Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies

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POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES IN GAME STUDIES

Casual Empire: Video Games as Neocolonial Praxis

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As a media form entwined in the U.S. military-industrial complex, video games continue to celebrate imperialist imagery and Western-centric narratives of the great white explorer (Breger, 2008; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Geyser & Tshalabala, 2011; Mukherjee, 2016). While much ink has been spilt on the detrimental effects of colonial imagery on those it objectifies and dehumanises, the question is why these games still get made, and what mechanisms are at work in the enjoyment of empire-themed play experiences. To explore this question, this article develops the concept of 'casual empire', suggesting that the wish to play games as a casual pastime expedites the incidental circulation of imperialist ideology. Three examples – *Resident Evil V* (2009), *The Conquest: Colonization* (2015) and *Playing History: Slave Trade* (2013) – are used to demonstrate the production and consumption of casual empire across multiple platforms, genres and player bases. Following a brief contextualisation of postcolonial (game) studies, this article addresses casual design, by which I understand game designers' casual reproduction of inferential racism (Hall, 1995) for the sake of entertainment. I then look at casual play, and players' attitudes to games as rational commodities continuing a history of commodity racism (McClintock, 1995). Finally, the article investigates the casual involvement of formalist game studies in the construction of imperial values. These three dimensions of the casual – design, play and academia – make up the three pillars of the casual empire that must be challenged to undermine video games' neocolonialist praxis.

Introduction

Postcolonial studies investigates and critiques the selective historiography of colonial pasts and their complex legacies (McLeod, 2000). It is concerned both with the past of colonial domination and violence; and the far-reaching consequences of systematic racial and ethnic oppression, which continue to this day. Among the seminal works in postcolonial studies are Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which unpacks the dynamics of patronising portrayals of the "East" as a monolithic place worthy of Western domination, and Gayatri Spivak's (1988) investigation into the agency of colonised subaltern subjects. In recent years, such discourses have travelled to the field of video game studies, with scholars tackling questions such as imperialist ideology in game spaces (Breger, 2008); video game characters (Geyser & Tshalabala, 2011); and the relation between imperialist fantasies and the subaltern player (Mukherjee, 2016). This article contributes to the growing body of postcolonial game studies by expounding more directly the dynamics of fun and innocence in game-specific remediations of imperialist ideology. A question insufficiently addressed in previous studies is why, despite availability of knowledge on the detrimental effects of colonial images on the previously colonised, game creators and consumers continue to perceive empire as a light-hearted theme appropriate for recreation and entertainment. The article suggests 'the casual' as a pervasive ideological category, which resists decolonisation by rendering the problem of empire invisible.

On an associative level, 'casual' refers to the unintended as much as to the recreational. If something is done casually, it is done without expenditure of great effort, in a leisurely way, or outside the confines of a regulating gaze. 'The casual' feigns disengagement with, renders unimportant and therefore belittles attempts to identify colonial tropes in video games. Meanwhile, the term 'casual games' commonly refers to 'non-expert' games that are easily accessible both in terms of content and platform (Juul, 2010). Mobilised in this context, the term 'casual' in 'casual empire' refers more directly to the properties of games as playful commodities to be interacted with effortlessly.

The video games addressed in this article have been designed as commodities for a market of users expecting certain entertainment products. By virtue of being a commodity, these games are framed as a utility object with the specific function of providing fun. Viewed from this perspective, a game's fiction is mere packaging. It pretends that a game's product value can be separated from the images and narratives 'attached' to it, disconnecting the intended function of fun from the way fun is realised. Once disconnected from history, the fun object can be celebrated as a commodity irrespective implications of race, gender and class. This allows designers, players and scholars to act without suspicions of racism or neo-colonialism: all they do is produce, consume and study objects of fun, after all.

The colonial fantasies so central to the mechanics of many video games can be downplayed as 'just' fiction. This means that the 'reality effects' (Barthes, 1986) that colonial images might have on players – including dealing with the detrimental consequences of seeing one's people repeatedly vilified or victimised – can be dismissed as well. If games are the product, not the content, of play, postcolonial critique, and cultural critique in general, can be declared irrelevant (Keogh, 2014). What we are left with is a notion of the ideology-free entertainment product, whose incidental narrative of colonial domination is reduced to a single genre label: *adventure* (Hall, 1995). Thus, tales of the great white explorer dominating fictional uncharted places and imagined others can be reproduced without question. What results is the construction of a casual empire, a (neo)colonial ludic world whose implicitly oppressive focus on the white Western hero passes unnoticed.

This logic of invisible whiteness is not unique to video games, but applies to (post)colonial representation more generally. As Richard Dyer (2005) has observed in relation to cinema, whiteness resides in invisible properties and thus fixes the coloniser's point of view as the default. But as an ideology, casual empire goes further than reproducing *images* of invisible whiteness; it mobilises them for the recreational *activity* of play. Video games that include cases of casual empire demonstrate our collective failings to address and redress imperial values. These failings are not confined to practices of game design, but occur in tandem with practices of play and academic discourse.

