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## POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES IN GAME STUDIES

# Introduction to the Special Issue on Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies

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The treatment of colonialism in video games, barring a few notable exceptions, is marked by a Western and, specifically, late 19th-century imperialist bias. Simultaneously, in the past two decades of multifaceted research and the development of robust theoretical frameworks in the still fledgling discipline of game studies, postcolonial discourses, whether they comprise critiques of imperialism or neocolonialism, have not been prominently highlighted until very recently. A coherent effort to bring together the current research on postcolonialism in video games was also urgently required. Further, the past years has seen a rather persistent, albeit unexpected, emergence of a pro-colonial or pro-imperialist discourse in mainstream academia that even justifies the continuance of empire as an ameliorating influence on the people of the so-called developing countries, most of which had formerly been colonized by European powers.

Thus, it is the aim of this issue to address this epistemic omission and counter such bias where it exists by also bridging video games research with larger discussions of postcolonialism in other humanities contexts and disciplines. The various articles in this special issue offer a range of perspectives from epistemological power to theory and praxis in critical academia, to contexts of production and practices of play, to close readings of postcolonial traces in video games. These varying approaches to the analysis of video games and their societal and historical contexts open up the debates further to a diverse set of topics ranging from board games to phone games or from mainstream high-budget console games to indie titles that question colonialism. As video games address issues relating to orientalism, subalternity, and hybridity as well as the current ambiguities in conceiving nationhood and the postcolony, the articles in this issue will also likely adumbrate further serious commentary that will develop both game studies research and current conceptions of the postcolonial.

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Whilst a fairly new discipline in the larger context of the humanities, game studies has now been formally established for over two decades. 1997 saw the publication of two major English language texts on videogames and their role in the humanities (Aarseth, 1997; Murray, 1997), and the now well-known ludology vs. narratology debates on the distinctions between games and narratives ensued soon after. During the inception of game studies as a discipline, postcolonialism, another comparatively new area (especially when considered beside other areas in traditional humanities) had already achieved prominence, with thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha making strong connections between theoretical developments in philosophy, literary criticism and other humanities discourses; and the predicament of those countries and communities which had recently achieved independence from their erstwhile colonial rulers an important topic of study.

The discipline of postcolonialism (sometimes written 'post-colonialism') 'deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies' (Ashcroft et al., 1995: 186), addressing key issues relating to the identity and subjectivity of colonised and formerly colonised peoples, and to their spatial and temporal perceptions. The former colonial empires had dwindled considerably: in 1992, Hong Kong became one of the final parts of the British Empire to be granted independence from the UK.

Videogames themselves had addressed colonialism consistently from their very early days. Highly successful game titles such as *Civilization* (MPS Labs, 1991) and *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios, 1997) are obvious indicators of this interest. These games were not critical of the logic of colonialism but were about building empires, with the conditions for victory often entailing the player possessing as much of the game's map area as possible. In *Age of Empires*, for example, it is even possible to 'convert' characters from other(ed) factions, allowing the player to realise the coloniser's dream of an absolutely pliant colonised populace. Given this, it is surprising that in two decades of game studies there has been very little discussion of colonialism (Mukherjee, 2017). As noted throughout this issue, where there is exploration of colonialism in videogames, this is often marked by a Western and late 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial bias. The aim of this issue, then, is to address and counter these

epistemic omissions and biases. In so doing, the issue will help connect videogames research to larger discussions of postcolonialism in other humanities contexts and disciplines, so that postcolonial studies can supplement game studies and vice versa.

*Open Library of Humanities* (hereafter OLH) made this possible not only by providing a platform and framework for creating this issue, but by disseminating it as open-access for all readers to peruse. Accordingly, OLH provides the ideal site for such an endeavour: as any teacher or researcher in the so-called 'third world' or 'developing' countries will be aware, access to pay-walled journals is next to impossible for large sections of students and faculty the world over. An open-access online issue, therefore, provides the opportunity for wider access and analysis among a larger number, including scholars from the formerly colonised nations to whom these issues are likely very relevant. Further, this issue aims to avail the technological space of possibilities of digital media to enable a continuing discussion of the ideas that have been addressed here.

