Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies

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POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES IN GAME STUDIES

Settler Colonialism in the Digital Age: *Clash of Clans,* Territoriality, and the Erasure of the Native

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In the past ten years, two seemingly unconnected fields of study have risen to prominence. Patrick Wolfe's 2006 theorization of settler colonialism called for the development of a distinct set of literature and analytical tools to analyze the relationship between indigenous peoples and occupying settlers. Meanwhile, Ian Bogost's 2007 elaboration of the notion of procedural rhetoric provided a theoretical framework to approach the critical analysis of the ideology modeled by a game's rules and design. While each of these theories have proliferated and prospered within their disciplines, this article seeks to bring the two fields together in order to establish a critical framework that can be used to highlight the presence of settler colonialism in popular mobile videogames, in particular Supercell's 2012 mobile game *Clash of Clans*. Within this framework, the essay analyzes how the game engages in a system of play driven by its focus on improvement, progression, and expansion, which ends up operating under the same principles settler colonialism has used to justify the expansion of settler-states and the eradication of indigenous populations. Through an examination of the game's economy, enemies, maps, and music, the essay connects the game's systems of play to the embedded nature of settler colonialism in the videogame industry—particularly the mobile or casual scene—and contemporary life in settler-states. The ultimate goal is to explain how social meaning is derived from these types of games and what that means for both players and creators in terms of developing new, progressive opportunities for play.

Invasion is a structure, not an event –Patrick Wolfe

Their hunger for resources is limitless –Goblin flavor text, *Clash of Clans*

Where Settlers Go to Play

Since the inception of games studies as an academic discipline—with Espen Aarseth's (1997) foundational *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* and the subsequent founding of the international journal *Game Studies*—scholars have fought for the relevant inclusion of videogames within the curriculum (Johnson & Colby, 2013). While games have been used to meet learning outcomes in composition classrooms (Shultz Colby, 2017), environmental science (Wu & Lee, 2015), health (Beale, 2011), and mathematics (Zhang, 2015) amongst others, there remain problems with representations of gender, sexuality, and race. Scholars such as Adrienne Shaw (2014) and Anna Everett and S. Craig Watkins (2008) have critiqued the representational qualities of videogames, but comparatively little work has been published on the connection between videogames and settler colonialist ideologies.

Several scholars have examined the colonialist imperatives of Sid Meier's *Civilization* series (Lammes, 2003; Mir & Owens, 2013; Mukherjee, 2017; Poblocki, 2002) as well as other games centered on empire building, such as the *Age of Empires* series (Ensemble Studios, 1997–2009) (Dillon, 2008), and the conquest of indigenous peoples (Douglas, 2002). Few, however, have looked at how these ideologies are enacted in casual, mobile games, which tend to have much larger audiences than the aforementioned niche strategy games. Even when the range of game genres has been expanded—as in *Games of Empire* (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009) the seminal game studies examination of global capitalism and colonial power—the discipline of settler colonialism has often been neglected when it comes to the analysis and critique of popular videogames. Since settler colonialism has become a specialized field that is derived from postcolonialism but differentiated in significant ways, most notably in settler colonialism's focus on the indigenous, it has become necessary to analyze videogames in a context similar to previous postcolonial approaches, such as Shoshana Magnet's (2006) focus on landscapes and Hanli Geyser and Pippa Tshabalala's (2011) interrogation of westernized zombies in *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009).

This article seeks to rectify this omission of settler colonialism by examining the underlying ideologies of the popular mobile simulation game *Clash of Clans* (Supercell, 2012) and how they contribute to the normalization of settler colonial structures. It is necessary to critique a range of games, rather than only a select few that focus specifically on colonizing and historical empire, in order to show that the ideologies and messages of games can be identified and analyzed in almost any game.

Once the realm of powerful computers and expensive home consoles, millions of adults in the United States now carry around cell phones with more powerful gaming capabilities than anything produced in the eighties and most of the nineties (Smith, 2017). As widespread as videogames have become across the globe, they are often misunderstood and misrepresented in news coverage, especially in regard to violence, aggression, and antisocial behavior (McGonigal, 2011). The attention to representations of physical violence in games has dwarfed the attention paid to systemic and cultural violence. Whether it is *Actraiser*'s city management aspects (Quintet, 1990), *Farmville*'s insistent requests for help clearing the land (Zynga, 2009), or *Turok the Dinosaur Hunter*'s (Acclaim Entertainment, 1997) reductive take on indigenous populations settler colonialism is deeply entrenched in multiple games in a variety of genres and platforms. Nowhere is this more prevalent and entrenched than in mobile simulation games, which I define as games that attempt to recreate physical labor in a digital environment, such as raising livestock, constructing buildings, and gathering resources.

