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**How to Cite:** Navarro-Remesal, V and Pérez Zapata, B 2018 Who Made Your Phone? Compassion and the Voice of the Oppressed in *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards*. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1): 11, pp. 1–30, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.209>

**Published:** 19 February 2018

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## POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES IN GAME STUDIES

# Who Made Your Phone? Compassion and the Voice of the Oppressed in *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards*

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*Burn the Boards* (Causa Creations, 2015) portrays the life of an Indian worker who recycles electronic waste in a precarious environment. *Phone Story* (Molleindustria, 2011) simulates the journey and process of production and consumption of mobile phones, from Congo and China to Pakistan. Whereas *Phone Story* is described as 'an educational game' that addresses the player directly as a consumer, *Burn the Boards* is a resource management puzzle that creates compassion through role playing. These games bring to the fore a hidden reality of the everyday that is ingrained in historical relationships and power dynamics, drawing attention to what Michael Rothberg has recognized as 'exploitation in an age of globalized neo-liberal capitalism' (2014: iv).

This article explores how these games denounce the smartphone industry by using that same technology. For this purpose, we refer to Game Studies theory on procedural rhetoric; values and ethics; and the role of the player, combined with questions of (neo)colonization, globalization, and neoliberalism drawn from Postcolonial Studies. Our analysis shows the complicity of users and their confrontation with the extreme vulnerability of others, emphasizing how the colonality of power works in our global consumer society. Thus we study the power relationships described and established by these games, the affective reactions which they seek to trigger, and their potential to transform players from passive observers into ethical players and consumers.

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## Introduction

The term 'postcolonialism' is frequently understood to refer to a time in which colonial relations have ended. However, as Peter Childs and Patrick Williams note, it is better understood to refer to the continuation of international relations of domination and inequality, premised on colonial lines. For them, 'post-colonialism as an historical period is best understood as a phase of imperialism, in turn best understood as the globalization of capitalism' (2006: 21). John McLeod has similarly argued that the term 'postcolonialism' has been understood in its conflation of 'historical, social and economic *material condition*' and that 'the "post" in postcolonial is too prematurely celebratory, implying an end to all things colonial'. McLeod adds that this 'celebratory emphasis damagingly directs attention away from the continued, neo-colonial operations throughout the globe' (2010: 278–9; emphasis in original). This view defines postcolonialism rather as neocolonialism, that is, the 'continuing economic exploitation' of previously colonized nations, which has often been regarded as one of 'the most insidious and dangerous form[s] of colonialism' (Nayar, 2010: 2–3). For these authors the prefix 'post' is not a mark of superation but rather of continuation of colonial practices in contemporary global times under other more or less blatant guises. In *The Postcolonial and The Global*, Krishnaswamy and Hawley see postcolonialism as criticism that 'focuses largely on a Eurocentric colonial past and examines how subaltern practices and productions in the non-Western peripheries responded to Western domination', while the global 'concentrates largely on a post/neocolonial present and examines how contemporary Western practices and productions affect the rest of the world' (2008: 2). But the two inevitably converge and borrow from one another. Our idea of the global cannot be understood without the colonial and the postcolonial, which have created, in Krishnaswamy's words, an 'emerging global (dis)order' (2008: 11). This 'global (dis)order' has materialized more clearly in light of recent crises and has laid bare the workings of empire, which, according to Hardt and Negri, entails a 'new global form of sovereignty' (2003: 43). This empire has 'no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries and barriers' and 'nearly all of humanity is to some degree absorbed within or subordinated to the networks of capitalist exploitation' (2003: 43, xii).

These new forms of colonialism and empire do not escape the world of technology and video games. Pramod K. Nayar conceives of capitalism as '*technocapitalism*' and speaks of a 'postcolonizing cyberculture', which he defines as 'a process of interpretation and appropriation of cyberspace and cybercultural practices that is alert not only to the racially determined exploitative conditions of globalized ICT labour, but also the emancipatory potential of cybercultures' (2010: 205, 208; emphasis in original). Nayar stresses that:

'it becomes imperative that we should look at material infrastructure, political ideologies, emotional responses, subversive appropriations and exploitative potential of cyberculture. We need to locate technological "devices" and processes within ideologies, economic policies and politics' (2010: 205).

We must situate ourselves within the production and consumption of technology and technological devices and assume our responsibility in the consequences of these processes. As Rosi Braidotti warns, in our post-human world we increasingly deny the responsibility of 'man-made' catastrophes and '[o]ur public morality is simply not up to the challenge of the scale and complexity of the damages engendered by our technological advances' (2013: 112–3). Thus, we need to locate ourselves, as agents and consumers, within the intersection of technological production and exploitation, a postcolonial cyberculture, and the ethical challenges they entail.

In the field of video games, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter analyse the relation between video games and capitalism from a materialist framework. They put forward a situated analysis by locating 'game culture . . . in the developed, rich zones of advanced capitalism' and asserting that 'virtual games are a direct offshoot of their society's main technology of production' (2009: xvii–xviii). They argue that video games are 'a paradigmatic media of Empire—planetary, militarized hypercapitalism<sup>1</sup> — and of some of the forces presently challenging it', and that 'virtual games

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<sup>1</sup> For Phil Graham, hypercapitalism implies 'the increasingly abstract and alien character of economic nature; the subsumption of all forms of labor under the systemic logic of capital; and the convergence of formerly distinct spheres of analysis — production, distribution, circulation, and consumption' (2006: 7).

are media constitutive of twenty-first century global hypercapitalism and, perhaps, also of lines of exodus from it' (2009: xv, xxix). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter heavily rely on Hardt and Negri's (2003) definition of empire and draw attention not only to the situatedness of the industry and play(ers), but also to the potential of games to denounce and resist the system in which they are themselves embedded.