The timing of this issue is also relevant as those in the margins continue contesting (post-)colonial hegemony, whilst this hegemony seeks to reproduce itself, including by violent means. The rise of post-fascism (Traverso & Meyran, 2017) and the failure of liberalism have emphasized a societal turn towards a restoration of more explicitly authoritarian forms of power in protection of volatile capitalism and its colonial history. This counter-reactionary dynamic has been present for years (if not decades) in videogame cultures, where dominant reactionary consumers organize against those who oppose the status quo, with the complicity of multinational corporations. In the recent case of the game *Thunderbird Strike* (LaPensée, 2017), Minnesota politicians and oil lobbyists labelled the game as 'eco-terrorism' for daring to criticize the oil industry and its relation to settler colonialism (Starkey, 2017). Meanwhile, videogames that are complicit with colonial power achieve enormous success with little by way of critical reaction. Counter-hegemonic contestations in games cultures, then, are faced with both economic and political pushback from above, as well as corporate grassroots organization by reactionary consumers from below. It is for this reason that the power relations of games—which frequently

reproduce colonial power-logics—need to be constantly questioned, criticized, and ultimately dismantled.

A widely noted case in contemporary academia sheds light on the acceptance of colonial power relations. In his article, 'The Case for Colonialism', published in and then withdrawn from *Third World Quarterly*, Bruce Gilley writes:

Western colonialism was, as a general rule, both objectively beneficial and subjectively legitimate in most of the places where it was found, using realistic measures of those concepts. The countries that embraced their colonial inheritance, by and large, did better than those that spurned it. [...] Colonialism can be recovered by weak and fragile states today in three ways: by reclaiming colonial modes of governance; by recolonising some areas; and by creating new Western colonies from scratch. (Gilley, 2017: 1)

Such an argument provides perfect justification for making videogames that celebrate colonialism and the creation of 'new Western colonies'. The article was rejected by two reviewers and was withdrawn by the journal's board of editors, who later resigned in protest at the deep sense of anger and hurt it caused to communities from formerly colonised nations, as embodied in the Indian politician Shashi Tharoor's speech at Oxford University: 'India was Britain's biggest cash cow, biggest consumer of British goods and provider of high incomes for British civil servants. We literally paid for our own oppression' (qtd in Yechury, 2015). Tharoor rejects Gilley's argument, and claims that the British have a moral debt to pay. Locating the problem of postcolonialism within these extremes, the articles anthologised in this collection clearly bring out the problematic nature of colonialism.

Some commentators might raise the question of whether postcolonialism is indeed a valid position given that power-relationships in different parts of the world still resemble colonialism. Indeed, the 'post' of 'postcolonialism' is a matter of debate; as is the hyphenation often used in writing. These are valid concerns and it is necessary to note that in this case the term is not to be merely understood as after colonialism. One way of rethinking the term is thus:

[t]he term itself does not simply mean 'after colonialism', the end of colonialism or even solely address the scenarios in the formerly colonized countries after their independence. The development of new elites within neo-colonial institutions in post-independence societies has perpetuated similar complaints of unequal treatment and exploitation. Postcolonial theory, in general, comprises a wide range of issues connected to the exploitative master discourses of imperial Europe and the responses to them by the peoples of the Americas, Asia, Africa, Australasia and some regions of Europe itself. (Mukherjee, 2017: 4)

This collection of essays aims to address these very master-discourses that linger within current discussions of videogames. The sense of 'Otherness' or alterity that colonialism thrived on is in no way extinct. Achille Mbembe astutely points out that 'the experience of the Other, or the problem of the "I" of others and of human beings we perceive as foreign to us, has almost always posed virtually insurmountable difficulties to the Western philosophical and political tradition.' (Mbembe, 1992: 4) Mbembe's reaction is not chronologically unique either: the challenges to the Othering have existed in tandem with the master discourses of colonialism. As Homi Bhabha would have it, the process of mimicry goes hand-in-glove with hybridity and the consequent threat to the comfort that stereotypes of race and social superiority aimed to provide the colonial enterprise (Bhabha, 1994: 145–175). In a sense, then, the 'postcolonial' has remained as an 'always-already' dangerous supplement to the centres of power that colonialism has tried to construct. It is hoped that the essays in this collection—by engaging with both early and later discourses in game studies, as well as with the colonial and anticolonial reactions in videogames—will perform the task of highlighting and challenging exploitative master discourses of colonialism.

As noted above, in game studies itself, attempts to present a postcolonialist critique have been few and far between. Nevertheless, Lisa Nakamura's groundbreaking analysis of 'cybertypes' has been of paramount importance in setting the tone for future research (Nakamura, 1995). In speaking of how racial stereotypes

or 'cybertypes' are hardcoded into online transactions and notions of identity, she uses examples from the videogame *Streetfighter* to illustrate her point. The 'identity tourism' that she discusses by way of Edward Said's analyses of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and *Lawrence of Arabia* is also crucial in analysing videogames, through which players can 'inhabit' the identities of their onscreen avatars, something which ensuing scholars have commented and expanded upon (Leonard, 2004; Shaw, 2015a; Mukherjee, 2016a). Sybille Lammes (2010) and Shoshana Magnet (2006), respectively, have initiated discussions around spatiality in empire-building games during the 1990s. Important work on postcolonial identity-formation and historiography in videogames was being simultaneously carried on by scholars such as Hanli Geysler and Pippa Tshabalala (2011) as well as by Tom Apperley (2006). This collection is privileged to be able to feature the current research of Lammes, Geysler and Apperley, who have all very graciously consented to contribute articles.

