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## POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES IN GAME STUDIES

# Counterfactual Communities: Strategy Games, Paratexts and the Player's Experience of History

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The genre of history strategy games is a crucial area of study because of what is at stake in the representation of controversial aspects of history in popular culture. Previous work has pointed to various affordances and constraints in the representation of history, based on the framing of the game interface, the alignment of goals with certain strategies and textual criticism of the contents of the games. In contrast, this article examines these games from the perspective of the player's experience of play in relation to a wider gaming community. It is in these counterfactual communities that players negotiate their individual experience with their knowledge of the history that is presented in the games that they play, indicating that the relationship between digital games, players and history is highly contextual. The relevant practices of players of history strategy games are illustrated with examples from the official and unofficial communities of the Paradox Interactive games *Europa Universalis II* and *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun*. The shared paratexts demonstrate how positions are negotiated in relation to the 'official' version of history presented in the games. These negotiations are made tangible through the production and sharing of paratexts that remix the official history of the games to include other perspectives developed through counterfactual imaginations. These findings indicate the importance of including perspectives from gaming communities to support other forms of analysis in order to make rigorous observations about the impact of digital games on popular history.

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## Introduction

Digital games are now a key element in the circulation of history in popular culture, which takes many forms, from *Downton Abbey* (ITV Studios, 2010–2015) and *Outlander* (Left Bank Pictures, 2014–), through to *Dunkirk* (Nolan, 2017) and digital games like *Medal of Honor* (Danger Close Games, 2010). Even though these texts are understood as ‘entertainment’, the questions of ‘which history’ may still arise. While Christopher Nolan’s film *Dunkirk* was met with almost universal acclaim, concerns were raised in India about the lack of Indian soldiers in the film, especially considering the key role that they played in the real evacuation (Bhushan, 2017). While Nolan’s intention is to focus on individual experiences, one consequence of this approach is to reinforce a predominantly white, Imperial version of British history. Similar issues arise when digital games make use of popular history. Often their perspective on history is a markedly narrow one, shaped by the key markets of many digital games being in the global ‘North’. However, many very popular digital games approach history in a more abstract way. Rather than using history as a ‘period’ setting in the manner of Ubisoft’s blockbuster *Assassin’s Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2007), these games grapple with history as a process (Elliot & Kapell, 2013). Among the most prominent are the games of the critically acclaimed *Sid Meier’s Civilization* series (MicroProse/Firaxis, 1991–), which has sold over 33 million copies (Nunneley, 2016) and is widely respected in the games industry. The accolades the series has accumulated include *Sid Meier’s Civilization IV* (Firaxis, 2005) being named the second-best PC game of all time by IGN (Adams et al., 2007).

But presenting history in an abstract manner creates other problems. While simulations are necessarily abstract (Frasca, 2004), what is significant are the elements that are retained or removed. In the case of digital games, there is also a demand that the simulation be ‘entertaining’. Thus various elements of history may be emphasized as activities, particularly activities which will lead to success in the game. For example, the *Sid Meier’s Civilization* series privileges particular approaches to technological development, the use of natural resources and relationships between cultures. Such expectations often reflect the cultural and historical assumptions of the game designers (Ford, 2016; Mir & Owens, 2013; Mukherjee, 2017). It is entirely reasonable to observe that digital games like the *Sid Meier’s Civilization* series are based on

Eurocentric and colonial assumptions. However, it does not necessarily follow that through playing these games the players internalize these assumptions, nor that the process of abstracting real events into an interactive simulation means that digital games are unable to represent history in a meaningful way.

This article examines historical strategy games from the perspective of the player's experience in relation to the wider gaming community. Players negotiate their individual experience through these communities, sharing their knowledge of history, counterfactual creations and strategic approaches to the games they play. These counterfactual communities illustrate that the alignment with, negotiation of and resistance to dominant paradigms of history are not necessarily found in the games themselves, but that they are palpable in the actions of players, and the communities of practice they establish. These practices suggest that the relationship between digital games, players and history is contextual. By understanding this context, a better perspective on the player's experience of the game may be developed, one which can inform the analysis of a game's algorithmic structure.