One factor highlighted by the term *casual* is its association with the unintentional, the private and the emotional. If something is done casually, it is done without great effort, in a leisurely way, or outside the confines of a regulating gaze. *Casual* thus describes a relaxed, disengaged attitude towards colonial tropes as incidental aspects of video games that permeate design, play and research practices. Designers, whether intentionally or not, draw on longstanding cultural grammar when assigning racial representations of the hero and the other to the affordances of play. Drawing on Stuart Hall's (1995) concept of inferential racism, I will demonstrate how video games casually update the two base images of the 'savage' and the 'native'. On the playing front, video games increasingly conquer the private homes of millions where they serve the function of recreation and relaxation. To make sense of the casual consumption of mass-produced empire-themed commodities in the home, I discuss them as an extension of commodity racism, continuing the legacy of Victorian soap and cookie boxes in the 19th century (McClintock, 1995). Within games research, there is a dominant nostalgic trend in game studies, which is invested in play as casual practice, immune to the study of culture.

In what follows, I will discuss how these three discourses collaborate to foster a climate in which casual empire can thrive as an unsuspicious phenomenon. I will do so through a reading of the video games *Resident Evil 5* (*RE5*) (2009), *The Conquest: Colonization* (2015) and *Playing History: Slave Trade* (2013). As representatives of different game genres, namely survival horror (*RE5*), turn-based strategy (*Colonization*) and educational game (*Playing History*), these games illustrate the range of colonial play experiences currently offered on diverse video game platforms. While all games implicitly or explicitly restage white Western colonial activity and the encounter with exotic 'others', the games are vastly different in terms of their gameplay propositions.

As a Japanese horror survival console game, *RE5* taps many conventions of the *adventure* formula (Hall, 1995). The white, muscular explorer Chris Redfield meets the barbaric other in a monolithic fantasy Africa. In the single-player version, Chris is the only playable character. In the two-player version, the co-protagonist is the mixed-race character Sheva Alomar, whose first and last appearance is in *RE5*.

Gameplay-wise, *RE5*'s focus is on managing resources while penetrating further into the 'heart of darkness' (Geyser & Tshalabala, 2011); foraging for treasure; and mastering surprise attacks by black; genetically modified black characters. As a console title, there is considerable emphasis on the staging of expensively rendered 3D graphics, audiovisual effects and the characters' well-rounded motions in space. The colonising activities are constructed as a spectacle, and as part of the *RE5* linear roller-coaster feel that characterises other instalments of the series.

One of the few things the Bulgarian casual turn-based strategy game *The Conquest: Colonization* has in common with *RE5* is its purpose to entertain. Apart from this, *Colonization* is the opposite of an elaborately crafted game. It is a casual game in the most literal sense: one among myriads of free colony-themed games released each day for the smartphone and tablet market. Made after a well-known real-time and turn-based strategy formula, *Colonization*'s relative non-importance in a plethora of comparable games is precisely why *Colonization* matters in an analysis of the casual. It demonstrates the double casualisation of empire, both as an incidental factor in design and as a major theme for casual games. Anyone with an Android device can play it, provided that they discover it in the row of comparable products.

Finally, the Danish educational game *Playing History 2: Slave Trade* exemplifies recent approaches in edutainment. Instead of being a mere entertainment product, its intended purpose is to teach a chapter from colonial history by restaging it through game mechanics. At this point in time, *Slave Trade* is widely known for its mini game 'Slave Tetris', which has caused some controversy on Twitter over its representation of slaves as Tetris blocks to be stacked on a trading ship (Cowen, 2015; Kilson, 2015; Thomas, 2015). According to the information provided on Slave Trade's page on the game distribution platform Steam, the game is intended as auxiliary material for middle school history lessons, and targeted at players between the ages of eight and fourteen.

Although produced in different places, for different audiences, with different purposes, these three games have several commonalities. First, there is the collective failure to reflect their own involvement in colonial history. Both *Colonization* and *Slave Trade* explicitly mention slavery and colonization in their titles, and yet, as

will be shown, they use these references as mere narrative shells for a particular entertainment experience. Secondly, all games have been released or relaunched (*RE5*) in recent years. Rather than merely isolated anecdotes, they point to recent trends in neocolonialist video game design. This trend spans platforms, technologies and markets; and concerns game production and consumption worldwide.

Casual Design

Game designers frequently pay considerable attention to technical details such as graphics and gameplay, but fail to interrogate the use of colonial imagery. This imbalance of attention fosters an attitude of casual design that allows video games to continue a questionable history of neocolonial representation driven by what Stuart Hall (1995) calls *inferential racism*. In contrast to overt racism, which advances openly racist policies or views, Hall argues that popular culture is saturated with

> 'apparently naturalised representations of events and situations relating to race which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions. These enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded.' (Hall, 1995: 20)

Hall reminds us that through inferential racism the 'ancient grammar' of race is updated to the affordances of contemporary media, especially in the form of 'adventure', a category 'synonymous with the demonstration of the moral, social and physical domination of the colonised by the coloniser' (Hall, 1995: 21). Furthermore, rather than being seen and addressed, colonial domination is taken for granted as a natural aspect of the adventure formula. This makes the concept useful in the context of video game design, since it highlights the need for a reflected production process. If colonial imagery does not emerge from intention but from the casual reproduction of what *seems natural*, game design reproduces and appropriates colonial tropes by default.