In his study of the differences between settler colonialism in the United States and the African continent, Mahmood Mamdani noted that 'what is exceptional about America, the USA, is that it has yet to pose the question of decolonization in the public sphere' (2015: 608). As the recent protests over the Dakota Access Pipeline have demonstrated (Dwyer, 2017), the American public is more concerned with current legalities than with the histories of violated treaties, indigenous genocide, and the repatriation of native land to its original owners. The lack of public awareness of the plight of indigenous peoples and the structural nature of settler colonialism cannot be blamed on videogames—it is a process that has been happening for well over

five centuries. The field of settler colonial studies seeks to identify the mechanisms settlers used to dispossess indigenous populations of their land and to justify their genocide. This can and does take many forms, and it is important to note—as Wolfe does in the epigraph that opens this article (Wolfe, 2006: 388)—that settler colonialism is not relegated to single, definable events, but is above all a *structure*. It is a continual process in which settlers seek to expand their territory at the expense of indigenous lives and their ancestral connections to specific places.

Just as film (Limbrick, 2010), television (Risling Baldly, 2015), and literature (Piterberg, 2013) have been criticized for obfuscating or outright denying the effects and existence of settler colonial structures in contemporary society, so too can videogames. Because this article is aimed at scholars of both indigenous studies and games studies, I begin by reviewing some of the basic tenets of settler colonialism: removal, relocation, forced assimilation, and codification of territoriality. Having established this conceptual framework, I then use several critical approaches from videogame studies to show how these games operate as a mimesis of settler colonialism. I demonstrate, notably, that players are encouraged to both explicitly and implicitly develop virtual systems of oppression, genocide, and colonization. These virtual systems, I argue, serve to normalize such systems in the real world. I end the essay with an exploration of the impact on the embeddedness of settler colonialism in the videogame industry—particularly in mobile games—in terms of perpetuating destructive ideologies and repetitive gameplay. The ultimate goal is to understand how social meaning is derived from these types of games and what that means for both players and creators.

The Native and the Digital

Videogames are inherently social when they include any type of multiplayer functionality, as *Clash of Clans* does (Juul, 2010: 121). They are thus positioned to engage or indulge in societal power structures such as settler colonialism. Settler colonialism is a distinct form of colonization in that its focus is on eliminating the indigenous in order to gain access to their land, as opposed to the focus of traditional colonialism on the extraction of resources—both natural and human, in the form

of slaves. Wolfe notes that 'territoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element' (Wolfe, 2006: 388). He examines the legacy of settler colonialism in its most successful iteration—that of the settlement and domination of North America by Europeans—in relation to Israel's current settler-colonialist-state practices and its occupation of Palestinian territory. Wolfe defines settler colonialism as 'an inclusive, land-centered project that coordinates a comprehensive range of agencies, from the metropolitan centre to the frontier encampment, with a view of eliminating Indigenous societies' (Wolfe, 2006: 393). Many other theorists and scholars have taken up the torch lit by Wolfe and analyze the ways in which settler colonialism operates officially and unofficially. The founding of such journals as *Settler Colonial Studies* in 2011 and *Decolonization* in 2012 has facilitated this growth.

The fact that settler colonialism is in itself a process has led to its quick, seamless, and thoughtless incorporation into videogames, which are themselves the result of a compiling of processes. In *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost (2007) puts forth his of idea of videogames producing meaning and persuading players through the use of procedural rhetoric. Bogost defines procedural rhetoric as 'the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures' (Bogost, 2007: ix). Because videogames are created through code and then experienced through the compilation of that code via strict procedural processes performed by a computer or console, the parameters set up by those procedures—the game's rules and gameplay—create a 'possibility space' where play is allowed to happen.