This issue will be explored through a discussion of two games and their online communities: *Europa Universalis II* (Paradox Interactive, 2001) and *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun* (Paradox Interactive, 2002). The discussion will focus on how the two games represent a specific moment: the colonization of Australia. This analysis is relevant to other historical strategy and grand strategy games. The article begins by reviewing prior scholarship on digital games that represent history as a process. Then, after briefly outlining some core elements of Paradox Interactive and their signature games, the representation of the Australian colonial moment in each game is discussed. The final section examines the practices of the games' communities, arguing that these practices demonstrate that some players use these games reflexively as counterfactual tools for thinking creatively about official versions of history.

## Past Approaches

A rich vein of scholarly work that focuses on the representation of history in digital games is now established (Chapman, 2016; Elliot & Kapell, 2013; Whalen & Taylor, 2008). This includes work that examines the use of historical settings in digital games,

both games that assiduously maintain correct historical detail, such as the *Medal of Honor* series (Dreamworks Interactive, 1999–), and games that explore historical fantasy, such as *Bioshock* (2K Australia, 2007). Other scholarship focuses on digital games that ‘play with’ history, in the sense that they involve the player in an account of the past in which the player’s actions impact what develops through the passing of time. The most prominent series of games in this style is the *Sid Meier’s Civilization* series, which is also the subject of key scholarly work that explores and critiques how digital games are able to represent history (Galloway, 2006; Wark, 2007; Chapman, 2013). The series is notably abstract in contrast to similar games that include historical actors, events and geographies as core designed elements of the player experience. Galloway, in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, constructively (2006) divides discussion of the *Sid Meier’s Civilization* series, which is split into three nodes:

1. The ‘cultural critique’: games are too trivial to be discussed seriously (2006: 95);
2. The ‘ideological critique’: games represent history in a way that demonstrates a particular ideological bias (2006: 96);
3. The ‘informatic critique’: games are algorithms, a form of information that provides an allegory for the contemporary control society (2006: 102–3).

The following discussion focuses on examining the ideological and informatic critique of games that portray historical processes.

### ***Ideological critique***

A key problem of the *Sid Meier’s Civilization* series, and many other games that deal with history as process, is the oversimplified manner they represent colonialism. The abstract way in which they deal with the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is potentially controversial, considering the systemic acts of violence underpinning the expansion of European power in the Americas, Africa, the Middle East, South and East Asia, and Asia Pacific. Scholars have argued that the *Sid Meier’s Civilization* series only represents Western style development (Caldwell, 2004: 50),

ascribes little importance to indigenous cultures (Douglas, 2002: 27) and – in the case of games representing history in general – overemphasizes the role of the military (Crogan, 2003: 279). However, these criticisms can be drawn together under the rubric of Friedman's key criticism of *Sid Meier's Civilization II*: that the game simultaneously denies and de-personalizes the violence in the history of 'exploration, colonization, and development' (1999: 145).

Underpinning this argument is the perception that through co-producing an ideologically loaded 'text' the player tacitly accepts the paradigm portrayed by the game. A vein of scholarship that focuses on the representational capacities of the software has suggested that this encourages acceptance of the game's ideology (Douglas, 2002: 24; see also Friedman, 1999: 136). The concern is that even in highly reflexive communities, the ideological implications of the game may remain obscured (Douglas, 2002: 28). This scholarship crucially pinpoints the significance of this genre of digital games; through a close relationship between the players' actions and software-defined parameters, a 'popular history' is produced.

Other research on digital games suggests that learning and mastering the rules can lead to reflection on the rules (Wark, 2007; Salen, 2008; Krapp, 2011). Consequently, players may recognize and subvert the ideologies that the rules may reflect (Apperley, 2010; Gee, 2003: 176; Everett, 2005: 318–319; Uricchio, 2005). The practice of playing a digital game notionally involves accepting software-enforced rules and structures for action, but this does not necessarily involve accepting the ideologies embedded in the software. Scholarly work specifically on *Sid Meier's Civilization II* notes the game's potential for encouraging a 'skeptical, critical attitude' in the player (Stephenson, 1999: 4) that may expose the player to the 'arbitrariness of ideologies of nation and culture' (1999: 1).