Hall's figures of the 'native' and 'slave' (Hall, 1995), are useful for demonstrating the casual updating of colonial imagery in game design. What these two stereotypical

images have in common is an ambiguity through which they characterise the racially 'other' as simultaneously threatening to and controlled by the white gaze. 'Natives' are usually associated with primitivism, appearing in rebellious tribes or hordes that are supposed to be mastered by the 'unshakeable authority' of a white hero (Hall, 1995: 21). The 'slave' image in its most positive version includes the 'noble savage' – a racial other who seemingly accepts their position as naturally inferior to their white master. Ultimately, however, the master can never trust this obedience. The slave is always 'capable of turning nasty', or of plotting in a 'secretive, cunning, cut-throat' manner (Hall 1995: 21). According to Hall, these two manifestations of inferential racism pervade popular media. In the context of video game design, they feature in the very structures of gameplay mechanics, game economy and game feel.

Quantifying domination in *RE5*

In *RE5* we find genre-specific updates of the 'natives' as primitive, barbaric hordes. As a 3D horror survival game, the console title *RE5* by the Japanese game studio giant Capcom focuses its portrayal of the exotic other as a shocking spectacle, a cheap thrill on a well-planned roller-coaster ride through the strange, monolithic place of 'Africa'. The black Majini are conveniently turned into 'bio-organic weapons' by a fictional virus, framing violence against them as a benevolent deed. More specifically, there are two moments in the design of the native that I would like to look at more closely.

The first example is the role of the 'Majini theme', composed by Seiko Kobuchi and Kota Suzuki; and the juxtaposition of the barbaric hordes – which can appear and 'run over the screen any time' (Hall, 1995: 21) – with the element of music. The use of threatening drums stirs excitement, associating the native with primitivism in alignment with Hall's base image. The departure of this music, meanwhile, accompanies the player's defeat of the Majini horde, signaling that they can relax and enjoy their triumph: silence signifies domination. Music is not only important as a flavour element, illustrating emotion; but functions as a tool of control, making the encounters with natives quantifiable and knowable. The element of usability and feedback – the communication of 'danger state' versus 'win state' – is closely entangled with the fantasies of dominating the racially other. This use of music helps to present the Majini

hordes in well-balanced, manageable doses, just about threatening enough to make their killing a casual, recreational pastime.

The second example concerns the relationship between the tribal and the inventory, which details items the player's character has at their disposal, which restages a colonial entitlement to exploit native resources (Harrer & Pichlmayr, 2015). Since *RE5*'s survival mechanism revolves around the rapid circulation of items and strategic weapons upgrades in the face of resource scarcity, the inventory plays a central role for the game economy. When items are taken, they are added to the inventory, from where they are either immediately used (weapons), saved for later use (herbs), or are transformed into money that can be used to buy weapon upgrades. This search for items and resources is constantly on players' minds when roaming natives' spaces and places. Living rooms, tribal artefacts and even bodies of the natives are primarily viewed through the lens of economy. Imperial acts of demolition are rewarded by the exclusive acquisition of vases, treasures and tribal bodies. These objects must be damaged or destroyed in order to use the game's resources effectively.

The colonial transformation from vase to green herb and body to gold does not remain an abstract concept but is engaged through polished, well-rounded and pleasurable interactions. Small animations, strategic lighting and gratifying sounds guide players' experiences of robbing, raiding, killing and looting. For instance, when a vase is hit, it bursts into many small shards accompanied by a rewarding crashing sound. Its contents are illuminated by a small halo, and a comforting sound is played when the player interacts with them. Small visual prompts like 'picked up gold [small]' help us make sense of this action in terms of gameplay economy. Inscribed in this relationship between the tribal world and the inventory is the assumption that the progression of the white saviour Chris Redfield demands the killing of 'native' others. Colonial murder, raiding and plundering – and the transformation of native worlds – are presented as necessary for the survival of white playable characters. This cements the myth of adventure as a synonym of white male domination (Hall, 1995: 21) through embodied player action.

Plunder or conquer? A playful choice in *Colonization*

The Conquest: Colonization updates the trope of the 'native' to the affordances of turn-based strategy games. According to the game description available on Google Play, from where the game can be downloaded for free, it is inspired by other classics of the same genre like *Civilization* (1991) and *Total War* (2000). This shows both that there is an established market for colonisation games and that colonisation is considered an appropriate topic to be explicitly addressed through casual gameplay. The game description invites players to '[e]xplore ruins, small villages and search for wonders like Machu Pichu [sp] or the Chichen Itza pyramid in the different territories of the American continent truly represented' (2015). Realistic ('truly represented') geography is framed as a desirable game feature, along with 'animated European and native towns' and '14 European and native nations' (2015).

This spirit of presenting peoples as quantifiable items on a list of gameplay features can be traced throughout various moments in *The Conquest*. First, as a turn-based strategy game, it uses the classic back and forth between the optimising of resources and the expansion into others' territory. The player can do so by playing as one of four European colonising nations – the British, the French, the Spanish or the Dutch – while the four 'native' factions – the Arawak, the Inca, the Cherokee and the Tupi – are enemies by default. Having selected the colonizing power they wish to play with, the player enters a campaign map somewhere on the American continent. The gameplay sees the player engage in hostility with the other factions – native and other European nations alike – over resources, in an attempt to ensure one's domination over territory.