Souvik Mukherjee argues that 'colonial empire has often been described in terms of the ludic', a 'Great Game', and that, in general, video games 'are associated with neoliberalism and capitalism by commentators who claim an intrinsic connect with colonialism and empire' (2016: 3–4), very much in line with Hardt and Negri's empire. One such video game is *Age of Empire*. But it is our contention that both *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* should be included in a different category, with games such as *Borders* (Gonzalo Álvarez, 2017), *Papers, Please* (3909 LLC, 2013), or *Darfur is Dying* (TAKE ACTION Games, 2006), which explore cases of violence in a globalized society that are 'neither sudden nor accidental', but rather the insidious consequences of 'exploitation in an age of globalized neo-liberal capitalism' (Rothberg, 2014: iv) and the international scenario of the refugee crisis (Bauman, 2016; Žižek, 2016).

This article focuses on two self-referential games designed for mobile phones: *Burn the Boards* (Causa Creations, 2015) and *Phone Story* (Molleindustria, 2011), which bring to the fore a hidden reality of the everyday that is ingrained in the continuing historical relationships and power dynamics of neocolonialism. *Phone Story* is a short game for smartphones (it can be completed in under five minutes) that, as the official site states, 'attempts to provoke a critical reflection on its own technological platform' (Molleindustria, 2011) via four brief stages that mimic classic gameplay styles and present the full cycle of production, consumption, and disposal of a smartphone, accompanied by a narration. *Burn the Boards* is a more traditional resource management puzzle with levels, an end goal, and fail states, focussing on the exploitation behind e-waste recycling in India.

By calling attention to the exploitation of others and the role we play in it, these games aim to suggest a more ethical way to be conscious about global relations, making us situated subjects aware of our place in the chain of power relations and the footprints of colonialism up to our global age. These games seek different affective reactions in players, both negative (shame) and positive (compassion), which are set

out to heighten the players' awareness of the reality of how their phones have been produced and thus generate lines of resistance against the neocolonial systems of a globalized world. This resistance is not only a matter of awareness, but a direct call to action that places the player, the games, their designers, the subjects they talk about, and the smartphone on which the games are played in an interconnected network defined by postcolonial power relationships.

### ***Phone Story: The Birth and Death of Your Phone***

Mukherjee argues that the effect of postcolonialism in video games is often subtle for those players who are not confronted directly with games that recall their own histories of colonial domination and thus will not 'engage with a distinct political consciousness' (2016: 2). However, there are others which might have a more direct effect and will implicate subjects in a wider discussion. Neither *Phone Story* nor *Burn the Boards* are subtle in their goals or rhetoric. The official website of *Phone Story* states that:

[u]nder the shiny surface of our electronic gadgets, behind its polished interface [sic], hides the product of a troubling supply chain that stretches across the globe. *Phone Story* represents this process with four educational games that make the player symbolically complicit in coltan extraction in Congo, outsourced labor in China, e-waste in Pakistan and gadget consumerism in the West. (Molleindustria, 2011)

Players and critics may already guess that we are going to be confronted with a hidden reality to which we are collaborating as consumers. *Phone Story* (**Fig. 1**) features a pixelated retro aesthetic, complete with chiptune music, and evokes classic gaming genres and archetypes, such as the Game & Watch handheld game *Fire* (Nintendo, 1980). This self-conscious design places the game in the broader context of its medium, using its history and tropes as shared ground with the player. *Phone Story* exploits this historically established language and helps the player to situate herself within the privileged context of capitalism, confirming Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's conviction that game culture is a product of a privileged context and technology (2009: xvii).

*Phone Story* addresses the player directly and brings awareness to the phone on which it is being played, highlighting the materiality of the act of playing: 'Hello consumer', the narrator says in the opening moments with some ironic force, 'thank you for joining us. Let me tell you the story of this phone while I provide you with quality entertainment'. The idea and mechanics of the game were explained by Leigh Alexander, asking readers to 'imagine being served hamburgers on a tour of a slaughterhouse' (Alexander, 2011: n. pag.), a comparison that might make readers imagine the violent conditions of phone manufacturing.

From the beginning of *Phone Story*, the logic of classic gaming is subverted to force the player into contemplating her own participation in empire: the pleasures of achievement and mastery, built around high-scores boards and demanding dynamics, are denied in favour of a rigid enactment of the game's discourse. The player has to follow the rules. If she fails to do so, the game reproaches her: 'do not pretend you are not complicit'. Winning becomes here a radical reinterpretation of video game logic. With its ever-present voice-over narration, *Phone Story* becomes a short lecture



**Figure 1:** Screenshots of *Phone Story*. Source: <https://www.wired.com/2011/09/phone-story/> (Last accessed 15 December 2017).

in which interactivity does not entail player freedom or agency, but an upfront rhetoric of shaming. 'Keep *Phone Story* on your device', the game's official site suggests, 'as a reminder of your impact'.

The message in *Phone Story* is clear: we are entertained at the cost of others' suffering and we cannot escape the fact that our daily lives also rely on them. It aims to shame us into action. Although shame is a negative affect whose effects can be devastating, making us ashamed is key for the game to succeed. Not in vain did Jean-Paul Sartre remark in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* that 'shame, as Marx said, is a revolutionary sentiment' (Sartre, in Fanon, 2002: 14). The game makes us more self-conscious of our consumption habits and our relationship to the global market and those *others* involved in the production of the products we are quick to consume and discard. Consequently, we might become ashamed of our persisting colonial behaviour and our direct participation in empire.