In order to demonstrate how players and gaming communities unpick this arbitrariness, I will turn to the notion of counterfactual history to argue that historical strategy games are used to explore counterfactual histories (Apperley, 2013; Chapman, 2016; Shaw, 2015). They act as tools for cultivating what I have described elsewhere as the 'counterfactual imaginary' (Apperley, 2013: 190), a creative process where players use historical games to negotiate the terrain of mass media popular

history according to their own predilections (see also Hammar, 2016). The process and product of play in this case is a personal expression that remixes everyday popular history which creates scope for an expression of identity that challenges the hegemony of official history. This is a key part of the enjoyment of such games. For example, the remixing of history was used prominently in the promotion of *Rise of Nations* (Big Huge Games, 2003); one 2003 print advertisement proclaimed: 'Where here were you during the Roman missile crisis?' Part of the entertainment value for players is that these games have the potential to diverge from recorded events (Atkins, 2003: 89), a value that Big Huge Games clearly references. By granting players the creative license to ask 'what if?' (Atkins, 2003: 94), players are invited to make the game a site for imagining counterfactual scenarios (Atkins, 2003: 102–103). Here, games provide what Serious Game design pioneer Gonzalo Frasca describes as a space for players to explore different possibilities in their own 'personal and social realities', one that is open to 'multiple', 'alternative' perspectives (2004: 97).

### ***Informatics critique***

The core of Galloway's argument is not that digital games such as *Sid Meier's Civilization III* do not have ideological leanings, but rather that any ideologies present are of marginal relevance. He states:

To use history as another example: the more one begins to think that *Civilization* is about a certain ideological interpretation of history (neoconservative, reactionary, or what have you), or even that it creates a computer-generated "history effect", the more one realizes that it is about the absence of history altogether, or rather the transcoding of history into specific mathematical models. (2006: 102–103)

For Galloway, *Sid Meier's Civilization III* embodies the principles of informatics; history has been turned into manageable and quantifiable variables that, he argues, allegorically represent what Gilles Deleuze calls the 'control society' (1992). Similarly, in *Gamer Theory* (2007), McKenzie Wark suggests that strategy games should be read as allegories:

It [*Civilization III*] embraces all differences by rendering all of space and time as being of the same quality – by reducing space and time to quantity. And finally, the next level appears: the expansion of topology outwards, beyond America, to make America equivalent to all of time and space. (2007: section 073)

I suggest that Wark's and Galloway's concerns with the notion of allegory have considerable overlap. Wark's argument is congruent with Galloway's in that his concern is with the quantifying – and homogenization – of all differentials. The allegorical representation of the control society empties the ideology of the historical representation, as every factor of potential difference becomes simply a variable in or input into an algorithm. Chapman (2013) mounts an important critique of this position, arguing that the process of historical representation, even by expert historians, is always a process of reduction and simplification.

This article's concern is less historiographical than that raised by Chapman. While the games themselves may have reduced ideological positions to selections from drop-down menus, the work of 'making meaning' of these games *does not only take place within algorithmic constraints*; rather, it is also situated in relation both to a community of players and the circumstances of the individual. Previous literature that indicates digital games have been used as historical tools for exploring counterfactual imaginations suggests fertilization and crossover between the informatic (or algorithmic) and the ideological elements of historical strategy games, which this article will explore through the player practices and player communities of the Paradox Interactive games *Europa Universalis II* and *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun*.

## **Paradox Interactive**

The company Paradox Interactive is responsible for designing and publishing *Europa Universalis II* (2001), *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun* (2002) and many other digital games. Based in Stockholm, Sweden, the company is probably the best-known developer of 'grand strategy' games. It is known for having a loyal customer base, and



has become very profitable; for example, in 2015, Paradox Interactive made over 74 million US\$ in profits (Brunozzi, 2016). Its stock market launch in 2016 valued the company at 420 million US\$, and its shares traded on NASDAQ for 3.96 US\$.