When the player defeats an enemy in battle, they are given the choice to 'conquer' or 'plunder' their settlement. Plundering dismantles a defeated settlement, converting its value into gold. All that remains is a basic camp icon of the triumphant faction. Conquering turns a settlement over to the player, while keeping its infrastructure intact. This mechanism is used to construct an incidentally racist division between European and native peoples. When taking over a settlement from other European enemies the player can just continue building and upgrading it. Taking over a

native settlement, however, means receiving it in a state of barbarism requires civilising efforts before the player can claim it as part of their empire. The 'civilising' option is represented through a Christian cross icon in the settlement's town window. It is accommodated by two figures: the amount of gold required to turn a settlement from 'barbaric' to 'civilised' and the amount of turns until completion. The player first has to pay and wait for 'civilisation' to occur before they can use the settlement and develop it further. It is suggested that converting natives into settlers takes time and money, and after the process has succeeded the settlement turns into a level one European settlement. This game dynamic contains two narratives: first, the native and their culture exist beyond European time, and beyond the paradigm of progress; secondly, this 'barbaric' state is positioned as inferior to the most primitive of European settlements. This incidentally racist hierarchy has an impact on gameplay: at times it might be more convenient to simply plunder a native town because the cost of 'civilising' it may be too high. Thus, *Colonization* incidentally incentivises the destruction of native settlements by defining them as less valuable than European settlements. On the other hand, the 'challenge' to convert a native nation to Christianity may be perceived as more 'exciting' than to win against Europeans: at the end of each 'civilising project' waits the reward of an expanded empire, and the pleasure of owning a once 'other' barbaric settlement.

A similar racist hierarchy between native and European nations is at work when a player is defeated in battle. Again, it matters who takes over a player's settlement. If the winning enemy is European, a player's settlement is handed over and reattributed to the respective flag. The player then retains the chance to win it back in one of their next turns. This is not the case when the player is defeated by a native tribe. In such cases, the settlement in question is turned into a tribal village icon and can no longer be 'civilised'. This suggests that unlike the European enemy, the native is an inherent threat to civilisation, incapable of preserving culture in any meaningful way. *Colonization's* turn-based strategy game mechanics only superficially reduces Europeans and Indigenous cultures to the same level of rational computation.

Emergent possibilities of play reveal that the game's ideology is skewed towards the European side. The gameplay inscribes natives as primitive and destructive, and existing in opposition with more constructive Europeans. Posing as a neutral simulation of nations against nations, the game silently reproduces a racist hierarchy through its most basic gameplay dynamics.

The third example is the mechanism of diplomatic relations and the bribing of other nations into alliances. Throughout the game it is possible to send gifts to other European and native nations, which improves relations. Friendly nations are less likely to launch surprise attacks, although the player can always declare war on them. Once relations have improved sufficiently, the cryptic option 'request intervention' appears in the menu. This option allows the player to hire the respective nation to assault another nation. This option exclusively serves to hire native peoples; one cannot enrol other Europeans in this morally questionable work. By implication, natives are characterised as more susceptible to employment as mercenary forces and less loyal to their own peoples than Europeans are. This design choice perpetuates the aspect of the 'slave' image as a crooked figure that can never be trusted.

Playing obedience in *Slave Trade*

A further expression of the slave figure is presented in the edutainment product *Playing History 2: Slave Trade* by the Danish independent studio Serious Games. The section of the game commonly known as 'Slave Tetris' has been removed, but the rest of the game remains available for sale through Steam, the rest of *Slave Trade* is still for sale on Steam. There, the designers describe it as:

> [a]n opportunity to take part in history, within in a living breathing world. . . Travel back in time to the 18th century and witness the horrors of the trans-Atlantic slave trade firsthand. In this episode, you will be working as [a] young slave steward on a ship crossing the Atlantic. You are to serve the captain and be his eyes and ears – reporting any suspicious activities is your duty. (2015)

First, this explicit invitation to 'step into the shoes' of a slave boy during the 1700s, including the 'horrors' of the slave trade, announces that there will be some involvement with the personal struggles of the main player character. It is announced that players will learn about slavery 'first-hand' through the eyes of an enslaved character. And indeed, the first thing players get to see in *Playing History* is a cut sequence in which a first-person voice-over tells the story of how the character – named Putij – was enslaved: 'I clearly remember the day I got torn away from my home and brought to the coastline in chains' (Serious Games, 2015). Although the narrative voice is male, it does not carry any traces of Putij's racial identity. Referring to his being 'acquired' by the captain as 'pure luck', this voiceover disowns the boy's experience in a double sense. Not only does it repress the traumatic memories of being captured, dislocated and enslaved, but Putij's voice is literally overwritten by the imagination of his implied master – the white, European game developers. Putij is thus a 'good slave' in the sense that he has internalised and speaks in the voice of his owner. As such, he occupies the position of a subaltern game character who, in Spivak's (1988) sense, cannot speak.

Putij's subaltern position manifests itself in different levels of gameplay. First, it is reinforced through dialogue options that restrict Putij's perspective, locus of control and access to his own emotions. Diverting from Putij's own experience as a child likely to be traumatised by the 'horrors' of slavery, the dialogue serves to emphasise his attachment to the white male figure of Captain Seahab. The first game challenge, for instance, is to fetch a bottle of brandy for Captain Seahab (including the optional study of facts about brandy provided in a text window). The focus on this menial task digresses from Putij's feelings as a victim of the slave trade. Instead of unpacking the mechanics of robbing a child of his freedom, the brandy game prioritises a minor facet of the white man's taste over Putij's experience as a traumatised boy in captivity.