As a discipline, game studies (and discussions of videogame culture in general) tend to gravitate towards a Eurocentric or a North American centre (with infrequent engagements with Japan and South Korea). Conferences take place primarily in North America, Australia, Europe, and China; whilst departments and institutes are mostly located in those same continents, and scholars mostly originate from those same power centres. Other regions—especially those of formerly colonised nations—remain on the margins. It seems that academia and game studies themselves likewise continue the postcolonial tradition. Nevertheless, following the initial late entry of postcolonialism into game studies, there has been a growing interest in the topic.

Adrienne Shaw's monograph, *Gaming at Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (2015) addresses some key issues of postcolonialism. Two years later, Souvik Mukherjee's *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (2017) was the first book-length study focused entirely on the topic. Soraya Murray's *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*, also published in 2017, addresses related issues. Phill Penix-Tadsen's *Cultural Code: Videogames in Latin America* (2016) also addresses postcolonialism, whilst his forthcoming project based on his DiGRA (Digital Games Research Association) conference panel on videogames

and the Global South aims to take this research further. Further work has been undertaken by scholars including Rebecca Mir and Trevor Owens (2013), Sabine Harrer and Martin Pichlmair (2015), Paul Martin (2016), Siddhartha Chakraborti (2015), Dom Ford (2016) and Emil Hammar (2017) have all contributed to this fledgling field. This special issue follows in the wake of these key perspectives on the topic whilst opening up the debates to a diverse set of topics ranging from board games to mainstream high-budget console games such as *Witcher 3* (CD Projekt RED, 2015). Until recently, game studies largely focused on videogames, but questions about narratives, empire and postcoloniality are increasingly asked of board and card games as well (Robinson, 2014; Trammell, 2016; Qureshi, 2018).

The goal of this issue is to provide space for a variety of contemporary research perspectives on the relationship between postcolonialism and game studies. It is an attempt at gathering established and early-career scholars with insights into postcolonial ideas in game studies (and elsewhere) to make an impact on the landscape of game studies, academia and beyond. While the issue is still reliant on the technology and economy of the global power centres, the open-access dissemination of this issue might help inform scholars and readers within the centres and erstwhile colonies. Whether or not academia is the usually domain of the bourgeoisie, it is nonetheless crucial that the knowledge it produces is spread wide and far.

In her article, Soraya Murray asks a key question in game studies: what is the purpose and political meaning of critical work undertaken by academics in the field? How can game studies move beyond conventional criticisms of the ideologies embedded into play, games, and their cultures? By surveying different texts adopting postcolonial approaches to game studies, Murray poses the crucial question of how political work within academia can and should avoid the global power relations that are reproduced in academia and beyond. In order to avoid this subsumption into neoliberal exploitation, she draws on the work of Sara Ahmed, Stuart Hall, and Gayatri Spivak.

Continuing this focus on academia, Sabine Harrer analyses a reductionist conceptualization of games and play as forms of 'fun' divorced from political



meaning through case studies of three games that feature colonialism. She develops the concept of 'Casual Empire', using it to identify how power and exclusion operate through games culture, their production, and game studies, with a specific focus on how previous attempts to construct game ontologies might inadvertently lead to exclusion and marginalization.

While Murray and Harrer provide key analytical insights into game studies and its ideologies, Hanli Geysler provides an account of decolonizing the curriculum at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. Geysler's article serves as a key insight into institutional and individual measures taken to establish a subaltern point of education divorced from the power centres of postcolonial hegemony. Through an exploration of the needs and wishes of students, Geysler outlines the practices that she and her colleagues have been committed to in recent years. These serve as guidance for other scholars and their institutions looking to decolonize games curricula.

In their article on the mobile videogames *Phone Story* (Molle Industria, 2011) and *Burn the Boards* (Causa Creations, 2015), Víctor Navarro-Remesal and Beatriz Pérez Zapata analyse how they resist hegemonic discourses on the production of videogames and how players are affectively motivated to perform what the authors refer to as 'ethical play' via these two 'games of multitude'.