This possibility space can be created through any form of play because, according to Salen and Zimmerman (2003), all play requires rules to be in place, but Bogost notes that in videogames the possibility space is defined by and 'refers to the myriad configurations the player might construct to see the ways the processes inscribed in the system work… we explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the symbolic systems the game provides' (Bogost, 2008: 121). The possibility space can then be analyzed for how the procedures used to shape it reflect particular ideologies and ways of interacting with the virtual and actual world. In doing so, the play afforded by videogames allows them to be more than 'just stages that facilitate

cultural, social, or political practices.' Rather, they become 'media where cultural values themselves can be represented—for critique, satire, education or commentary' (Bogost, 2008: 119). In this way, Bogost argues, proper criticism of videogames allows players to 'read games as deliberate expressions of particular perspectives. In other words, videogames make claims about the world, which players can understand, evaluate, and deliberate' (Bogost, 2008: 119). Bogost's claims about the universality of procedural rhetoric have been criticized for their lack of focus on player agency in games (Sicart, 2011), but it remains a useful framework for beginning a critical analysis of any system, including games.

Through an in-depth and thorough look at how games like *Clash of Clans* set up their systems and the ways in which they allow players to interact and produce desirable game states—winning the game, conquering an opponent, becoming stronger and more formidable—one can see how a settler colonialist mindset is part of the game's internal logic and, as Bogost reminds us, '[a]ny social or cultural practice can be understood as a set of processes, and our understanding of each of them can be taught, supported, or challenged through videogames' (Bogost, 2008: 136). Because of the ways the structure of settler colonialism has become normalized through US law (the Dawes Act of 1887, for example, and the Indian Relocation Act of 1956) and reductive yet popular depictions of indigenous people, looking at representations of indigeneity in digital spaces and videogames offers a fresh, defamiliarized opportunity to analyze these structures.

Clashing with Culture and Casual Games

In order to fully understand *Clash of Clans* and rhetorically analyze the game in terms of its relation to settler colonialist structures, I played the game for several months with play times ranging from short two minute sessions to longer, sustained sessions of around thirty minutes. I played through the single-player campaign and also joined a guild and participated in player vs. player battles.

Clash of Clans is not a particularly unique mobile simulation game. It relies on many mechanics and tropes of less lucrative predecessors such as *Cubivore: Survival of the Fittest* (Nintendo, 2002), *Backyard Monsters* (Kixeye, 2010) and *Battle Pirates*

(Kixeye, 2011). It is also a game that, because of its success, has been imitated and iterated upon countless times across mobile, consoles, and PCs. Games such as *Boom Beach* (Supercell, 2013)*, Clash of Kings* (Elex Tech, 2014)*, Game of War: Fire Age* (Machine Zone, 2013)*, Dragon City* (Social Point, 2013)*,* and *Star Wars: Commander* (Disney Interactive, 2014) all operate under similar rulesets and game design principles of resource collection, territory acquisition, and building efficiency. The official *Clash of Clans* website greets players and describes the game by stating, 'Welcome, Chief! Here you can learn everything you need to attack your enemies, defend your village and conquer the realm' (Supercell, n.dat). The focus of players in these games is less on winning and more on increasing their military might and efficiency in resource acquisition and allocation. In fact, the vast majority of these types of mobile simulation games do not offer any definable endpoint, kill screen, or win condition. The game is meant to go on forever in a way that mirrors Wolfe's assertion that settler colonialism is not defined nor confined by a singular event.

The point of these games, *Clash of Clans* in particular, is to amass the most powerful army, the most updated and improved structures, and to be able to go wherever players please on the world map, unimpeded by other players or non-player characters that are controlled by the game's code. *Clash of Clans* operates in two basic modes: improving your own base/territory and attacking other bases for resources and land. Whether an attack is successful or a failure matters little to the overall effect on players' territories and game states. Battles can be won, lost, and drawn, but there are always more battles on the horizon. This slow and steady build toward the improvement and elimination of others' bases and resources echoes Wolfe's claim that 'elimination is an organizing principle of settler-colonial society rather than a one-off occurrence' (Wolfe, 2006: 388). While the same could be said of many videogames—arguably a reflection of the mainstream acceptance of settler colonialism—the focus of *Clash of Clans* on resource and territory acquisition specifically connects it to the processes of colonization in the United States and other settler states. Their overall organizational structure is one that encourages systemic destruction and replacement. The game's setup and play conditions, however, enact the structures of settler colonialism in ways both similar and different to this initial premise of a game that never ends.

When *Clash of Clans* begins, players are implored to build a fort on the outskirts of the civilized world. They are tasked with building a town hall, which then acts as players' bases of operations. After they have constructed their town halls, players are then directed to begin allocating resources. Gold via gold mines and elixir (a sort of pinkish-purple goo used to train soldiers and other combatants) via elixir collectors are required to be built. Some rudimentary defenses such as swivel-based cannons and walls are also introduced to players. After building barracks, players are allowed to create troops, starting at first with simple 'Barbarians' and progressing through 'Archers' and culminating in the 'P.E.K.K.A.' a knight/samurai/robot that specializes in large, single-target attacks that do massive damage. Players are encouraged to progress through these units by improving and upgrading their town hall, barracks, and laboratory.

