

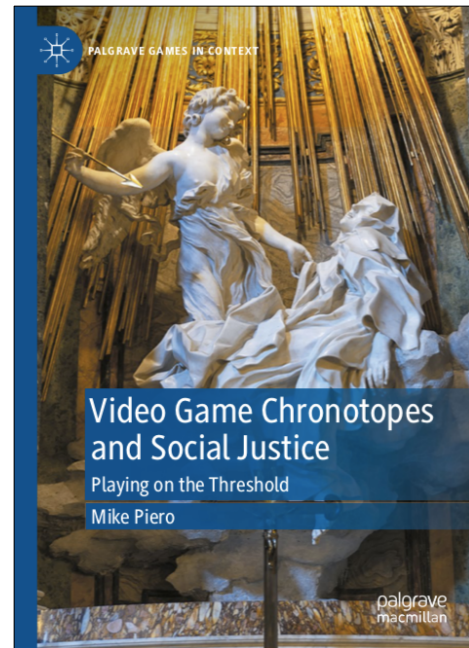
Mike Piero, **Video Game Chronotopes and Social Justice: Playing on the Threshold**, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 292 pp., \$109.99 (hardcover).

Reviewed by  
Sabrina Sonner  
University of Oregon

With skyrocketing video game sales amid intensifying social justice movements, neither unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic, Mike Piero writes **Video Game Chronotopes and Social Justice: Playing on the Threshold** in a moment of crucially fluctuating times in his field. Identifying a need for tools that allow players and scholars to look beneath the surface of the games they play, Piero turns to Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) work on chronotopes to investigate the cultural implications of the construction of space and time in video games (p. 1).

In his new book, Mike Piero proposes chronotopes as a tool for identifying the values encoded into video games. Defined literally, chronotope means *time* ("chrono") and *space* ("topy"). Applied to video games, chronotopes reveal themselves through the ways players break from reality through different temporal and spatial gameplay interactions: pausing a game, speeding up time, engaging with unique physical laws, and omnisciently controlling a game's environment. Piero argues that by identifying chronotopes in games, a player can discover otherwise hidden ideologies. Piero's application of chronotopes to video games adapts Bakhtin's initial theories on the chronotope, which use chronotopes to identify the way that different genres became significant to specific eras of literature, and focuses on gameplay interactions rather than media content, which was the sole focus of Bakhtin's work. In examining the unique ways games create an engagement with spatial and temporal elements, Piero uses chronotopes as a lens through which video games can challenge and open up conversations surrounding new forms of social justice.

As chronotopes span a wide range of topics, Piero specifically looks at threshold chronotopes. Thresholds connect to games by way of transitional spaces like those between the real world and the game world, different map zones within games, and unique interactions with life and death in games. These threshold interactions allow players to identify moments of transition and liminality in games more clearly than they can in the real world, contributing to the way players can use chronotopes to identify the values implicit in a game. For instance, in chapter 2, Piero introduces the chronotope of the bonfire applied to the *Dark Souls* games. Within the game, the bonfire acts as a site of resurrection (a threshold between life and death) and community, literally affecting a player's ability to connect with other players in the game's world. In turn, this affects a player's conception of a self/other divide and the way they view themselves as part of a group or as an individual. These ideas surrounding individuality and community



relate strongly to Piero's views on social justice and the way injustice occurs from seemingly irresolvable differences between individuals. The first two chapters of Piero's book work to establish core theories surrounding the chronotope, hinting at these ideas of justice that fully emerge in later chapters. Though this slightly decentralizes the themes of justice, the structural choice overall aids the book in explaining its main concepts thoroughly.

Narrowing down within threshold chronotopes, Piero focuses his conversation on a specific threshold chronotope in each subsequent chapter: chronotopes of the abject, the archipelago, the fart, madness, and coupled love. Within chapters, relevant chronotopes associated with each chapter's main chronotope develop, as do other relevant media theories. For instance, chapter 7, on coupled love, mentions the associated chronotope of jealousy. The chapter also incorporates theories around nonmonogamy and queerness from scholars such as Angela Willey (2016), Elizabeth Emen (as cited in Willey, 2016), and Roland Barthes (1987, pp. 236–240). Additionally, each chapter builds on ideas from previous sections and foreshadows the upcoming chapters' developments on chronotopes, as seen in the way that chapter 7 builds on ideas of individuals operating under sovereign power, madness, and laughter from previous chapters. The interconnections of theorists and ideas in this way showcase Piero's unique outlook on his research.