The company has achieved this considerable success with a relatively small stable of games. Notable games include the *Europa Universalis* (1999–) and *Hearts of Iron* (2002–) series. Both of the initial releases garnered substantial critical acclaim and positive audience reception, despite being considered both extremely complicated and graphically unimpressive (Osborne, 2002; Parker, 2001). Paradox Interactive was able to capitalize on this success to produce sequels of greater quality, having incorporated many suggestions from players into the redeveloped games. Loyal players eagerly anticipated the updated versions of the games and promoted their release among the wider games community. Paradox Interactive also diversified quickly, first moving into publishing games (Calvert, 2004), and then into digital distribution. Paradox Interactive's (unfortunately named) digital distribution portal, Gamer's Gate, began operation in April 2006. It was successfully spun off into a separate business in 2008, and now offers over six thousand digital titles, DRM free.

*Europa Universalis II* spans the era 1420 to 1820. The main focus of the game is the expansion of the European powers to dominate trade and create colonies around the globe. While technology, budgeting, diplomacy and military concerns are all important in the game, they are ancillary to the concern of colonialism; the player selects a country for which they will play. Initially, this is one of the European colonial powers: England, France, Portugal, the Russian Empire, Spain, and so on. However, a key innovation of the game is that it actually will allow the player to select any country from around the world, including non-Western and tributary nations. But within the programmed parameters of the game, it is almost impossible for the other playable nations to win.

However, the game community has an important role in assisting players to set goals. Feasible goals for the smaller, less powerful nations are discussed, contested and developed through a mostly generative discussion within the community of players. One example of a community negotiated 'win' is the player of Oman being

considered to have 'won' if they still retained control of Zanzibar in 1820. The community also places caveats on the actions of stronger nations. For example, because of its relative security within Europe and its large number of explorers, Portugal can 'spam' settlers across North and South America as well as Africa, creating a Portuguese new world with relative ease. In order to avoid exploiting these unbalancing advantages, players may choose to only colonize areas that were historically colonized by Portugal, such as the east coast of the South American continent. In any case, winning the game outright by becoming the strongest power is extremely challenging even for the most dedicated players, encouraging community goal setting as a strategy for negotiating the relative success of the myriad potential sub-optimal outcomes.

*Victoria: Empire Under the Sun* covers the period from 1820 to 1920. While it has a similar aesthetic to *Europa Universalis II*, it deals with issues including commerce, economy, diplomacy, technology and politics in a considerably more detailed fashion. While colonization remains an aspect of the game, the urge to colonize is driven by industry, meaning that the nations of Europe scramble to gain control over areas producing essential raw materials (coal, lumber, steel, sulfur, etc.). Like *Europa Universalis II*, any country can be chosen for play; however, *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun* has a more formal mechanism for assigning value to success through victory points that are calculated at the end of the game. This means that several non-European nations (China, Japan and Persia) have a good chance to perform well in the points system. Countries are ranked according to their total victory points obtained during the game, and the player-communities have established ways of evaluating performance based on the ranking that a country achieves in the game compared to how hard that country is to play. For example, to finish the game with Brazil in a top eight position is considered a victory (Anderson, 2004).

### **Maps, Colonies, Genocides**

Both games present their interfaces as a map, or rather, as several maps which detail various aspects of management (of resources, transportation networks, religion, and so on). The perspective is often as if the player were surveying the map from a tab-

letop, revealing the genre's roots in board and war games (Apperley, 2006: 13). The player is at a distance from the field upon which they will be acting, rather than located within or adjacent to the screen through an avatar or a gun-sight. Thus the player is located as an 'outsider' to the game-world; one who retains the ability to act upon that world, but from a distance, hence this genre is sometimes referred to as 'God Games'. The map is presented at a level of detail that represents strategic military concerns (Kontour, 2012), which reflects the player's role in the game: that of a military/economic machine that typifies military despotism.

At the start of play of *Europa Universalis II*, Australia, and the waters around it, are obscured. They are presented as empty spaces waiting to be filled in through exploration. During the course of play only the continent's eastern and western coastal provinces can be explored; the center, south and north of Australia cannot be mapped. However, in *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun*, Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales are already a part of the British Empire and there is a significant British presence in the rest of Australia. As a result, it is likely that during play the whole of Australia will become a British colony, and eventually a self-governing dominion.