Of course, to improve the town's fortifications and amenities, resources are needed. In general, elixir is used to bolster troops and gold is used to build and upgrade buildings. While players' gold mines and elixir collectors do produce resources slowly over time, players are offered another way to gather these things: by attacking and stealing others' resources. Players can choose two options: they may attack other players by paying a small gold fee and then deploying their troops, or they may attack non-playable characters and work their way through the game's campaign by fighting and expanding the territory that is able to be reached and exploited. The wilderness is represented by a fantasy style map with place names reminiscent of the US West such as Rocky Fort, Gold Rush, Arrow Head, and Fort Gobb. Players are actively encouraged, via in-game prompts, to push further and further across the map, expanding the frontier and increasing the amount of opportunities to develop their own towns and make them stronger, more impervious to attack, and a greater source of pride and 'Achievements.'

The progression and forward momentum created by the acquisition and expansion of territory are set up as the ideal state toward which players should work. In a similar move, settler colonialism seeks to naturalize the expansion of settlers across indigenous land. In fact, stagnation and failure to keep moving forward on the map represents players' inability to 'beat' the game and an overall weakness of

strategy and approach. Lorenzo Veracini (2014) outlines a similar mindset in regard to the opportunity for the theft of Indigenous land. Veracini notes that 'settler outrage mirrored the intuition that a settler polity that is unable to expand has entered a declining stage of its development' (Veracini, 2014: 625). Much like settlers on the frontier, players are given two options: expand or decline. There is no other state of being. In these zero-sum games, you are either about to win or you are losing. Players who do not check into their towns everyday will eventually come back to find them reduced to smoking heaps of rubble, devoid of resources.

This is the overall gameplay set-up, but as Bogost observes in his formulation of a procedural rhetoric, how the game is played and the opportunities play creates allow for ideological systems to be simulated. In order to do so, I look at the notion of the proper utilization of the land, the intense individualization set up by the games clan system, the positioning of landscape as a nuisance, the idea of expansion and its Utopian ambitions, improving the land in order to increase the excess gained, and the game's pastoral music and sound effects. The modeling of settler colonialism in *Clash of Clans* has the overall effect of normalizing and naturalizing an ideology that is already deeply structural and hidden—to settlers, at least—in contemporary life (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Much like settler colonialism, *Clash of Clans* asks players to go beyond simply modifying and adjusting the landscape. The focus in the game and in settler colonialism's justification of indigenous dispossession is rooted in the idea that the land and its resources belong to those who seek to improve it. As soon as players complete their first raids into enemy territory, they are tasked with upgrading the town hall they built at the outset. With each upgrade of the town hall, the game allows players to produce more resources. This means that each time an improvement is made to the town, it can expand, developing and building more gold mines, elixir collectors, barracks, and defense towers. Many elements and aspects of the game are also gated behind these improvement barriers. These include several of the flashier, more powerful army units and buildings. In order to unlock and use the 'Dragon', a powerful flying unit that can attack ground and air units, the barracks and town hall must be upgraded to Level 9. If players fail to properly use their resources and

land to improve their territory, they are not allowed to play with much of the game's content, particularly the more strategic aspects of the endgame. This is how the game uses its procedural rhetoric to ensure that constant improvement is always on players' minds.

The intense focus on improving and properly utilizing the land is a hallmark of settler colonialist discourse and in every settler state has been used to justify land theft. Susan Bruce describes this settler rationale: 'those willing to exert themselves to make this space productive earn thereby the right to its use and the right to appropriate it for themselves, dispossessing in the process those whose engagement with the land is judged insufficiently productive' (Bruce, 2015: 27–8). Wolfe similarly notes that 'the ideological justification for the dispossession of Aborigines was that "we" could use the land better than they could, not that we had been on the land primordially and were merely returning home' (Wolfe, 2006: 389). As long as players are focused on upgrading buildings and unlocking more powerful troops, they are incentivized to attack other players in multiplayer mode and to expand their territoriality in the single-player campaign. Even the game's economic system of gold and elixir (and eventually, if enough improvement happens, dark elixir) has little to no use outside of improvement. Gold can only be used to make more buildings or upgrade those that already exist. Elixir can likewise only be used to create new troops or research new powers for those that already exist. While there are decorative items that can be bought with gold and elixir, they offer no value and do not change the state of play. The game's insular economic system shaped by the game's procedural parameters and mirroring settler discourse makes the ultimate goal clear: colonize or die.