### ***Burn the Boards: The Human Cost of E-Waste***

*Burn the Boards* is, in gaming terms, much more traditional than *Phone Story*. It creates a fictional situation in which the player takes on the role of a character, and has to pursue a goal by facing several obstacles and honing her skills. According to the game's site:

[t]he player takes on the role of Arun, a villager who came to the big city with his wife and child to try his luck. Arun gets work in Chopra's e-waste scrapyard, a small backyard factory where a dozen workers recycle electronic components. In order to feed his family, Arun has to recycle as many boards as possible, while toxic fumes will also poison him at the same time. (Causa Creations, 2014a)

The bulk of *Burn the Boards* (Fig. 2) is composed of puzzle stages in which the player has to connect as many pieces of electronics per stroke as possible while keeping an eye on her life bar. The levels are designed so that these two goals are often at odds. With the money Arun earns, the player can buy food and equipment to improve his house and the well-being of his family through resource management sections



that take after the demanding ethical situations and scarcity challenges in *Papers, Please* (2013), which Georg Hobmeier, one of the game's creators, cites as a reference (2015). *Burn the Boards* is a long game, with more than 600 puzzles, and a clear learning curve in which new elements are constantly being introduced. According to Hobmeier, it is crucial 'to find a balance between family, work and survival to win the game' (Deutsche Welle, 2015). The player can win the game with several endings depending on her performance: 1000 coins grant Arun the chance to buy a small shop by the side of the road to sell food; more money provides him with a proper education at a community college; and the most expensive ending (and thus hardest to reach) rewards him with his own electronics store.

Like *Phone Story*, *Burn the Boards* is a game with an activist intention, 'designed to expose the reality of the informal worker breaking down e-waste for a living' (Causa Creations, 2014a). Unlike *Phone Story*, however, it substitutes confrontational style with a vicarious story in which the player gets the chance to understand the struggle and the suffering of her avatar, Arun, who could be seen as a representative of every e-waste worker. This fictional and ludic representation is key to immerse the player in Arun's reality and provide these workers with some humanity. Hobmeier believes



**Figure 2:** Screenshots of *Burn the Boards*. Source: <https://madewith.unity.com/en/games/burn-the-boards> (Last accessed 15 December 2017).

that '[i]t is very important for such problems (e-waste and exploitation) to have a human face', because 'figures, charts and calculations do not affect humans, they need a human face to make an emotional connection' (Deutsche Welle, 2015). Phones and games are not exempt from postcolonial relations in a virtual world and by confronting the player/consumer with a (representation of a) human face, with a (virtual) human life, which is in the player's hands, *Burn the Boards* tries to create an emotional link that could lead to empathy and compassion, which, in turn, might bring about ethical changes in consuming habits. But who is pushing for these changes?

### **The Designers: Molleindustria and Causa Creations**

Both *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* can be considered what Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter label 'tactical games', ludic works 'designed by activists to disseminate radical social critique' and usually produced outside the margins of the mainstream industry (2009: 191). However, both games are designed by European teams and not by the 'subaltern' themselves (not even as consultants or creative partners). Coined by Antonio Gramsci, 'subaltern' refers to 'those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes' (Aschcroft et al., 2001: 215). The term was further developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in which she questions the possibilities of representation as politically 'speaking for' and artistic/philosophical 're-presentation' (2011: 70). Spivak explores how the subaltern is situated within discursive representation by the West and 'how such an alliance between the intellectual and the subaltern could come about in a way that is not detrimental to the subaltern' (Morton, 2007: 169). Therefore, we must ask ourselves if these games are eliminating the subaltern from representing themselves. In order to explore this question, we must take a look at the creators, Molleindustria and Causa Creations.

These designers seem to fit into Flanagan and Nissembaum's category of 'conscientious designers', that is, designers who support the principle of integrating values into systems and devices. These conscientious designers are 'ethical (they are truthful, factual, and alert and have the player's best interests at heart) and also strive to make a difference through their work' (2014: 12–13).

Molleindustria, an independent game developer, was established in 2003 by Paolo Pedercini, a teacher in Experimental Game Design at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Art, alongside a manifesto which defined it as 'theory and practice of soft conflict . . . through and within video games' (Molleindustria, 2003). Molleindustria originated as an act of protest against the gaming industry as well as a 'reappropriation' of the medium, aiming to 'focus on the emancipatory potential of play, and the very real conflicts that cut across the cycle of production and consumption of video games' (Molleindustria, 2003). Their works range from satirical business simulations to 'meditations on labor and alienation'. Their website shows an opposition to empire and its logic: the project is described as 'a call for the radicalization of popular culture', 'born in the soft core of Capital's processes of valorization', and advocates for the radical transformation of games into 'media objects able to criticize the status quo' through 'understanding and subverting the deepest videogame mechanics without resorting to dull antagonistic translations or artsy self-referential divertissement' (Molleindustria, 2003).

Following Molleindustria's view, video games can pertain to the 'multitude' (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004), which Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter describe as 'the social force that is at once the motor and the antagonist, the engine and the enemy, of Empire' (2009: 187). While Hardt and Negri criticize the conquest of the medium by entertainment corporations, Molleindustria defends video games 'as vehicles of ideologies and narratives that are radically "other" than those belonging to the ruling class' (2013). Pedercini sees Molleindustria's work as a 'procedural critique', which intends to invite players to reflect on the nature of 'the systems that produce those events' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009: 199). He also claims that they look 'not to produce games to entertain radical people, but (to make) radical games' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009: 199). For Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, their 'tactical games are frankly didactic' and they can be considered an 'oppositional intelligence' in the manner of other alternative media (2009: 199).