One of the most interesting aspects of this book comes through in Piero's synthesis of a broad range of social, political, and games scholars. Piero's ideas on chronotopes pair theorists to create conversations that may not have otherwise occurred. The passion Piero has for his theories shines through in the way he interweaves different theories and ideas across fields and periods. Truly uniquely navigating the spaces and times of these theorists, a new chronotope of its own comes to life within the pages of his book.

Closely related to his ideas of the chronotope, Piero proposes slow reading as a tool to allow players to analyze the games more critically. Through this process, Piero invites players to make their own meanings within games rather than blindly following the meanings present within games. Piero also relates this to queer readings of texts and encourages players to spend time playing slowly to discover new thoughts and ideas that might have been missed when playing more quickly.

While contributing his theories, Piero takes careful note to avoid "totalizing" and keeps a sense of play and open interpretation at the forefront of his discussions. In the games discussed for their reinforcement of dominant values, this openness is reflected in Piero's call to look more deeply at the media object being consumed without didactically prescribing which games should be played. In this way, Piero writes with the player in mind. A resounding joy in playing games, even the ones fairly critiqued for their hegemonic values, comes through in Piero's discussion of his chosen media artifacts. He engages ideas of *jouissance*, a fleeting pleasure sustained and courted by video games.

Piero's avoidance of totalizing and advocacy for slow readings also tie into his conceptualization of justice throughout his work. Structurally, Piero's book spends each chapter establishing a chronotope and a game (or, in the case of the introduction, establishing general theories connected to the chronotope) before then transitioning into a discussion of justice. Specific issues arise in certain chapters. For instance, response to the COVID-19 pandemic notably enters the conversation in several instances as

context to the period in which he writes and as examples of his theories on justice. The larger goal of the book, however, is to apply general frameworks surrounding social justice.

Piero conceptualizes social justice as requiring a need to dissolve a self/other divide that creates irresolvable conflicts. Piero advocates against a singular view of belonging in favor of justice that embraces ambiguity and a multirelational understanding of one's connections with others. He writes of the "singular plurality" of each individual before they become divided from others, viewing this as a key to better understanding a form of justice that applies to everyone. Video games allow players to engage differently with justice by drawing into specific attention the rules and laws by which one is playing and operating, and through altering one's sense of self and the groups to which they belong.

Piero's optimism for affecting positive changes in the world through the methods of social justice for which he advocates fills every page. He gives careful thought and attention to deconstructing the forces at work creating division, but through the application of his theories, none seem insurmountable with the right tools. Though the effort needed to affect such changes is not minimized, neither is the possibility for social change.

Several audiences may benefit from reading this book. Within the book, Piero identifies players and scholars as his main audience. Game scholars seeking frameworks through which to explore mechanics related to space and time or themes related to social justice would likely find value in Piero's unique application of chronotopes. Additionally, someone interested in following these interconnections between scholars whose work may otherwise remain separate would appreciate the connections made by Piero. A nonacademically inclined player may find the theories complex, though someone willing to come along for the ride would enjoy reading it.

Separately from those main audiences, scholars researching concepts that come up in specific chapters may find value in the connection between those concepts and games. Though focused on game studies, other theories have prominent moments in the spotlight in relevant chapters. Chapter 3 introduces ideas of the abject, chapter 4 uses the archipelago as a tool for anticolonialist thinking, laughter and comedy as a destabilizing force comes up in chapter 5, and chapter 7 introduces queer and nonmonogamous theories.

On the whole, Piero's application of chronotopes to video games sparks unique discussion surrounding the way that closely examining a video game's spatial and temporal components can generate larger conversations of justice. Throughout the book, Piero's playfully passionate voice guides readers on a journey through theorists and video games that span across fields. He invites players and scholars alike to think critically about the games they play, while never losing sight of the joy that draws them to their games in the first place.