Neoliberalism and Self-Improvement

The goals of improving or dying happen on the level of the individual. *Clash of Clans* markets itself in part as a social game, in which players can create or join a clan and work with others to achieve common goals. Even in this forced communalism, settler colonialism is reenacted. While clans do perform a social function, the vast majority of the clans created by players in the game are used for two reasons: to request free additional troops from clan mates and to gain Clan Perks. Clan Perks have two functions: reduce the amount of time and resources needed to get more troops and

increase the limit and storage of resources gained by attacking other players. While the clan can be used to offer help to other players, the game does not incentivize this in any way. It becomes an illusory community that is more invested in the individual and the benefits they receive than any actual greater, communal good. While this is in line with Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's (2008) assertion that new media has been adapted toward neoliberal ends, the interactive nature of the game makes it even more troubling. The inclusion of leaderboards, both within the clan and in the game's much larger population, ensures that the attention on the individual is never lost. In Wolfe's (2006) examination of the forced removal of the Choctaw, he notes that many of the Choctaw opted to stay in their ancestral lands and take up the United States' offer of land allotment. This would seem to go against settler colonialism's goals of eliminating the Native as they are encouraging their rootedness and also giving them a means to support themselves. However, Wolfe points out that this is part of the larger, systemic notion of destroying the Native by destroying the tribe. He writes:

'The reason that the remaining Choctaw were acceptable had nothing to do with their being Choctaw. On the contrary, it had to do with their not (or, at least, no longer) being Choctaw. They had become 'homesteaders and American citizens.' In a word, they had become individuals' (Wolfe, 2006: 397).

The negotiation between what is tribal and what belongs to the individual is the distinction between the homesteader and the Native.

Wolfe argues that the giving of land to individual Choctaw was an important aspect of settler colonialism as 'what distinguished… the removing Choctaw from those who stayed behind was collectivity. Tribal land was tribally owned—tribes and private property did not mix' (Wolfe, 2006: 397). A similar arrangement is made in *Clash of Clans*. While one member of a clan may offer help and resources to another, there is never any collective benefit. Each action or reward is claimed only by an individual. Even amongst the Clan Leaderboards, only the clan members who are most active and have wreaked the most destruction are rewarded by the game. You may win as a member of a clan, but the game does not allow the whole clan to win together. If you want those resources, you are going to have to earn them yourself,

thereby promoting an individualistic/neoliberal ideology as the game's procedural rhetoric.

While attacking others and expanding territory are the primary way *Clash of Clans* intends its players, there is an additional, though much less effective, means of improving one's game state. The game has sixty-six individual Achievements that are completed through various tasks and award experience points and Gems, a type of currency that allows players to speed up construction times or quickly allocate resources. These achievements, complete with dubious names such as 'Union Buster' and 'Empire Builder', encourage players to favor certain playstyles over others, as it is rare to come across opportunities to gain Gems without purchasing them with real-world money. While the majority of the achievements will be completed by most players through normal gameplay, requiring players to meet certain numerical thresholds for gold and elixir gathering, for instance, there are several that produce possibility spaces for settler colonialism. Chief among these is the 'Nice and Tidy' achievement that is gained three times when players remove 5/50/500 obstacles. Obstacles are defined by the game as mushrooms, trees, rocks, and bushes. Additionally, each time an 'obstacle' is removed, players have the opportunity to be rewarded additional gems, the scarcest resource in the game. The fact that removing the trees makes players' towns more 'nice and tidy' indicates the game's implicit message that the best landscape is one that has been transformed by settlers and is entirely in service to them.