Causa Creations was founded in 2014 by programmer Tilmann Hars and writer/designer Georg Hobmeier while they were working on *The Resource Paradox* (Causa Creations, to be announced), a real-time strategy game for Amnesty

International India about the struggle of an Indian tribal community whose land is taken over by mining companies. On the studio's website, they claim to have 'a strong disposition towards independent games, but also an equally strong interest in politics and social justice' (Causa Creations, 2014b). Their tone is less confrontational and radical than Molleindustria's, and their goal is 'to develop [their] own brand of social awareness games, collaborating closely with NGOs and other institutions' (Causa Creations, 2014b). Hobmeier explains the origins and motivations behind Causa Creations:

Some of us came into game design via making rather political mods and we are quite happy being in a small yet growing niche of designers that are interested in the intersections of politics, game design and activism. It certainly never feels like a disadvantage, when you realize you aren't making the 25334<sup>th</sup> game with generic science fiction or orcs. (Hobmeier, 2016)

The advantage Hobmeier sees in that niche of designers may be considered cynical, but it also fits into the 'exodus' from empire that Hardt and Negri describe. This is not an anti-globalization but 'a movement for another globalization'; a transformation of the dominant forces of empire, particularly of the market, from within (2000: 210). This view ties in with Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's notion of 'ludo-capitalism', defined as 'the interaction of virtual games and actual power in the context of Empire' (2009: xiv). The fact that Causa Creations see themselves as part of the market speaks of this effort to transform globalization from within. Their games are more traditional design-wise than Molleindustria's, and perhaps less openly radical, but they might also belong to the multitude, 'at once the motor and the antagonist' of empire – although this multitude does not include the direct voice of the subaltern.

According to Hobmeier, the idea for *Burn the Boards*, and thus for the creation of the studio, came up during the research phase of the aforementioned Amnesty International India commission: 'We had built a small prototype of an e-waste simulator during the process and got more and more engrossed in the topic' (Deutsche Welle, 2015). That is, an activist endeavour arose from a business transaction with an

NGO, within the margins of empire logic but not in defence of it. Perhaps, in such cases, we might invert Audre Lorde's words: 'the master's tools' can dismantle 'the master's house' (Lorde, 1983: 94); just as writing literature in a colonizer's language can destabilize and resist colonial discourses.

### **'Hello, Consumer': The Implied and Emancipated Player(s) and the Situated Platform**

The subject of these games is the subaltern and their creators are Western activists, but who is their audience? Every game is designed with a specific type of player as its target, not only on a thematic and ideological level, but also regarding their skills, knowledge, and performance. Expanding Wolfgang Iser's idea of the 'implied reader' in literature, Espen Aarseth develops the concept of the 'implied player', which 'can be seen as a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfil for the game to exercise its effect'. The implied player is part of the construction of the player's role, 'has a concrete, material existence', and is 'a boundary imposed on the player-subject by the game, a limitation to the playing person's freedom of movement and choice' (Aarseth, 2014: 184).

This limitation on the player's freedom fits the idea of games as systems of 'directed freedom' (Navarro-Remesal, 2016: 311), in which the player is given a set of things she can, cannot, ought, and must do; and the process of meaning-making results from her performance within these margins. Some players might be aware of the construction of these limitations (and the resulting implied player) and engage, as Farca explains, 'in a creative dialectic with the implied player whose persuasive attempts are both accepted and critically scrutinised' (2016: 15). This is what Farca calls 'the emancipated player', 'an empirical being who is critical about her or his involvement in the game- and storyworld and who primarily wants to experience play's aesthetic effect' (2016: 2). This 'ludo-gourmet', as Farca calls her, 'enjoys and understands' the game while freeing herself from 'a confining perception and interpretation' of the game (2016: 5, 14).

Therefore, an analysis of the player must include the performance expectations encoded in the game, the interface/avatar setup, and the limited freedom she is

given, which brings to the fore how the player is situated, as Apperley and Jayemanne contend, in the material and 'mundane practices of everyday life' (2012: 10). In addition, the implied player must be considered as a specific phenomenology of play that critically engages with all that ludofictional construction.

*Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* force the player to situate herself in the global context and relationships she inhabits. Apperley uses the term 'situated gaming' to evoke the specificity of context, the particular local cultures of use, and, in sum, the 'specific ecotone where the digital game ecology and the local rhythms of everyday life intersect'. This situated gaming must also include the 'gaming body', not a body in the literal sense, but a 'collective or assemblage that is produced to meet the needs – and desires – of the body of the gamer', including 'numerous ancillary material requirements' and influenced by conditions stemming from the local cultures and contexts of play (Apperley, 2009: 35–7). The relationship between players and their smartphones is at the core of *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards*, and both games intend to make the player reflect on this relationship by using situated gaming and covering the whole system of production. The situatedness of the platform is an invitation for the emancipated player to reflect on the games' meaning and, more specifically, on the materiality of her smartphone. This materiality includes the minerals and their obtention processes. Jussi Parikka explores *Phone Story* in the context of the 'geology of media':

A variety of metal and mineral materialities are essential for a wider picture of the digital economy. Some of these are mapped as part of our awareness of the chemical sides of digital culture – entangled with issues of global politics. . . . Molleindustria's painfully simple game creates another map of this darker side of media materiality. . . . This map is about nonorganic and organic materialities. (Parikka, 2015: 89)

Although *Phone Story* has later been adapted for computers, Pedercini considered that it was essential to first release it on smartphones, to create the feeling that 'the device itself was speaking to the user'. It places the smartphone on which it is

played in the wider geology of media. As Fordyce and van Ryn point out, 'the sleek and glossy finish of an Apple product does nothing to suggest its origins' (2014: 37). The game is intended to be 'a sort of reminder that you can keep with you, like a way-less-permanent tattoo or a bumper sticker, something that you carry around and maybe show off as a conversation-starter' (Alexander, 2011). Fordyce and van Ryn remark that 'playing the game is a performance that attempts to render visible what is already inside the phone' (2014: 39). Its target audience, according to Pedercini, are 'adults in the Western world', who are aware to some extent of the manufacturing process of their technology and issues like the suicides at the factories of Apple supplier Foxconn or electronic waste, but do not connect these aspects 'in the larger frame of technological consumerism' (Alexander, 2011).