The strategic importance of Australia in these games revolves entirely around the continent's apparent suitability for colonization. In *Europa Universalis II*, there is likely to be a race between the seafaring powers to be the first to 'discover' Australia, send colonists and eventually form official colonies. While much of the world of *Europa Universalis II* is available for European expansion, most of it is unsuitable for colonization by Europeans, leaving locations like Australia critically important for developing colonial empires, while the other regions are best left alone to be dominated by trade. In *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun*, Australia is of little importance to Britain, as it produces no goods that are not already available from the home isles. Furthermore, the colony does not attract many settlers because the algorithm has a bias towards sending unoccupied populations to the USA; this means that even as a self-governing dominion, Australia will remain a relative backwater without the human resources to contribute to the empire's armies and economy.

One of the more controversial aspects of *Europa Universalis II* is the ease with which 'natives' may be either exterminated or assimilated. Each province that is uncontrolled by a 'civilized' nation has a native population of between five hundred and five thousand; furthermore, the population of each 'uncivilized' province is given a rating between zero and 10 to indicate their aggressiveness towards incursions by colonists and traders. The native population is assimilated into the colony once it has become a certain size, and the natives automatically become productive citizens in the economic output of the colony's economy. A peaceable native population can be easily assimilated to create a large, thriving colony without having to allocate troops to protect the colonists. The large and peaceful native population is what makes Australia a desirable colony. However, trying to set up a colony or even a trading post in a province that has a large and aggressive native population will often lead to the extermination of the colonists. This can be prevented by stationing the colony with troops, as even the weakest colonizing troops can usually defeat a large indigenous army. However, once troops enter a province with a native population, the player is presented with the option to 'exterminate natives'; this option is recommended in most strategy guides when dealing with natives of aggression level four or more.

In *Europa Universalis II's* simulation of Aboriginal culture, they are rated with one or zero aggressiveness depending on the province; this usually ensures their survival because they won't threaten the fledgling colony, and will add a great deal to the community once they are assimilated. In *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun*, the already assimilated Aboriginal population is shown as a demographic within the wider population of the state, which can be appeased if the government adopts policies which suit their status. A vital part of the game involves setting the agenda for government policies on key issues, such as economics, religion, trade and the military, or, in this case, minority rights. Minorities can be assigned full or limited citizenship, or reduced to slavery. Thus, in the case of *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun*, the player is able to take a more (or less) enlightened approach to minority rights in Australia than those which were actually adopted during the historic period represented in the game, yet which still fall short of returning lands to indigenous sovereignty.

During play of both games, Australian settlement can take on some rather strange configurations. Competition for Australian colonies among colonizing nations in *Europa Universalis II* can create counterfactual maps which include part of Australia being controlled by France, Spain or Portugal. This will often lead to minor colonial wars, as powers become embroiled in struggles in Europe and extend the field of combat to the Australian colonies. Australia takes on a much more varied form in *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun*; while it is mostly controlled by Britain, it is also an important source of coal, making it of great strategic value to other nations that are trying to industrialize. Britain may then trade parts of Australia with other colonizing powers to gain advantage in another sphere. For example, in one playthrough of the game, Australia had become a Brazilian colony after Britain had traded it for some of Brazil's Caribbean possessions – Cuba, Puerto Rico – won in a war with Spain. This ahistorical but strategic exchange was implemented by the game's AI; deliberate intervention by players further multiplies the possibilities of producing such counterfactual outcomes.

### **Paradox Player Productions**

Paradox Interactive has extensive official forums for all its games, which include player-authored strategy guides and player-created wikis for both of the games discussed. Counterfactual imaginary is cultivated in several ways on these official forums. Crucial for this discussion is the genre of the After-Action Report—often referred to as AARs on the forums—and the discussions of 'modding' the games. In general, a key community function of the forums is to cultivate expert play through an ongoing discussion of the variables in the various games, and how these variables may be understood in the wider context of the games and thus deployed strategically (see Myers, 2003: 44). While this knowledge is useful primarily in playing the games, it is developed through gleaning information from secondary sources or 'paratexts', which can include: Internet sites, chat rooms, bulletin boards, conversations with other players and game magazines. (Consalvo, 2007; Newman, 2008).