There are other such mini games that use menial tasks to dodge any meaningful engagement with racism and imperialism. When Putij finds his enslaved sister in a cage the game launches the 'flower of hope' mini challenge. Putij must collect a

forked stick to help her reach a blossom through the prison bars. In all of this, the possibility of rebellion and collective escape is only briefly discussed but eventually dismissed. The 'flower of hope' episode further diverts from the dangers of rape and torture Putij's sister would face in a historically accurate situation of captivity. Since the game does not portray these dangers, however, ideas like freedom and escape feel vapid. In fact, they are absent from the game altogether; looking for a forked stick is presented as more rewarding.

Another problematic aspect of the game is the 'trust meter', an evaluation tool that depicts the relationship between Putij and his master. The trust meter is displayed in the left upper corner of the screen in the shape of a thermometer that rises when the player selects a narrative option that aligns with Captain Seahab's will, and drops when Putij resists his will. However, since no meaningful options for resistance are provided by the game, the 'challenge' is to optimise trust with Captain Seahab. The lesson thus taught to young players of *Slave Trade* is that protesting slavery is futile – all Putij and others like him can hope for is to be rewarded for their obedience to authority.

Finally, the game introduces an anachronistic high-pitched mouse character that makes an appearance throughout all parts of the *Playing History* series as a tutorial guide. Clearly designed as a cute, comforting attachment figure for children, the mouse character personifies the game's failure to combine child-friendly entertainment and serious engagement with history. Against the backdrop of Putij's oppression, the mouse character's cheerful explanations and words of praise for tasks well accomplished are an awkward reminder of the game's questionable priorities: *besides the dark, complicated chapters in history, let's focus on some fun gameplay!*

In addition to these gameplay mechanics, the developers denied the effects of inferential racism. While the 'Slave Tetris' mini game was removed from the game, they continued to defend its original inclusion, positioning it as an appropriate tool for learning about the history of slavery (Thomas, 2015). In a statement published on their Steam page, they state: '[a]pologies to people who was [sic] offended by us using game mechanics to underline the point of how inhumane slavery was.

The goal was to enlighten and educate people – not to get sidetracked discussing a small 15 secs part of the game' (2015). Even if this goal of providing 'enlightenment and education' is genuine, *Slave Trade* suggests that such a goal can be achieved by learning that slavery is eternal; that protest is unrealistic and freedom unattainable; and that white voices are entitled to tell the stories of black people. It is the juxtaposition of educational goals, discourse of fun and hegemonic silencing that make the example so disturbing. In journalist Kashann Kilson's (2015) words:

> Slapping a few cutesy cartoon rodents wearing silly hats on top of a game that involves simulating the actual slave trade as an actual child slave helping an actual slave trader, in between rollicking rounds of *Slave Tetris*, is not, nor will it ever be an acceptable way of "teaching" anyone anything, anywhere on this planet or beyond. (Kilson, 2015)

RE5, *The Conquest: Colonization and Slave Trade* illustrate that game design casually repurposes existing tropes on the 'slave' and the 'native' as incidental parts of entertainment. It is useful to remember two facts shaping these repurposing practices: Firstly, racism is a latent part of cultural memory that can be activated through casual design. As part of the grammar of adventure, this racism constitutions a default position. Secondly, game production cycles are often lengthy, complex and costly. As a consequence, breaking with convention to challenge the casual may be perceived as too risky a strategy.

Casual Play

Moving on to the question of how such design offers are understood by players, I will explore the attitude of *casual play*, as expressed in some player responses. To provide some context for how games travel from their production to players' homes, the concept of 'commodity racism' is useful. Developed by Anne McClintock in Imperial Leather, the term is used to discuss 19th-century Victorian practices of decorating mundane commodity objects, such as soap, biscuit tins, whisky bottles, chocolate bars and tea tins, with scenes from the great empire. By 'trafficking promiscuously across the threshold of private and public', commodity racism 'made possible, as

never before, the mass marketing of empire as an organised system of images and attitudes' (McClintock, 1995: 209). The 21st-century gaming market updates the mass consumption of colonial fantasies by utilising the affordances of the contemporary living room couch.

Here, domesticity and the notion of 'home' are important factors. Like the Victorian tales of 'the progress of the great white explorer' (Hall, 1997: 240) emblazoned on soaps and biscuits, games' neocolonial subtexts enter the household as invisible properties of a fetish object. Consider the parallel between soap and games as a commodity object. Given the perception that their functions are cleaning and entertaining, soaps and games are often not perceived as part of representation; and are not expected to tell stories. Accordingly, when reflecting on voices during casual play, it is instructive to reflect on how 19th-century soapboxes invisibly normalised colonial values by advertising a product with a different function.

One point in case is the videogame website *Kotaku*'s editor-in-chief Stephen Totilo's impression of the *RE5* trailer as 'an advertisement to literally shoot poor people' (Totilo, 2008), which changed significantly after he played the game for the first time: 'these angry-looking people they want you to shoot are no longer human', he wrote (Totilo, 2008). Totilo argued that rather than signifying humans, the 'angry-looking people' were actually game tokens, and therefore no longer appropriately discussed in terms of their human features. What Totilo performs here is a shift of perspective from *RE5* as representation – the *RE5* he sees and responds to in the trailer – to *RE5* as a game commodity, and an object of play. This shift of perspective from characters as people to characters as things to be owned and consumed harks back to a larger horror video game trope of legitimising violence against a dehumanised enemy (Carr, 2009; Geyser & Tshalabala, 2011). Simultaneously, the acts of violence performed in Chris Redford's white body can be enjoyed like Victorian biscuits whose taste is seemingly unrelated to its wrapper theme.