Molleindustria's aim with *Burn the Boards* was 'to highlight the goal that "must-have" consumer electronics culture plays in perpetuating these high-impact cycles', thus, again, making the player 'symbolically complicit' (Alexander, 2011). Consequently, they wanted to shift 'the perception of technological lust from cool to not-that-cool', as has previously occurred 'with fur coats, diamonds, cigarettes and SUVs' (Alexander, 2011). The game was banned from the Apple Store, a development that was not expected by Pedercini. He argues that '[o]f course, the goal was to sneak an embarrassingly ugly gnome into Apple's walled garden, but not to provoke the rejection' (Alexander, 2011). Once again, this case highlights that the materiality of the context is crucial for the rhetoric of *Phone Story*, since the game weaves together the materiality of the device, the user's desire, and exploitation in other countries using the very same device as a space for discourse.

Hobmeier thinks of *Burn the Boards* in similar terms. He argues that a mobile game is the best approach to create awareness as 'it is sort of self-referential', because '[y]ou recycle e-waste on a device that could just as well be the object that you recycle in the game'. The player's own smartphone is indirectly singled out as part of the problem, for the creators 'also want players to understand the impact that the very device has, that they are using to play the game' (Deutsche Welle, 2015).

The tagline of the game also refers to the player's personal consumption history: '[e]ver wondered what happened to the old mobile phone you threw away?' It should be highlighted that the implied player in *Burn the Boards* is not exclusively Western, because the creators have declared that they did not 'have Europe in mind exclusively, but the Indian market as well'. Hobmeier affirms that 'the people in these (emerging) countries now experience the same situation as the people in Europe' and even 'lose touch with the kind of reality that we show in the game' (Deutsche Welle, 2015). The colonial relationship has given way not to a postcolonial structure, but to a global capitalism that relies on neocolonial relationships to produce and sell its goods. Empire emerges as an all-encompassing structure that affects power and consumption dynamics outside and within decolonized countries. Empire truly has no outside.

*Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* are created for people who consume smartphones and are familiar with the technology and its software, but not necessarily with their materiality or the geology of media. Their rhetoric redefines the smartphone, from being understood just as container of software to a physical device with specific means of production, sociopolitical impact, and a central role in postcolonial relationships. Therefore, these games can be seen as practical exercises in what Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort label 'Platform Studies' (2009). As Apperley and Jayemanne explain:

[t]he materiality of platforms can be turned inwards to examine the individual components of a platform, and just as easily outwards to focus on the organizational structure that allows the platform to be produced. The genius of platform studies is to locate the platform as the stable object within this complex, unfolding entanglement, allowing it to perform the role of a centre around which other relationships may be traced and examined. (Apperley and Jayemanne, 2012: 12)

It is precisely '[t]he organizational structure that allows the platform to be produced', which is at the centre of these games as formal objects and as activist projects. In



their use of smartphones, *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* seem to be pushing for a new relationship between that technology and players recalling what Chris Bateman calls 'cybervirtue': the desirable qualities that 'the cyborg each of us forms with a robot, such as a laptop, a smartphone, or a desktop computer' might possess (Bateman, 2017: n. pag.). In light of Bateman's 'cybervirtue', it could be argued that these games follow Félix Guattari's vision of 'a new alliance with machines', which would 'join science and technology with human values' (qtd. in Genosko, 1996: 267, 264). The player of tactical games and games created by conscientious designers is meant to play critically, as an emancipated player that reflects on the games' rhetoric and on the real-world problems illuminated by this rhetoric. But, as we argue later in this article, awareness and action are not necessarily linked, and that is why *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* include specific calls to action.

### **Playing as the Subaltern: Ethics Through Gameplay**

The fictions of *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* present complex scenarios of systemic abuse that grant very limited freedom to their protagonists. *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* confront the player to make her understand the situation of these subaltern characters, the workers and Arun respectively, and her role in creating and/or maintaining their situation. They also highlight the lack of power of the subaltern in cyberculture. In cyberculture, Radhika Gajjala defines the subaltern as an 'individual who does not have the tools or the agency to actively and freely participate in a social order' and who does not 'have the voice to speak for her/himself' (2014: 161). The question of representation in cyberculture has also been examined by Ziauddin Sardar, who reminds us that '[c]yberspace is particularly geared towards the erasure of all non-Western histories' and that 'cyberspace not only kills history, it kills people too' (2000: 736, 737). Sardar (2000) also argues that colonization has not ended, it has 'move[d] from the physical colonization of the other to virtual colonization of everything by virtual capitalism' in a world which hides the 'inhumanity of everyday lives' (2000: 746, 751). *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* make explicit the virtual erasure of the subaltern in gaming and digital cultures, where they have neither representation nor a voice.

These games are not made by the subaltern and thus can only be considered an approximation of the voices of these others. Nevertheless, *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* provide a (technological) platform from which histories of otherness can be reclaimed, spaces where their players can become aware of the hegemony of the neoliberal world they inhabit and of those inhumane conditions which are often hidden away for their ease. The representation of the subaltern is not a matter of player identity and diversity, but of adopting the point of view of others – and, following that, of having an ethical reaction to their reality. Therefore, it could be argued that *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* present a double exercise in ethics by making the player reflect and act as a virtual subaltern (asking herself what she should do in the in-game situations) and as an emancipated player-consumer (what she should do outside the game to improve their situations).