In addition, the forums allow the many local contexts of play to be discussed and negotiated, opening forum participants up to multiple perspectives on history.

One element of the considerable creativity on display in the forums is negotiation conducted by the player to establish a stronger resonance between the 'global', one-sided, colonial/industrial version of history presented in the games and a more nuanced 'local' perspective on history (Apperley, 2010: 135–8). This can emerge as modding projects which re-inscribe the physical and human geography of particular provinces, or in substantive creative fictional work like that found in the 'Rise of the Condor' AAR, which uses a combination of writing and screenshots to recount a counterfactual colonial encounter between the Incan and Spanish Empires (Apperley, 2013: 193).

AARs are the recounting of a single game, often in a series of episodes that the author updates as the game is played. Like many player accounts of digital games, the report may be primarily descriptive, or recounted in the form of fiction (Consalvo, 2003). One exemplary forum post reports on a game that remixes the events of the First Afghan War (1839–1842), so that the Persian player manages to avoid the British intervention (Dalrymple, 2013). The player of the Persian faction, Wannabe Tartar, writes:

The Afghans, under the leadership of Dost himself, put most of their effort of driving the Persians out from Farah, but they couldn't break enemy lines. The Shah marched with his army to Kandahar, where he would lay siege to the city. Slowly the Afghans were being pushed back, and realizing that they were not able to withstand the Persians, Dost tried to convince the Shah in signing peace. But the Shah, now smelling victory, continued his advance towards Ghazni and Mazar I Sharif. Although Ghazni didn't fall to the Persians, Mazar I Sharif did, bringing the Persians within less as [*sic*] 100 kilometres from Kabul. The Shah moved his troops closer to Kabul and when his troops were at the outskirts of the city, Dost was quickly [*sic*] to offer peace. All province[s] currently occupied, with the exception of Mazar I Sharif, would be seceded to the Persian. The Shah realized that if the war would drag on, the probability of a British intervention force being sent to Afghanistan would increase, so he accepted the treaty offered to him. (Wannabe Tartar, 2006)

The After Action Reports act as a dual display of game and writing prowess; in some cases the posts are also illustrated with maps and portraits of the historical figures being discussed. The reports also show other players the tactics adopted to succeed (in Wannabe Tartar's post the goal was to create a Persian Empire). AARs come in many shapes and sizes, as the (sub-)genre of writing is characterized by highly individual approaches. What characterizes AARs as a discernable sub-genre is that they share a 'faithfulness to the gameplay' (Mukherjee, 2016a: 67). The processes of writing and playing are entwined, making the AAR a key example of the imbrication of playing, reading and writing that can be found in digital gaming cultures, which captures 'the ephemeral computer game narrative that is played out in each instance of gameplay' (Mukherjee, 2015: 117). The way that *Europa Universalis II* or *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun* both encourage players to set their own goals allows AARs to examine multiple perspectives on history, connecting them to the counterfactual imaginary; however, many AARs also show a remarkable adherence to what are perceived as the 'historical facts' by trying to recreate events with an adherence to 'accuracy'.

Notions of historical realism and authenticity are also major topics of discussion in the forums. Both forums include lengthy discussions that evaluate and critique how authentically *Europa Universalis II* and *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun* represent events in the past. Of particular interest is when the discussion is directed by a forum member who has a perspective based on local knowledge or expertise. For example, one unofficial forum, the Croatia-based Vojska.net, has advocated major changes to the map in *Europa Universalis II* in order to better represent their historical understanding of the geopolitical division of provinces in the Balkan region of Europe from the 15th to the 19th-century. In order to have the boundaries of Balkan provinces drawn in a historically authentic manner, the community produced and distributed a mod of the *Europa Universalis II* map. This collaboration on Vojska.net allowed players from outside the region to play in a geographic depiction of the Balkans that was locally defined as historically realistic. While not counterfactual, such activities make players aware of the multiplicity of historical perspectives which *Europa Universalis II* and *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun* subsume in a singular view of history.