This *casual* attitude to play as the engagement with a set of mechanics rather than representation is a recursive theme in player reviews of the other games under discussion in this article. Negative reviews, in particular, focus on usability. For example, one disappointed reviewer of *The Conquest: Colonization*

'on Epic Games' GooglePlay page complains that the game is 'too hard and too fast', and that it 'makes me rush everything cuase [sic] the other european nation apparently hates me so much. . . i wish there was a way to lower the difficulty' (2015). Here, the expectation is that the colonial playing field ought to be framed in a way that allows effective colonising. Rather than highlighting the insufficient treatment of colonial history, the reviewer criticizes the insufficient smoothness of colonising. A similar attitude can be found in a review of the same game on the Epic Games site: '[w]hen I played one of the maps, one of the Europeans declared war on me even though I had not met them yet, and refused to peace out for a decent deal even after 4 failed assaults on my forts' (2015).

The focus on technical aspects and game features is also found in reviews of *Slave Trade.* Steam user Snort Cannon mentions the 'horrible controls', while maintaining that the 'graphics are alright for the most part'. Furthermore, the 'game is incredibly short' and 'there is next to no replay value' (2015). This review conflates the game's quality with production value and game design craft, stressing the game as a commodity. The review is interested in usability, i.e. how visuals, controls and mechanics behave. The quality of ideological design, and the question of how engagingly the slave trade is presented and packaged seems to be secondary, as expressed by Snort Cannon's terse remark: 'the game isn't [as] offensive as one might think' (2015).

What these reviews reflect is players' expectations of games to be consumed, enjoyed or criticised as commodities. Looking back at the history of commodity racism and the fetish object of soap, we might wonder to what extent video games' enjoyment as a product, rather than text, repeats this history. While casual design integrates updates of inferential racism into the very mechanics of games, there seems to be a collective wish by players to treat occurrences of empire as part of a soapbox decoration that is not essential for the 'real' function of entertainment. The question does not seem to be whether it is problematic to inhabit the role of a mass-murdering coloniser (*RE5, The Conquest: Colonization*) or a complicit slave (*Slave Trade*), but how well the challenges of empire are restaged via the different

technical levels of game design. In centring questions of functionality and usability, the 'other on the soapbox' becomes silenced as a normalised backdrop to play.

At this point it is important to note that as an attitude complicit with inferential racism, casual play is available to everyone; not just the symbolic beneficiary of the white Western man. *Colonization* addresses players as 'Sir', invoking the role of both the 'truly represented' white male coloniser and the implied identity of the player. However, it cannot be assumed that only white men will play and enjoy the game. In the same way that colonising activities in history have always been supported by marginalised bystanders (i.e. the silenced white female explorer [McClintock, 2013]), casual colonialism in video games can be enjoyed by anyone irrespective of their race or gender (Shaw, 2014). Technically any player can take on the role of a white supremacist, expansionist male hero dominating others. However, where the player is a subaltern or colonized subject, this can create a disjuncture that the game does not allow the player to articulate: 'the game's rules constrain [a player] to follow certain assumptions about his/her culture that he/she, being marginal to the identity the game constructs, is unable to protest [against]' (Mukherjee, 2016: 10).

Casual Academia

As an ideological category facilitating neocolonialism, the casual is not reserved for the designing and playing of video games. It also drives a specific type of formalist scholarly discourse on video games, that persists, despite being faced with works demonstrating that video games cannot be separated from politics and race (Consalvo, 2012; Fron et al., 2007; Leonard, 2006; Nakamura, 2013; Westecott et al., 2013). One example of this type of scholarly discourse is the idea that a video game character's appearance and cultural identity do not matter, since it is the actions they perform that constitute gameplay (Aarseth, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2011; Newman, 2002). Aarseth reports that when he plays *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996), 'I don't even see [Lara Croft's] body, but see through and past it' (Aarseth, 2004: 48): what matters is engagement with the game system. It is suggested here that a video game's representational features, the body of Lara in this case, are less important than the game and can literally be looked through. Although Keogh (2014) and

MacCallum-Stewart (2014) point out that it is necessary to see Lara as a person to make sense of the gameplay options of shooting and climbing, Aarseth's argues that the cultural relevance of Lara's identity as a 'cyberbimbo' or icon of empowerment (Kennedy, 2002) can be safely dismissed. Instead, scholars may 'look through' to see what is truly significant about Lara Croft: she is a procedural game token within the digital playing field of *Tomb Raider*.

This discourse of differentiation between relevant and irrelevant parts of video games is reiterated by Jesper Juul in *Half Real* (Juul, 2005), where video games are described as dichotomous halves, comprising 'real' and 'fictional' elements. While at times the book claims that both elements matter, Juul's narrative pushes towards a formalist resolution: which side wins? Based on his observation that games can do without fiction, but not without rules, Juul concludes that rules are the more pertinent, 'real' side of games. This claim is rooted in observations, including that early *Quake III* players reduced the quality of graphics to achieve a better frame rate. This is taken as evidence that graphics and narratives matter less to gamers than rules and procedures.