The ethical stance in these games is not only presented through text and visuals, but is mainly created through the ruleset and game mechanics. For Ian Bogost, video games and other software can be used for persuasive reasons using ‘procedural rhetorics’, the practice of ‘authoring arguments through processes’, that is, ‘rules of behaviour [and] the construction of dynamic models’ (2007: 29). According to Bogost, the systems of a video game, rather than the text or images, are the true spaces where ideology is actually engraved: rules, metrics, affordances, rewards, and penalties create a virtual process that in some way mirrors a part of the real world and is valorised according to a specific world-view.

Anna Anthropy agrees with Bogost and affirms that ‘games are especially good at communicating relationships’, since ‘games are a kind of theater in which the audience is an actor and takes on a role’ (2012: 20). This issue can be related to Clara Fernández-Vara’s view of the player’s performance, which she compares to the *mise-en-scène* of a theatre play (as opposed to the written script or the code in a game), and where the world-view implicit in the game is negotiated and ultimately accepted or rejected (2009: 4).

Sicart provides a model for the analysis of games that invite ethical reflection, in which he considers both situations where the player can change the world and the system (an ‘open ethical design’, where player values influence the game) and

where the player cannot change them (a 'closed ethical design') (2009: 17). Both models can be implemented to be experimented upon by an emancipated player, keeping with Farca's terminology: whereas an open ethical design shows the consequences of the player's actions and allows her to seek a moral path, a closed design can become ethical either by substracting strategies (where 'the player interprets the game as an ethical experience, cued by design elements') or by mirroring (where the player 'forcefully adopts the questionable values of the game world/character') (Sicart, 2009: 17). The calls to action included in both games discussed here attempt to turn ethical reflection into action, creating what can be called an 'emancipated player-consumer'.

The gameplay of *Phone Story* grants the player little freedom to act and enact change, in a manoeuvre intended to shame the player and establish her complicit role in the exploitation of the postcolonial world. The relationships it presents must be enacted following a rigid script. This closed ethical design is consistent with the situated conditions of play: since the game tells the story 'of this phone', there is no changing the past conditions of its production and, therefore, no way in which we can now detach ourselves from the shame it has created. The player is being told, and forced to re-enact, conditions that have already happened, while compelling her to stop them from being repeated. Although its aesthetics are ironic and self-referential, *Phone Story* goes a long way to ensure the player is aware of the suffering the creation of her phone produced. We have distinguished elsewhere between 'ludic suffering' (caused by the challenge, the controls, the skills the game demands from us, and the desire for a better state) and fictional suffering or 'suffering-believe', expressed by player and non-player characters via character animations, voice acting, text messages, and other narrative events. Suffering-believe is still systemic game-wise, but the process of meaning-making is more nuanced in the narrative, thematic, and ethical planes (Navarro-Remesal and Bergillos, 2016).

The characters in *Phone Story* are nameless and almost faceless, as different types of characters share a single look. They have no agency and show no personality, apart from some basic animation. However, the ironically retro aesthetics of the

game portray their abuse in a clear, although detached, manner. This game seems to present a criticism of our distance and disconnection through mechanisation and dehumanisation: the exploited subaltern is not a real human being, but a non-player character. Since the player is more or less aware of the reality being portrayed, this visual detachment may lead to a sudden acknowledgement and recognition of the Other. Therefore, the game seems to aim not only to inform us, but also to shame us for not identifying this suffering earlier. Suffering-believe helps us recognize non-player characters as more than mere assets, even if they do not have well-defined individualities, agency, or establish relationships of love and friendship with the player or among themselves.

Shame seems to be the endgame of the systemic design of *Phone Story* because it is impossible to win the game, it is only possible to fail ('do not pretend you're not complicit') and the punishment is to keep re-enacting each situation. The player adopts an omnipresent point of view, with no direct player character, and performs several actions to cooperate in the cycle of exploitation. Her role is that of the consumer, who bought a smartphone driven not by necessity but by desire and without considering the abuse in its chain of production. The goal is thus to shame the player, without using an avatar as an intermediary and having instead the player play herself, a consumer who is wooed by the market and in whose hands is the possibility to change it. Hence, the game recalls what Sontag argued in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: 'there is shame as well as shock in looking at the close-up of a real horror. Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it' (2003: 28). By appealing to the player as consumer, these games consider her capable of bringing about change.

Video games provide us with fictions about suffering but also scenarios from which we can enact our compassion. 'Compassionate play', following this conceptualization, would be the acknowledgement of one's own suffering as a player as well as the suffering of others (human or fictional agents), and the interconnectedness between them. Compassionate play is a type of critical reflection where the player

can clearly see who is suffering, how and why, what impact it has on the fictional world, and what she can (or cannot) do about it. In *Phone Story*, the closed ethical design places the culture of obsolescence as the source of the player's real-world suffering (social anxiety, economic pressure) and the player's consumption habits as the cause of distant yet still real suffering. The limited actions available within the game means that there is nothing the player can do about this, but the game's open ending encourages her to act on her feelings of shame and frustration to affect change in the real world.

*Burn the Boards* offers a more traditional experience of 'compassionate play'; it has an avatar for the player to control and with whom to identify, detailed characters, and a bare-bones plot. The gameplay asks the player to balance speed and gain with health preservation, because most of the pieces of the boards are poisonous but rewarding and fast to break. The rewards can be employed not only to benefit Arun, but also to take care of his family, making the game a matter of clashing, often incompatible well-beings. As Mukherjee, drawing on Andrew Baerg (2009), explains, 'the procedural rhetoric of video games . . . [has] a twofold impact: first, in mirroring the choice-driven progressive expansion of free markets and secondly, having an economically inflected rationality behind the making of these choices' (2016: 3–4). In *Burn the Boards*, Arun's health is reduced to an economic asset within the context of his job.

