

¹⁰ Tara Fickle, "American Rules, Chinese Faces: The Games of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*." *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 39.3 (2014): 68–88.

But there's so much to say about the way that ideas about the market and capitalism have evolved over the 20th and 21st centuries globally *through* games that there's all the more need for something like analog game studies. Because game studies captures how money *and* communities form around games through these affective experiences of gambling.

EC: Yes, I think a lot of analog games tend to be more about like the engagement with others and with the culture that so kind of surrounds it.

TF: Right, which I agree is totally crucial. The format of the four-person table and the way in which people are face to face with each other in a way that Chinese families and Chinese American families, well, both stereotypically but also in reality, is rare. It's "the magic circle" in the sense of a real familiar break from the day-to-day distance, whether cultural linguistically, emotionally, politically.

It's equalizing but not exactly democratizing in the sense that everyone can play, more like it creates an alternative mode of communication that for people like us is otherwise hard to access.

EC: But this does tie into the original American mahjong controversy, which comes from this attitude that games themselves are neutral. Anyone can learn a game, anyone can play a game. We have this logic for board games especially, right? It's driven the recent board game renaissance. Yet, mahjong's not exactly a board game. It is a tabletop game like playing cards, things like that, parlor games. In a sense, players think these kind of "home" games are inherently democratic because anyone can play them.

Therefore, there is a kind of games-for-all portability that gets built into some games. Anyone can learn to play poker, let's say, then it doesn't belong to anybody, any group. Therefore, players don't need to worry about the history or politics of these games, which is not true, of course. I think about the nineteenth century social reform, temperance, and anti-gambling movements in the US, which definitely saw games as political.

Mahjong falls into this history, especially given the ways the game was raced, classed, even demonized particular for certain groups like immigrants and the poor. However, for other groups, like those who are linguistically, economically, and politically in power, they are going to do whatever they want to do with the game, right? Those dominant or mainstream groups can claim that mahjong belongs to everyone, but what it really means that it belongs to "us" and "we" are going to do whatever we want with it.

TF: Given that particular cultural attitude toward games, then, is the mahjong debate any different from appropriation debates that have been historically circulating about, say, fashion, or music? Like the posts circulating several years ago of high schoolers wearing Chinese *cheongsam* or *qipao* to prom and Chinese Americans responding, "my culture is not your prom dress."¹¹ Or just the much older discourses about appropriating Black culture, Black music, Indigenous culture, etc. Is game appropriation more of the same?

¹¹ See Kassidy Chao, "This Teen Wore A Traditional Chinese Dress To Prom And Caused A Huge Controversy," *BuzzFeed News*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/kassycho/keziah-daum-prom-qipao-cheongsam>.