In *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* (2011), Graeme Kirkpatrick makes a similar claim by suggesting that playing a video game corrodes elements of meaning that are not immediately necessary to complete the game. Kirkpatrick argues that by being constantly occupied with analysing the performance of our gameplay activity, our mind drifts from making sense of the characters, stories and environments towards a concern with managing tasks. What occurs inside the game universe becomes increasingly irrelevant. Play is essentially about 'purposeless techniques of rapid-fire puzzle-solving and managing the values attached to variables in a dynamic environment' (Kirkpatrick 2011: 44). The view that games are naturally corrosive of fictional contents is also presented in Sebastian Möring's philosophical take on play as a transformational activity leading players from thought to praxis (Möring, 2013: 316). What happens during this transformation is a kind of purification, through the repetitive *doing* of gameplay tasks. Just as the frequent repetition of a single word eventually erases its meaning over time, this repeated

in-game action eventually puts an end to meaning and processes of representation, and leaves the player in a trance-like status of pure praxis.

These academic voices contribute to the maintenance of video games' casual empire in at least three ways. Firstly, by striving for a separation of games and representation, they affirm players' and designers' intuition that their incidental connection to a colonial past and neocolonial present does not matter. By suggesting that games are more important than fiction, or that games are even corrosive of fiction, game designers are invited to ignore, to 'look through' contents that might otherwise be considered culturally insensitive. The separation of play and representation, declared by the authoritative voice of academia, legitimises a colour-blind approach to racial relations in video games (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This expedites the casualisation of empire, and the reproduction of colonial images like the 'slave' and the 'native'.

Secondly, once casual, traces of empire in video games can be shrugged off as irrelevant. The implication is that if one truly *played* rather than only looked at offensive material, one could 'play away' the colonial. Brendan Keogh suggests that this view 'actively damages video game criticism' (2014: 7). It is suggested that only by isolating the 'core' of games can we distil knowledge that is interesting and relevant. However, 'such claims are acts of scholarly sabotage that work to toss aside any elements particular to the video game form that we do not immediately understand' (Keogh, 2014: 6). For instance, a formal understanding of games does not require interest in what *Slave Trade*'s construction of the 'slave' as complicit, obedient and silent teaches Danish schoolchildren who play the game as part of their history curriculum. Further, formalist game scholarship actively discourages postcolonial criticism. After all, to study video games as cultural artefacts with a history, and with contemporary reality effects, is not *really* to study them as games.

We might ask, then, who the 'purity complex' (Keogh, 2014: 5) in formalist studies serves. One possible response is that it speaks to a certain nostalgia of some game scholars, who are unwilling to give up a romantic view on gaming as a class-free, gender-free, race-free environment. As Juul asks in *A Casual Revolution*, '[g]iven that

video games are as wonderful as they are, why wouldn't you play them?' (2010: 2). Some pages later, this question is followed by another one: 'who can resist being moved by the invitation of [War Craft III]? A real-time strategy game is waiting to be played' (2010: 4). These questions take for granted a *casual play* attitude towards real-time strategy games as objects of pleasure, not representations of spatial domination or cultural arenas of othering. This selective, nostalgic angle on video games as wonderful by default corresponds with hegemonic power configurations. To make authoritative claims as to what video games are and how they can be enjoyed is also always an act of exclusion (Keogh, 2014). It does not speak to those players whose default attitude to real-time strategy games is alienation, and ignores the fact that games are enjoyed and rejected for multiple, partly contradictory reasons (Shaw, 2014).

Challenging the Casual Empire

What to do about the status of casual empire? How to respond to and adequately critique it? As an ideological form, casual empire emerges across design, play and academic discourse. These are also the sites where it can be constructively engaged.

In the context of game design, it is necessary to challenge the dynamics of inferential racism as the default imagery manifested through gameplay. In *Colonization*'s conquer/plunder mechanic, *RE*'s vase crushing and the silenced dialogue options in *Slave Trade*, racist stereotypes of the 'native' and the 'slave' emerge unintentionally. To game studios like Capcom, Epic Games and Serious Games, they are side effects of design that may appear normal, and pose no reason for concern. As the property of the casual, incidental racism grows in the absence of attention. If no attention is paid to the way our natural assumptions about the 'natives' and the 'slaves' are tied up in stereotypes, these assumptions will enter entertainment products unchallenged as expressions of *adventure* (Hall, 1995). In other words, doing nothing means letting inferential racism do the work. This work can pervade all layers of game design, art, sound and gameplay. For instance, the agitated 'bush drum' in *RE5* serves to classify the black Majini as simultaneously barbaric and manageable. *Colonization*'s distinction between European and native

people mobilises naturalised ideas of the native as an uncivilised subjects beyond a sense of time and progress. The white narrative voice in *Slave Trade* distracts from Putij's experience as a slave, and rewrites his story for a target group of Danish middle school children.

While game designers cannot be blamed for the fact that racism feels normal, they can be blamed for failing to consult on avoiding common pitfalls in order to prevent the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. One thing game designers can do is improve their receptiveness towards justified criticism by commentators whose cultures, identities and stories they unintentionally misrepresent. There is no reason why the values transported by a game should not be checked and resolved as rigorously as technical issues prior to release.

One possible access point towards checking games for instances of casual empire is the question of intended audiences: who is served by the game and its adventure narratives? These narratives not only accommodate specific power fantasies and pleasures but contain historical references, which need to be critically engaged. For instance, if references to the white, male coloniser and the barbaric 'other' are made, they can be made explicit or even satirised. Rather than civilising, the Europeans in *Colonization* could have been portrayed as passive brutes who need to be taught respect for the land's fauna and flora by the Inca. In *RE5,* Chris Redfield's imperial mindset could have been directly addressed through comments remarking on the tension between his job as a security assessment officer and his violent behaviour towards racial others. A few design tweaks would have allowed Putij in *Slave Trade* to break the trust meter, and thus to challenge the representation of slavery as an eternal condition beyond resistance.