While the system and the world do not change, the player can actually do something to alleviate the suffering of the main character and those who depend on him, i.e. his family. Hobmeier explains that the game is designed to 'give the player an optimistic chance', because '[u]nlike the reality for millions', 'he [Arun] has the chance to win' (Hobmeier, 2016). The three endings (opening a little street food cart, getting an education, or opening an electronics store) demand different degrees of effort and provide Arun and his family with a better future; although it must be noted that none of them change the organizational structure that originally put them in that situation. Empire cannot be defeated and the postcolonial relationship cannot be redefined, just escaped. Whereas *Phone Story* has no ludic suffering (for it is impossible to actually win), *Burn the Boards* exploits the tropes

of traditional video games to link this ludic suffering created by difficulty with a suffering-believe that mirrors a real-world situation, specifically focused on the fate of a single character.

## **Calls to Action**

*Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* combine this goal of raising awareness with a call to action for the player to fight the issues they denounce, through changes in consumer habits and/or direct donations. Hobmeier (2016) repeatedly speaks of the intentions of his studio in creating *Burn the Boards*, which he always situates within the space of the market: 'The fundraising market hasn't discovered games yet, but it will come in the next decade and then we are happy to participate and make more games about the unpleasant reality out there, while figuring out ways to change it'. Causa Creations' position appears far less radical than Molleindustria's, which aims to confront the player's consciousness with 'the unpleasant reality' of empire, but both seem to fit quite clearly into the exodus sought by the multitude. Pedercini insists that they 'don't want people to stop buying smartphones', they just seek to make them aware of the connections between their consumption and the subaltern problems, and ideally change their consumption habits—presumably into more cyber-virtuous ones.

*Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* are games of the multitude, in no small part, because they aim to go beyond just raising awareness amongst players. They illuminate problems within the ecology of media and their possible solutions. This focus on action is typical of the multitude, which is not limited to the individual but also contains the dimensions of social movement and is often implicated in a political project (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009: 188). The website for *Phone Story* has a section for each of the levels of the games and thus for each of the problems with which it deals: coltan, suicides, obsolescence, and e-waste. These sections are filled with explanatory statements, such as '[m]any consumer electronics could be said to have been "designed for the dump" — in that they are intended to be used for a short time before being replaced and tossed into the trash'. More importantly, each section has a selection of links with 'more info' and a '[w]hat can be done?' epigraph, with proposals such as 'local governments can institute conflict-free zones in collaboration with

NGOs', 'obsolete computers can be repurposed and their lifecycle can be extended using less demanding open source software', and 'the industry can adopt a certification that recognizes responsible recyclers' (Molleindustria, 2011).

Initially, Molleindustria pledged to redirect the benefits of *Phone Story*, 70% of app store revenues, 'to the organizations that are fighting corporate abuses', and 'ask festivals and art institutions that are interested in exhibiting the game to contribute to the cause instead of paying artist fees'. The game was created with the explicit purpose of raising money:

Phone Story was supposed to function as a provocative fundraising tool for organizations like SACOM [Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehaviour]. We wanted to allude to something more concrete than "raising awareness" and at the same time provide a counterpoint to the obsession of "monetization" that pervades the community of game developers. (Molleindustria, 2011)

In February 2012, Molleindustria donated 6000USD all the money earned by the game, to Tian Yu, a 19-year-old girl who suffered from serious injuries after trying to commit suicide by jumping from the Foxconn factory complex where she was working in 2010. Molleindustria had initially planned to raise more money, but the game was banned from the iTunes store just hours after being released, citing four code violations: 15.2, which prohibits depictions of child abuse, 16.1, which prohibits apps depicting 'objectionable or crude' content, and two others (21.1 and 21.2) which do not allow users to make donations within a game. The studio published a detailed list of the fundraising in their website and explained in a statement why they decided to help Tian Yu:

we came across the tragic story of Tian Yu, a girl who suffered from serious injuries after trying to commit suicide by jumping from the Foxconn's factory complex where she was working in 2010 [sic]. She was 17 years old at the time. We thought: \$6000 won't do that much to an organization

but they could be significant for an individual who used to earn about \$130 a month. So we made Tian Yu the recipient of our first donation. (Molleindustria, 2011)

The case of Tian Yu contrasts with that of the so called 'iPhone girl', a Chinese factory worker whose story went viral after a picture of her appeared on a British Apple iPhone buyer's brand-new phone in 2008. According to Lisa Nakamura, the iPhone girl went viral with Apple fans because 'she was cute and the event was unexpected', and her popularity 'underwrote the illusion that Apple is "cruelty free," and that users are not contributing to human misery by consuming it' (2011: 3). By shedding light on the story of Tian Yu, Molleindustria is rebutting what Nakamura describes as 'the utopian notion that digital tools endow everyone with the same social and cultural entitlements', something that, according to her, 'is part of the mythology of the neo-liberal commodity' (2011: 3). Nakamura remarks that 'the manufactured desire for the next version of the iPhone has material effects not only upon our wallets and upon the environment, but upon the lives of "iPhone girls" in Asia' (2011: 8). *Phone Story* has served as a useful tool to improve the life of at least one of these 'iPhone girls'.