In the space of the forum the boundaries between playing the game, discussing it and making mods are blurred. The community supports this blurring of activities, as evidenced by numerous threads linking to guides to mods. Both *Europa Universalis II* and *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun* also have large collective projects focused on developing systemic improvements to the games. The Victoria Improvement Project is committed to making the major wars of the era more realistic; thus it has developed mods which improve the realism of the game scenarios dealing with the American Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War and World War I. The project also expands the development of technology, and has worked on improving the artificial intelligence of the game (which is the subject of much criticism in the forums). The Alternate Grand Campaign and Event Exchange Project for *Europa Universalis II* were originally two separate projects that have merged. The focus of the project is to develop more events based on history. In the game, events are typically connected to a certain country, and only countries that were originally intended as playable in the colonial sense have many events (England, France, Portugal, Spain, Sweden). So the project has two purposes: to represent historic events more realistically by modifying events already in the game; and to generate new events that occurred historically in individual nations, but were not originally included in the game.

Individuals and organizations that have a stake in the representation of Australia's history could of course create mods for the game, to either represent the past more accurately, or to create a more fantastic scenario. The tools are available for anyone to do that; there is also ample opportunity to learn the processes of modding through involvement in larger projects. Yet mods made for Australia are not common. For example, one of the mods from the Victorian Improvement Project creates a more realistic immigration flow from the metropolitan centers to the periphery colonies. However, this is a more recent mod, which indicates both the potential and limitations of the practice. The Indigenous People of Oceania (IPO) mod for *Europa Universalis IV* was created with the aim of depicting the history and presence of the native people of Oceania (Cosmosis7, 2016). The IPO mod creates a diverse representation of historical Aboriginal, Micronesian, Melanesian and Polynesian cultural groups using the framework of the game to present differing lifestyles (nomadic



or seafaring), technologies and beliefs. The mod also includes pop-up events with information about the history of each nation. This mod gives a more balanced and inclusive depiction of the indigenous view of history in the region, capturing some of the specific attributes of the different indigenous nations of the Pacific. While this mod does add more historical detail that provides access to a different perspective on historical events, it clearly establishes the limitations with which it functions. The mod must operate within the parameters provided by the original software. The indigenous viewpoint is not established on its own terms, but through adding detail to the colonial framework in which the game operates.

## Conclusion

The way that the dynamics of the colonial period in Australia are encoded in the two games discussed here embeds the logic of the contemporary colonists, the most problematic aspect of which is the representation of Aboriginal culture as homogenous 'natives' to be assimilated or killed as the player sees fit. However, this does not mean that players accept the ideologies presented in games like *Europa Universalis II* or *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun* as valid. The shared paratexts of the counterfactual community demonstrate that players establish negotiated positions in relation to the 'official' history presented, which draw on their own experiences of local and popular culture. Indeed, their negotiations are made tangible through remixing the official history presented by the game, as other perspectives are developed through the creator's own experiences and counterfactual imagination, which may be informed by highly localized knowledge and concerns. The paratexts are based on skills and literacies that are relatively traditional, such as After Action Reports, and the more advanced digital literacies required to mod the games.

Crucially, these unofficially published remixes are evidence of a wider reflexivity in relation to *Europa Universalis II* and *Victoria: Empire Under the Sun*. While only a small proportion of the counterfactual community is engaged in producing the content, many other players will consume it. Thus, these digital textual practices inform the experiences of players beyond these communities. However, these practices- which may otherwise challenge or disrupt dominant paradigms of history- are

limited because they are anchored in software which portrays the process of colonization and exploitation of indigenous people from a dominant white colonial perspective (Mukherjee, 2016b; 2017; Shaw, 2015). Thus, these practices also contribute to the circulation and dominance of official versions of history, rather than offering a radical new perspective. Yet they also illustrate that official accounts of the past, however dominant, remain subject to localized interpretation. This impacts on the everyday understanding of history in a significant way, not just because it highlights the disjunction between official history and lived experience, but also because it makes transparent the power behind the official version of history.

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### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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