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'Truly an Age of Empires?': Coded Colonialism and Subaltern Histories in Videogames

Colonization and empire have been popular themes in videogames ever since their very early days. Narratives of settler colonialism and manifest destiny in the 1970s educational game *Oregon Trail*, open imperial expansion in the 1990s Microsoft classic *Age of Empires* and subsequent games of its ilk and the less obvious but pervading colonial concerns of games such as *Tomb Raider*, *Far Cry* and even the *Assassin's Creed* series. On viewing the representation of history in videogames, the much-neglected but important element of the videogame maps and the silences in the videogame narrative arguably a different impression of videogames emerges.

As a relatively new medium of entertainment and of narration, it is surprising that these games continue to perpetuate notions of colonialism and imperialism that were prevalent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even the new discipline of Game Studies, while expressing concern at how videogames themselves may be 'without exception colonised from the fields of literary, theatre, drama and film studies' (Eskelinen 2001) in one of its foundational texts, fails to go beyond this parochial fear into questions of how colonialism and imperialism are pervading tropes that are often accepted as given in the videogames' gameplay. At the risk of courting controversy, it will be argued here that often these notions of colonialism are *coded into* the historiography that videogames promote; this is an issue that is often neglected in the discourses of videogames as history or those of the portrayal of history in videogames.

Looking at these issues from a Postcolonial and particularly, a South-South perspective, the first strategy here will be to address the notion of subaltern histories. 'Subaltern' as conceived by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* was later used by the Subaltern Studies group of historians in India such as Ranajit Guha and also made popular in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak's question is not an easy one to answer and in Guha's understanding, the subaltern is rendered voiceless as she does not have the access to and facility with the archives that the Western notions of history privilege as representations of history. For Guha, Subaltern Studies is 'part of a self-conscious effort to correct social history's traditional bias for the perspective of the elite classes' (Arnold, Bayly, Brass, & Chakravarty, 2012, p. 13). More recently, scholarship by South American historians such as Walter Mignolo have focused on concepts such as 'colonial difference' and 'border thinking' to illustrate how the '"people without history" were located in a time "before" the "present" [and therefor] people with history could write the history of those people without' (Mignolo 3). Elsewhere (Mukherjee 2016), I have discussed the 'gamer subaltern'as a category where the player occupies a position of ambivalence - on the one hand the plurality of the game and its apparent agency allow the player to follow strategies of counterplay (see Apperley 2010, Hammar 2020) and on the other, there is

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the complicity with the colonial notions of the game. The voices of the non-player characters such as the colonized Other in *Age of Empires,* the Native Americans in *The Oregon Trail* or the freed slave in *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* are always-already rendered subaltern in the gameplay. History, as it is represented in videogames is a limited history, one that is expressed at the cost of silencing other voices, such as the non-playable nations in Sid Meier's *Colonization* or the Barbary Pirates in *Empire: Total War.* When presenting the blockbuster videogame history of the Great War in *Battlefield One*, the colonial soldier is almost entirely forgotten (Hamilton 2016). There are many examples that one could provide.

Such silences in the videogames' portrayal of history are crucial in revealing the fissures in the portrayal of history. Perhaps looking at games from geographies other than the Global North may be helpful in revisiting the notions of history-making in videogames.The indie game *Somewhere,* which is about a community that has lost its powers of speech (a literal rendering of the subaltern) and the Indonesian game *Nusantara Online*, which can only speak of an imagined history that is often conflated with fantasy, could be other sites of history-making in videogames in parallel to the usual Western grand narratives of history. Another area that reflects the unspoken/unwritten history of colonialism is that of cartographic silences. Recent work on videogame cartography has described the in-game maps as 'postcolonial playgrounds' (Lammes 2010) and has drawn important connections between the maps in nineteenth century adventure stories such as *Treasure Island* and *King Solomon's Mines* and the modern-day videogame maps in *Tomb Raider* or even *Witcher 3* (see Mukherjee 2015, Majkowski 2019, for example). The removal of the 'fog of war' to show the hidden sections of the game's map in *Age of Empires* finds a classic parallel in the removal of unexplored blank spaces on the colonial explorer's map. The history that is contained in these silences is important and needs to be explored beyond the constraints of the standard notions of archival understanding.

Based on the observations on the presentation of colonial history through the gameplay and through the construction of game cartography, this presentation will argue that notions of colonialism and imperialism are *coded* into the thinking around some of the most prominent and popular videogames today. The plurality of the medium and the potential counternarratives and counterplay that it allows within these games, however, continually bring to light the 'other' discourses of history and leave us with the possibility of tracing potential trajectories of historiography that challenge ingrained notions of colonialism and imperialism from within. Elizabeth LePensee's response to the *Oregon Trail* game in *When Rivers Were Trails*, where the tale is retold from the perspective of the Native American people who were displaced from their homelands is a case in point. There are numerous examples of playing the games differently or of modding the code so as to represent those who do not 'normally' get any agency in the game. In the context of the current BLM movement (and the related toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol, UK), it is important to start thinking about how empire and colonialism are represented

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in popular media such as videogames and to see how issues of postcolonialism and subalternity connect to prevalent discourses on inclusivity and diversity in race, gender and class. This, in turn, addresses the crucial issue of how history is presented in popular media and how, despite the initial years of silence, it is important to raise these issues in Game Studies and larger Cultural Studies contexts.

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