Besides further engaging in the idea that the proper role for players is to be the ones 'improving' the land, the game pushes forward with its settler colonialist ideology by positioning the landscape as nuisance. Leslie Marmon Silko points out how contrarian the idea of improving a landscape is to her people. She writes: 'Ancient Pueblos took the modest view that the thing itself (the landscape) could not be improved upon' (Silko, 1996: 266). Silko goes on to explain the Pueblo view of the landscape, a perspective that stands in sharp contrast to settler understandings. Instead of being a site to be improved or draw excess from, the landscape was a way of connecting to the past, present, and future of the Pueblo. 'Pueblo people', Silko

suggests, 'could not conceive of themselves without a specific landscape. Location, or 'place', nearly always plays a central role in the Pueblo oral narratives' (Silko, 1996: 269). Of course, the Pueblo are just one of hundreds of different indigenous nations that were devastated by the onset of settler colonialism, but even looking at this specific formulation of how the landscape informs the belief systems of a people shows that the ways in which the settler idea of dominating the natural world has become the norm in games like *Clash of Clans*. Videogames as a medium are often lauded for their ability to tell stories in new ways, through immersion, interactivity, and multiple branching paths (Bissell, 2011). In this instance, however, any sense of narrative inspiration from the landscape is ignored by the game's achievements, and the landscape is treated as just one more task to complete, a roadblock in the way of territorial and town hall expansions.

Clash of Clans treats expansion as a default goal that all players should aim for, and in doing so, it perpetuates the settler perspective of the environment as passive and static as well as the centuries old ideas of a Western Utopia that leaves no place for the Indigenous. Óliver Pérez Latorre proposes 'an analysis model for studying the social discourse of video games based on examining the structures and processes of the ludic design' (Latorre, 2015: 416). In an ideological framework that draws on Bogost's procedural rhetoric, Latorre identifies sixteen possible spaces in which play is created by videogames. Each one of these formulations acts as a possibility space that encompasses the processes of a game›s rules and the aesthetic of its design.

Analyzing a game's spatiotemporal design—the world in which the game takes place, as well as the pace of that game's world—reveals part of the representative system created by the game's processes and determines how the environment is perceived by the game system and thus by players. Latorre argues that 'the design of a spatiotemporal environment with a dominant "active" versus a dominant "passive" or reactive with respect to the player [*sic*] affects the symbolic relationships between subject and environment, especially the power relationships between them' (Latorre, 2015: 423). In regard to *Clash of Clans*, the temporal environment is active. Alexander Galloway (2006) considers action, in the sense of interactive input, as the defining

feature of games, but is also quick to point out that many games do not rely on a constant stream of user input to provide the interactive sense of action. As in Chun's (2016) notion that real-time is not actual time, but the time it takes for a computer to process code, *Clash of Clans* estranges a player's relationship to time. The game continues to run, whether players are playing or not. If a player starts a building and it takes ten hours to complete the construction, the game will continue the countdown even while your mobile device is powered off. This gives further credence to the representation of settler colonialism as a structure rather than an event. The game does not need players to continue in its machinations. Players may provide inputs, but the rest is out of their control. The buildings and troops in the game do not appear to be half-finished. There is no definable event for when they are almost complete. Instead, they move from unfinished to finished in a single, magical poof. The only indicator of development is a progress bar that obfuscates the actual work by failing to depict any sense of day-to-day structural progress.

While the temporal environment is active, the spatial environment is passive. Nothing will change on a map or in a territory if players do not take deliberate actions to change it. A rock or tree will remain where it is until players command a Builder to remove it. This disparity between the spatial aspects of the environment and the temporal aspects leads to an odd dichotomy. Some aspects of the game players have no control over, such as the amount of time it takes to complete an upgrade. The decision to make those changes, on the other hand, initially resides entirely with players and the environment is not allowed to have any autonomy. The land can only be changed when the hard work and ingenuity of the settler is applied to it, and from the very beginning, *Clash of Clans* positions players as settlers. In her examination of the dispossession of Palestinian lands, Bruce (2015) notes the common rhetoric of both the settlers in Thomas More's Utopia and the Israeli state. I would argue that *Clash of Clans* employs the same rhetoric through its depictions of its environment. More's Utopia, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and the core gameplay loop of *Clash of Clans* all share 'the conviction that with the proper application of labor, the most hard and unforgiving of terrains can be made productive' (Bruce, 2015: 27). In the same way that the Native American was depicted as nomadic and uninterested

in modifying their environment in order to justify settler land theft, *Clash of Clans* compels players to apply labor to their territory in order to customize and shape it or risk losing everything they have earned up to that point.

Clash of Clans's procedural rhetoric establishes possibility spaces in which players are encouraged to further engage with settler colonialism. Beyond the game's design and rules, there are elements of the system at work in furthering the ideology. Brendan Keogh (2014) argues that videogame critics should explore every phenomenological aspect of a game in order to fully understand its message. Keogh states that 'the affordances and constraints of videogame play, what the player can or cannot "do", only make sense in relation to the audio-visually constructed fictional world of the game, and it is not surprising that videogames would pick up representational strategies of other audiovisual media' (Keogh, 2014: 6). He goes on to examine several different games and the way their rules and design interact with other media embedded in them, such as menu and user interface design, characters, and music. In doing so, he shows how these elements can bolster or unhinge a game's message and meaning. An examination of the music and sound effects of *Clash of Clans* helps to further inform its settler-colonialist pretenses.