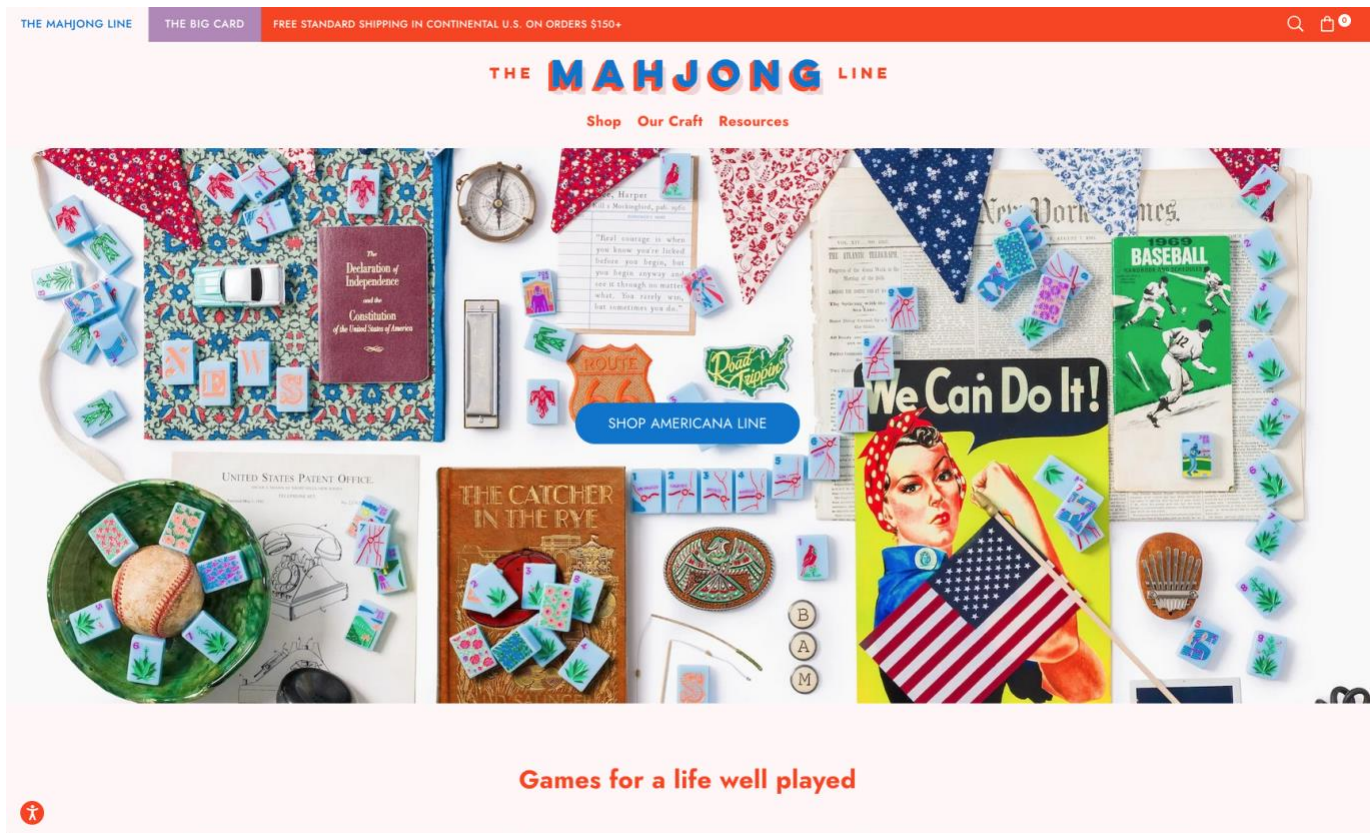


Figure 4: Screenshot of The Mahjong Line website: Mahjong-as-Americana imagery.

EC: Indeed, but I think this is more than just about the rules or even the pieces. But rather of what you call “ludo-Orientalism,” such that if representation itself is a kind of game¹²—who’s in, who’s out, who’s good, who’s not, who’s right, who’s wrong—then the appropriation here is of much more than the material game (though that’s obviously happening) but who gets to play in the first place. Who’s being centered here? Who’s being pushed off the table altogether?

TF: I think part of it also has to do with the historically ambiguous relationship between Jewishness and whiteness, because it wasn't just white American but specifically *Jewish* American women who played mahjong in the early 20th century. It was so popular that it became a trope of its own in Jewish American culture. But while, even into the 1990s, the variant they played was called "Jewish mahjong," now it's being called "American mahjong," and that's the version these mahjong companies are selling. And that seems so telling: mahjong as Jewish Americanness-cum-whiteness, erasing but still relying on the exoticism of Chineseness.

Which gets at the heart of what troubles so many Chinese Americans. It feels like white people, white women in particular, taking something that doesn't feel like it has the same cultural meaning, the same gendered immigration meaning and history, and plucking it out of its context. And then charging \$485 for it.

¹² Tara Fickle, "Introduction: Ludo-Orientalism and the Gamification of Race," *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 1-27.

What's being sold isn't the Chinese American intimacy experience, it's white-woman-lifestyle. The advertising is about: buy this set for your gal pal, who is "equally happy in LA or Austin. Loves a wild wallpaper, millennial pink, and her many sneakers."¹³ Playing mahjong becomes part of being, or at least playing, a hip, trendy white lady.

This also taps into another aspect of the offense, which is perhaps something that would bother people who have been into particular games years before they became trendy, and now feel like, *oh, this is not the version of the game that I recognize as authentic.*

EC: I can't help but see linkages to and resonances with the current "trad wife" trend, this aestheticization of "traditional" gender and racial roles, especially given the styling and aesthetics of The Mahjong Line's website and *The New York Times* story above, which is about the space and décor of game rooms or playrooms. Who has the time, square footage, and discretionary income to participate in these aesthetics? How do you demonstrate the traditional home and family than with games and accouterments from ping pong in the rec room to croquet in the back yard to mahjong in the den? It's a re-romanticization of white, suburban American affluence and normativities.¹⁴

TF: That makes complete sense. What better way to flex your weakness than by saying, *I play—or at least own—a game that's not about or for me?*

EC: I also want to think about the critiques of appropriation, which is totally valid, but is that the only logic at work, is that the only critique? Because I feel like sometimes appropriation is shorthand for a bunch of other things that we need to unpack and talk about—over racism, white supremacy, sexism, misogyny, classism, and such—which I think get sort of condensed and simplified as, "Oh, it's just these bougie white women appropriating this game."

Especially regarding The Mahjong Line, why now, why again when you faced a similar backlash five years ago? Do companies like this feel emboldened now because Texas has overturned diversity and equity initiatives and worked to re-disenfranchise BIPOC communities and so on?

TF: That's an excellent point. To expand "standard" appropriation critique, the controversy also, I think, can't be understood without thinking about China, and the status of China—and Taiwan—right now. The emboldening and romanticization of a certain kind of American whiteness combined with anxiety and newly salient thinking about China. It's a perfect moment, but also one that, with the new world order, I think we're going to continue to see recur.