In addition to design concerns, changing casual play attitudes requires players to rethink their criteria for a 'good game'. Players should expect games to make critical use of their capacities to exclude and include social experiences in addition to delivering functional gameplay. The majority of fantasies currently available cater to the select experiences of an presumed white male player (Alexander, 2016). While marginalised players may be inventive in dealing with their erasure and misrepresentation throughout video games (Shaw, 2014), their symbolic

silencing can be a source of distress. They become what Mukherjee (2016) calls 'subaltern players', a type of player whose experience is made unspeakable by the game. The wish to reduce distress in their fellow players can be an important incentive for players of the target audience to start protesting against further repetitions of casual empire in future games (Shaw, 2014). Instead of living in a state of complicity with the ubiquity of racial grammar, fans may start pressuring studios to reframe their priorities and seek consultation for future products.

This requires from players the literacy to recognise their own living room couch as an arena for contemporary commodity racism; however, this is a kind of literacy notably absent from the reviews discussed here. Besides references to 'lazy gameplay' and 'alright graphics', hypothetical reviews of the future might address the construction of Putij's perspective; and questions regarding who created him for what purpose. Furthermore, they would talk about lessons learned about slavery, and expect these to challenge a white Western narrative.

Finally, casual empire highlights the need for academia to practise a holistic approach to games as artefacts and practices within historical contexts of representation (Fron et al., 2007). What is required is multidisciplinary work that challenges the myth that video games are structurally separate from other media forms and therefore immune to the impacts of race, gender and class. The nostalgic celebration of the assumed liberating qualities of play, and general ideas that being a game-player is necessarily a wonderful thing, must also be challenged. Such sentiments need to be exposed in their ideological function of hegemonic discourse denying the need for change (Keogh, 2014).

To accept that colonial power fantasies in games are more than fictional wrapping begs the question as to how games can contribute to the discourse of decolonisation. Game writer Meg Jayanth notes that removing the paradigm of winning from games is not the same as removing fun and engagement (Jayanth, 2016). Her interactive fiction game *80 Days* (Inkle, 2015), which reimagines Jules Verne's literary classic *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873) makes a clear case for this. Besides traversing the world in the role of a racially ambiguous, non-binary Jean Passepartout, the player can choose to ignore the implicit goal of traveling

around the world in eighty days or fewer. Instead of stopping, the game allows the player to play on after eighty days have passed. Exploration and the discovery of different endings supplant a clear win/loss dichotomy. This matches the inclusive tone of *80 Days*'s 19th-century steampunk universe, which presents the world under conditions of postcolonial, post-binary identity politics, where options for romantic encounters, charming conversations and moral choices have significantly expanded.

This is expressed, for instance, in the fact that both Passepartout and Phileas Fogg are interested in people of multiple genders, and do not discriminate against new aquaintances based on their class or racial markers. The characters maintain their signature demeanour as 19th-century gentlemen engaging in charming conversations with interlocutors of frequently undisclosed genders and ethnicities. Male-connoted professions such as captain, driver and hotel owner are often held by women, but more often than not, this is handled as a mere side note secondary to the important narrative choices. The game *80 Days* thus invites players to imagine a different model of the world that is full of adventures resisting default expectations, and is therefore an example of how game design may 'decasualise' the empire in practice. It integrates and demands respectful treatment of racial difference as part of its gameplay premise; and caters to a player base beyond the hegemonic stereotype of the white, male, power-hungry 'gamer' (Alexander, 2016).

This article has instigated discussion on casual empire as it pertains to video games as cultural texts produced through design, play and academia. Besides perpetuating oppressive narratives of an omnipotent white male ruler, the concept of casual empire argues that games do so through the currency of play. It is in this intimate place of play where players, designers and academics have to start asking uncomfortable questions. There are other potential aspects of casual empire that have been left unaddressed due to the scope of this article, but require more attention in the future. Firstly, the question of how casual empire as an invisible ideology not only pertains to the textual but also to the material level of hard-ware production. It would be interesting to apply the concept of casual empire to the context of hardware production and the inequitable distribution of global

labour that perpetuates colonial logics. The gap between those working to produce hardware and those able to consume it is well documented (Huntemann, 2013). Focusing on the role of labour in the production of entertainment hardware would add another dimension to the casual as an ideology that sustains class differences between those who labour for entertainment and those who profit from its outcome.

Secondly, another aspect of casual empire that requires more elaborate discussion is its intersectionality, i.e. how class, race and gender work together in the construction of oppression, play and pleasure. Throughout this article, intersectionality has emerged in examples like Putij's sister whose traumatic experience is erased from *Slave Trade*'s narrative. The casual silencing of women's stories, from their experience as low-wage labourers for the hardware market (Huntemann, 2013: 42) to their symbolic erasure from in-game power fantasies, would be an important theme for future research. What seems particularly necessary in the growing body of postcolonial game studies is a black feminist angle on both textual and material aspects of the casual empire. This could also shed new light on the question of the hitherto ignored subaltern female player, and the dynamics of being silenced in the course of casual empire building.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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