The game's main musical theme, when viewing the town, is unassuming. It is a gentle collection of strings that does not build or crescendo, rather it streams along in a repeatable loop that reinforces the notion that this is a game designed to be played for a long time. What is interesting to note about the game's music and sound is its use of natural noise. The gentle chirps of birds and the rush of wind through trees can be heard over the top of the soundtrack. The chirrups, whistles, and croaks of woodland animals round out the symphony to give the audio a bucolic, pastoral feel. *Clash of Clans* does not have a player-controlled agricultural system in place, but it is not uncommon for similar games to have orchards and farms as a central resource-gathering mechanic. In its place, *Clash of Clans* substitutes pink-haired workers scurrying across the landscape, picking from bushes and working the trees. Even without the presence of player-built farms, *Clash of Clans* still attempts to connect its player to the idyllic shepherd playing on the pipes or farmer relaxing with his fiddle after a long day of work. This coincides with the false justification that

the land belongs to those who will work it. After all, the main image of territory in *Clash of Clans* is full of little workers running to and fro. In his examination of the differences between settler colonialism in African nations and in the United States, Mamdani (2015) goes even further and classifies this justification as the myth that gave rise to the American identity. 'The real stuff of American history,' he writes, 'was said to be the work of the democratic yeoman farmer, whose individual toil was said to be responsible for the clearing and cultivation of the soil and the continuous extension of the frontier' (Mamdani, 2015: 604). The imitated animal sounds push players toward feeling as if they, too, are a part of this never-ending expansion.

Playing with and against Ideologies

There can be little doubt that *Clash of Clans* and games similar to it call for players to enact settler colonialism each time they boot up the game. Since settler colonialism is a structure that is so thoroughly embedded in contemporary US life, this article seeks to point out its acceptance and integration into popular videogames. Similar arguments can and have been made concerning depictions of race in videogames. Anna Everett and S. Craig Watkins (2008) examine how videogames engage and subvert stereotypes about race through play. They ultimately argue that 'urban/ street games produce some of the most powerful, persistent, and problematic lessons about race in American culture' (Everett & Watkins, 2008: 142). Systemic racism, in ways similar to settler colonialism, is easily co-opted into videogames. These ideological systems operate behind the scenes and do *not* inform the game's central aspects—in contrast to the way that, say, shooting and violence *do* inform the central aspects of many videogames—and thus, only become apparent through an analysis of a game's procedural rhetoric and possibility spaces. In the same way that, as Everett and Watkins have observed, 'the portrayal of race in videogames remains remarkably narrow' (Everett & Watkins, 2008: 143), so too is the representation of settler colonialism in *Clash of Clans*. It would be interesting for future scholars to see if similar procedures and effects are prevalent in other videogames and genres because, if they truly are ubiquitous, the result is a suffocating, myopic representation of the world. Adrienne Shaw (2010) connects the common discourses surrounding

videogames and gamer culture with the hegemonic power structures that dictate standards and conventions in politics, culture, and technology. She also (2014) notes that mainstream videogames appear to offer little alternative to either the white male protagonist or the white male protagonist's view of the world. Shaw interrogates this assumption, however, and finds large populations of gamers who do not identify with this perspective, and the modular and customizable nature of new media, especially videogames, has the potential to reshape our notions of representation and how we perceive ourselves.

Given the devastating effects many of the systems we have in place have had on both indigenous peoples and the environment—including the role of videogames relying on precious minerals from colonized countries and the e-waste which is disposed in the same countries after passing through developed countries—it is important to offer alternate ways of viewing our relationship with the world around us. Nowhere is the need for alternate views on our networked, digital world more important than in the educational system. Over the past fifteen years, videogames in the classroom have become more accepted and mainstream. In a recently funded study by the MacArthur Foundation, Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh, and Chris Evans (2009) examined the ways in which videogames could be used to foster civic development. In the research for their book *The Civic Potential of Videogames*, they conducted surveys and experiments with teenagers to determine if the quantity and the quality of videogame play influence civic engagement. They determine that 'the overall amount of game play is unrelated to civic engagement, but that some qualities of game play are strongly related to civic engagement' (Kahne et al. 2009: 40). In particular, they find that teenagers who play 'more civically oriented games', such as *Civilization* and *SimCity*, are more apt to vote and be politically engaged (Kahne et al. 2009: 1). Similarly, aspects of socially-oriented games, of which *Clash of Clans* should certainly be considered an example, help lead to civic and political engagement. If playing videogames leads teenagers to certain civic actions, then we need to be asking what kind of civics lessons they are learning from these games. As Latorre points out in explaining his social discourse model, 'In *Civilization IV*, the player can control very different civilizations (Greek, Chinese, Aztec, etc.) and adopt