So to your point, the fact that the mahjong controversy tends to cause such a strong affective reaction on the part of Asian Americans is part of how a reminder that appropriation can act as a kind of buffer, that it's absolutely real and useful to give us vocabulary for what's happening, but it also has the ability to stop the conversation by making us focus only on a part of the issue. It limits our reaction to: *This is racist appropriation. Stop selling it.* Rather than, as you say, unpacking the broader contexts of: how and why is this marketing—the language of "refresh"—appealing in this moment, to this particular audience? How does it reinforce notions of white femininity *and* non-white female sociality? Or, as in our own conversation, if as Asian Americans we both immediately recognize the same problems in the new sets, why is it actually deeply relevant whether our families immigrated from Taiwan or from Hong Kong?

¹³ <https://themahjongline.com/products/the-cheeky-line-lilac-mahjong-tiles>

¹⁴ See Sophia Sykes and Veronica Hopner, "Tradwives: The Housewives Commodifying Right-Wing Ideology," *Global Network on Extremism*, July 7, 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/07/07/tradwives-the-housewives-commodifying-right-wing-ideology/>.

EC: Again, I think it useful for us to push ourselves, to push allies beyond the appropriation critique. I think like it is really easy to just point out appropriation and feel like good has been done. But wait a second, what about other spaces and places that might need some untangling. Would-be allies love their Vietnamese or Cantonese food but what happens when well-meaning whiteness decides that pho needs to be “modernized”¹⁵ or dim sum needs to be “healthier,”¹⁶ you know? To be clear, this is not to say that non-Chinese people can’t eat dim sum. But I think it is about like recognizing that these flows of power and meaning-making and who gets to be what, say what, do what, eat what, play what get kind of lost in the mix. Appropriation, yes, but maybe whitewashing (mayonnaise-washing?) is a better word. Though even the appropriation and whitewashing of foodways is itself a project of whiteness.¹⁷ But what if it’s all of the above?

We need to extend these interrogations into analog game spaces. This isn’t just about mahjong per se. We have flagship games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, for example, trying to reckon with their racist, colonialist, orientalist past, but at the same time, how far is that going?

TF: Absolutely. Changing the packaging on games is significant but not actually getting at the underlying ways in which all of these power dynamics are part of what makes the game pleasurable for people. So much work was done in the “first wave” of race in game studies research¹⁸ to demonstrate why erasing caricatures can’t be the end goal: first we have to acknowledge that the pleasure of identity tourism—of cosplaying otherness—is an aspect of why the game exists in the first place, consciously or not.

And then that acknowledgment can also get us to the important questions of, *what do we do with games that are problematic that we like?* And by “do with” I mean not just about playing them but also writing about them. So I think that it’s actually very helpful to look at games that are not sanitized, or that are appropriated—like we have with mahjong today.

EC: Yeah. In other words, citing Aaron Trammell’s excellent book *Repairing Play*, we must subvert and appropriate “the narrative of White play to center BIPOC people and participation.”¹⁹ Otherwise, as he warns, “To forget this is to aestheticize the experience of play and to resign ourselves to the cultural norms of White supremacy.”²⁰

Because at the end of the conversation I still find myself thinking, *I really want to learn how to play Mahjong myself*. But whose version do I want to learn?



¹⁵ See Kim Lan Grout, “Unpacking the Great Pho Appropriation Debacle of 2016,” *INDY*, October 12, 2016, <https://indyweek.com/news/culture/food/unpacking-great-pho-appropriation-debacle-2016/>.

¹⁶ See Sharon Otterman, “A White Restaurateur Advertised ‘Clean’ Chinese Food. Chinese-Americans Had Something to Say About It,” *The New York Times*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/12/nyregion/lucky-lees-nyc-chinese-food.html>.

¹⁷ See Theodore Ross, “Forked: How Food Became a Right-Wing Movement, with Michael Pollan,” *Food and Environment Reporting Network*, June 2, 2026, <https://thefern.org/podcast/how-food-became-a-right-wing-movement-with-michael-pollan/>.

¹⁸ See the work of Anna Everett, Lisa Nakamura, David J. Leonard, T.L. Taylor, Tanner Higgin, Vit Sisler, among others.

¹⁹ Aaron Trammell, *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2023), 107.

²⁰ Trammell, *Repairing Play*, 110.

Tara Fickle is Associate Professor of Asian American Studies at Northwestern University. She is the author of *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (2019), and co-editor of the volume *Made in Asia/America* (2024), both of which explore material and ideological linkages between games and Asian/American racialization. More information can be found at tarafickle.com. Fickle's current research projects include the racial and gendered dimensions of global esports, and a book and digital archive of the canonical Asian American anthology, *Aiiieeeee!* (1974).

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