The website for *Burn the Boards* also contains sections informing about the problems exposed in the games, although the 'learn more' links are broken at the time of writing. Hobmeier explains that the studio intended the game 'to have a certain impact apart from informing people'. In order to do so, they partnered with Action for World Solidarity (AWS), a German NGO, to which they donated 50% of their revenue. As explained on their website, AWS supports migrants in India, mostly Dalits, and works only with local organizations 'with collective and long term goals', whose decisions are 'collective and democratic with a strong participation of women' (Action for World Solidarity, 2017). AWS also explains that India's economic boom has not benefited most of the rural population, neither the 109 million indigenous Adivasi nor the 209 million Dalits. Their partner organizations bring together women, Dalits, and Adivasi, to inform them about their rights and train them to participate in local councils.



These games invite us to redefine our position as witnesses towards those others who have remained invisible, unable to speak, and/or subaltern. Not only do we become aware of a hidden reality that is ingrained in our everyday, but these games provide us with means and ideas to act, so we do not remain 'just voyeurs' (Sontag, 2003: 29). The scenarios in these games allow us not only to experience other parts of reality, but also to engage in 'an attempt to take on a selfhood which can "understand" the postcolonial trauma' (Mukherjee, 2016: 11), either through inhabiting a subaltern or 'becoming-Other', as Mukherjee puts it, or through reframing our own role as consumers, unveiling how we are silencing and oppressing others, even if unknowingly. No longer can these histories be 'concealed in a fantasy' that ignores 'the labor of others' (Ahmed, 2004: 117), because the feelings that phones usually inspire in consumers, such as pride, joy, or power, appear 'only by the concealment of how they are shaped by histories, including histories of production (labor and labor time), as well as circulation or exchange' (Ahmed, 2004: 120–1). The confrontation with the exploitative and shameful process of production and consumption of mobile phones in these games allow us to get closer to these Others. But, as bell hooks warns in 'Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance', '[t]he desire to make contact with those bodies deemed Other, with no apparent will to dominate, assuages the guilt of the past, even takes the form of a defiant gesture where one denies accountability and historical connection' (2005: 369). *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* bring to the fore subaltern histories that have been *consumed* without questioning their origins for a long time and encourage us to rethink our relationship to Others and the way consumers (particularly smartphone users) consume objects and subjects. Once more, the invitation to act after playing is not an afterthought but a vital point of these games as activists' products of the multitude.

## Conclusion

Although they share the goal of making the player confront her role in empire, *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* take different approaches. Both feature a postcolonial locale, but they differ in their use of the postcolonial subject and the way in which they address the player. *Phone Story* uses shame and confrontation, subverting the logic of video games, their economies and metrics, and the rationality of their pro-

gress structures and reward systems. There is no way to win in *Phone Story*; we are already complicit and can only change our real-world habits to stop the exploitation it depicts. It is a radical and transgressive piece made by an activist collective that openly opposes the practices of empire. *Burn the Boards*, on the other hand, uses traditional game design (with a more traditional directed freedom), combining a mainstay of the mobile market, puzzle games, with independent management games like *Papers, Please* or *The Westport Independent* (Double Zero One Zero, 2016), and an elaborate fictional scenario to create a procedural rhetoric that humanizes the subaltern and his struggle. It aims to create compassion through gameplay, while maintaining the presence of the player in a distant position: the game tells the story of Arun, not of the 'consumer'. *Burn the Boards* rewards the player depending on her skill and dedication: mastery and challenge are important parts of the game experience and they can bring about as much as three different happy endings for Arun and his family.

Both games use the smartphone to denounce the industry and practices of that very device, in a situated gameplay experience that considers the reality of the player and her relationship with technology as framed by the dynamics of empire. Thus, we believe the situatedness of the games favours the play style of the emancipated player. The smartphone, as a game device, becomes much more than a piece of technology or tool: it is a landmark of the (harmful) geology of media, a space of empire that functions, at the same time, against empire, the result of an organizational structure and an ideology, even a virtual agent in a power dynamic that connects agents around the world. Smartphones are first created by the subaltern, far from the heart of empire. Next, they are consumed as commodities and symbols of social status around the world. Finally, these devices end up being destroyed (hazardously) by the subaltern.

The nature of the disposable devices that end up as e-waste parallels the disposable nature of many e-waste workers, whose lives are continuously at risk and who, in the global economic context, have become easily replaceable commodities. These workers are slaves to empire, subjects who Kevin Bales has repeatedly defined as 'disposable people', 'cheap lives', upon which consumerism rests (2000: 1–4). Their lives are precarious and let us not forget that, as Judith Butler argues, 'precariousness

implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other' (2009). The voices of the subaltern are not directly heard in these games, but they open a window into a version of their reality, which will hopefully trigger a reaction against the insidiousness of their lives under the shadow of empire.

*Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards* illustrate how, by consuming the smartphones we hold in our hands to play them, we are having an impact in *others'* lives. They do so using procedural rhetoric, interactive systems that synthesize the power dynamics and economical relationships behind the smartphone industry. By having the player enact their suffering in a very rigid, closed fiction, the real-world relationship between her and the subaltern are made explicit, with the phone being subverted into a theatrical space where compassion can arise. Both games combine an in-text awareness strategy with a paratextual call to action that encourages cyber-virtue. Their ultimate goal is to go beyond mere charity and change the way in which we relate to technology as materiality and industry, otherness, and empire. We all partake in the Great Game of this (not so) new empire and we have in our hands the power to change the rules.

## Acknowledgements

Dr Beatriz Pérez Zapata would like to acknowledge the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness for their research funding (Ref. BES-2013-063237).

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** Navarro-Remesal, V and Pérez Zapata, B 2018 Who Made Your Phone? Compassion and the Voice of the Oppressed in *Phone Story* and *Burn the Boards*. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1): 11, pp. 1–30, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.209>

**Published:** 19 February 2018

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