Wilson Roberto Bekesas, Mauro Berimbau, Renato Vercesi Mader, Joana Angelica Pellerano and Viviane Riegel also focus on players' experiences through their account of the research project 'Youth Cosmopolitanism in Brazil', as part of which they developed and utilized *CosmoCult Card Game*. The results of the research highlights how the game and the practices of play by 170 participants in São Paulo illustrated 'a reflexive view of the Other' by contributing 'examples and narratives of these individuals regarding their daily lives and the possibilities of connection to other cultures' (2018: 25).

Subsequently, Tom Apperley investigates the contexts of his established term 'counterplay' in the communities of the historical strategy games *Europa Universalis II* (Paradox Development Studio, 2001) and *Victoria: Empire Under*

*the Sun* (Paradox Entertainment, 2003). By analyzing the paratexts of these communities, Apperley uncovers the power dynamics between hegemonic histories and the counterhegemonic practices of players in their negotiation of each game's simulation of history. As a result, Apperley's article reminds us the importance of player perspectives and performances in how they interpret, negotiate, and activate various meanings.

Sybille Lammes and Stephanie de Smale explore their own practices of play in the game *Civilization VI* (Firaxis Games, 2016) via an auto-ethnographic analysis. Exploring *Civilization VI* through a constellation of possible interpretations, the authors account for their dispositions as players and how they negotiate the colonialist and technological conditions of a videogame like *Civilization VI*.

Tomasz Majkowski analyses the Polish videogame *The Witcher 3* from a theoretical perspective informed by Polish literature. He explores the game's representation of political struggle, the ideological stance of the protagonist, and the ethnic inspirations on its world-building. His close reading uncovers the game's nuances and paradoxes in relation to international, national and regional power relationships.

Steffen Krueger analyzes *Finding Fanon I* and *II*: films by the artists Larry Achiampong and David Blandy made within the world of *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2013), which explore the game's colonial spaces. Krueger develops an account of their engagements with identity, virtual space, and the culture of videogames.

Jacob Euteneuer investigates the under-explored concept of settler colonialism in the mobile game *Clash of Clans* (Supercell, 2013). He contrasts the game to 'the embedded nature of settler colonialism in the videogame industry, particularly the mobile or casual scene, and contemporary life in settler-states' (2018: 1). The article highlights the importance of close readings of postcolonial expressions found in ever-changing spaces like mobile platforms.

Cornel Borit, Melania Borit and Petter Olsen's article traces the postcolonial discourses propagated in the realm of analogue games through an analysis of the popular board games *Puerto Rico* (Seyfarth, 2002), *Struggle of Empires* (Wallace,

2004) and *Archipelago* (Boelinger, 2012). By investigating the goals of the games and players' negotiation of their colonial themes, the authors argue that through 'the game mechanics, game rules and graphic representations, the three games are humanising the colonist while de-humanising the colonial subject, sometimes through invisibility or blurred depiction of the latter' (2018: 1). The authors compliment this issue's overwhelming focus on digital games by drawing out the postcolonial themes and systems evidenced in some of the most popular Western analogue games.

It is our hope that this issue enables praxis. Many of the ideas uncovered are not merely an intellectual exercise, but rather a highlighting of the ways that the postcolonial operates and is instantiated in games and play. As Murray so excellently puts it in her article, it is important to consider 'larger methodological questions of what political work is achieved when we engage in postcolonial critiques of video games' (2018: 1). Scholars within game studies (and not only those concerned with postcolonial analysis) should ask themselves what exactly game studies as a field hope to achieve. Will game studies continue to be subsumed under the neoliberalisation of academia, in which the only telos is profit, and which churns out workers for the factory that is mainstream game development? Or will game studies reflect on and question the ways that games are embedded in the (historical) global power structure? Will game studies adapt and question the ways the postcolonial is reproduced in academia, as well as in games?

We hope this collection in some ways put these thoughts at the basis of future games studies research projects insofar as to challenge and decolonize the power struggles inherent to the field, as well as the students that university factories and their colonialist histories produce. These articles and future research will hopefully inspire praxis in relation to economic, material, symbolic, colonial, and historical inequalities. Yet it is always easier to talk the talk than walk the walk, so to speak, so even while formulating this special issue we run the risk of reproducing the hegemonic structures, and the chance is that we replicate the same network of power relations that Sara Ahmed's politics of citation criticizes (Ahmed, 2013). We sought to expand the level of dissemination during our call for papers and we unfortunately

had to reject some very key contributions that would otherwise have provided new and refreshing but hitherto unheard-of perspectives on game studies; hopefully these contributions will be published in due course.

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### **Competing Interests**

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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