many strategic variations at the ludic level but only one history can be lived again and again: Western history' (Latorre, 2015: 419). If the only option for players is to enact settler colonialism, it will arguably help us to continue to see dispossession and the elimination of Indigenous peoples as a natural and normal part of our history.

Of course, pointing out a problem is a lot easier than offering a solution. Any possible answer must take into account the numerous variables that go into designing, creating, marketing, producing, and playing a videogame. While such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this article, there are ways of approaching game design that can shift the focus away from domination, expansion, and settler colonialism. In his book *A Casual Revolution*, Jesper Juul (2010) examines the ways in which videogame play is constructed in social settings and how the social dynamic affects the goals of a game. By looking at multiplayer games, Juul is able to identify three frames of play that operate concurrently. These three frames are: the game as goal orientation, the game as experience, and the game as a social event. Essentially, when playing a multiplayer game such as *Clash of Clans*, players want to win, to have interesting experiences, and to fulfil a desire to manage the social situation the game is played in (Juul, 2010: 127). These game design constraints operate in concert with the constraints of the contexts of production, including political economies, global capitalism, and the demographics of developers, to produce goals that necessarily intersect and diverge in different ways, depending on the game and players. While there are multiple variables involved, in every social game 'the shared understanding of goals allows helpful and not-so-helpful in-game actions. If players did not share this mutual understanding of goals, in-game actions would not have the same social and emotional value' (Juul, 2010: 126). If the goal of the game can be changed, then the social and emotional value of that game changes along with it. While *Clash of Clans* does not have a winnable state, it does incentivize players to climb up the game's leaderboards. The goal of the game is to get as high up on the leaderboard as possible by collecting the most resources and having the most improved and expanded territory. If the goals change, so do the values players place on specific, largely settler-colonialist ways of playing the game.

While 'improvement' is the main focus of *Clash of Clans*, it is closely aligned with the idea of expansion. The previously discussed progression of the single-player campaign mode and its rustic map also advances the idea that expansion is as desirable as improvement. Latorre, in moving away from expectations that videogames can or should be didactic or impart aggressive and violent feelings in players, notes that in the case of *Grand Theft Auto IV (GTA IV)* 'it is not that the game forces the player to 'play at being criminal', but rather that players 'learn' that in the given conditions of the character/player and surrounding game world, the activity that tends to emerge is crime' (Latorre, 2015: 432). *Clash of Clans*, while quite different from *GTA IV*, teaches players in a similar manner. The lesson that emerges is that improvement is the ultimate end goal, and territorial expansion leads to increased resources that can be used in the service of future upgrades and improvements. This perpetuates a never-ending cycle with limitless borders. There is no end to the frontier in a digital world. These ideologies can be perpetuated indefinitely.

Conclusion

Rather than simply depicting settler colonialism, *Clash of Clans* asks players to become active participants in it. Yet, unlike games such as *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto*, in which players are able to see and visualize the effects of their violence, no such ramifications are depicted in *Clash of Clans*. The Native has been entirely eliminated. All that is left is to acquire their land, with the implicit sense that players have earned it through an individualistic effort to improve, commodify, and then optimize the resources, buildings, and environment. It is a harrowing depiction because, rather than critique or mock settler colonialism's goal of disappearing the Indigenous, *Clash of Clans* reifies it and makes it desirable.

This article used Bogost's procedural rhetoric to analyze the underlying ideologies present in the popular mobile simulation game *Clash of Clans*. An examination of the game's rules, systems, achievements, progression, and audio reveal the ways mobile simulation games normalize and typify the structures of settler colonialism. In much the same way that other forms of popular media have been critiqued for their

colonialist imperatives, a thorough examination of games and their relationship to economic and racial oppression presents an opportunity to visualize and thus begin the work of deconstructing the monolithic structures of settler colonialism that seek to assimilate and eliminate indigenous cultures.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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