

Essay 2: Digital Colonialities

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Digital Colonialism is a broad and far-reaching topic that embeds itself in all areas of our interaction with the internet. This spans from the design of games, where colonial frameworks are often used to justify the core gameplay of the experience, (Euteneuer, 2018) to the outside forces that govern the labour market for the online world itself, where menial tasks are often relegated to third-world and underdeveloped countries for a fraction of the labour value that is being provided. (Graham, et al., 2017) In this essay, I want to use Amrute's article as a jumping off point to discuss how the technological labour market replicates colonial practices in jobs and hiring, first by breaking down how those colonial practices are seen in this industry, then by showing how they have incarnated in the modern market. Finally, I will relate that to how South Africa is viewed and what can be done to alleviate coloniality on a personal level.

In Amrute's article, we can view Colonialism as manifesting itself in three specific incarnations. Specifically, Amrute argues that Colonialism is hierarchical, exploitative, and extractive. (Sareeta, 2020) By analysing these incarnations of Colonialism, we can isolate their harmful aspects and recognise them in broader industry practices.

- Hierarchical. The belief in a hierarchy of people, more specifically that there are some people who are *inherently* more qualified to administer progress than others is present in technology as well. This is expanded upon in an article from Springer Link, where the authors show that entrepreneurs in rural areas in the US consistently earn less than entrepreneurs in urban areas, even when controlling for selection. (Yu & Artz, 2019)
- Exploitative. Colonial practices exist to exploit people in countries that are less developed. This manifests itself in the tech industry when companies choose to spend less on workers from foreign countries. For example, according to indeed.com, the average base salary for a software engineer working at amazon in Silicon Valley, CA will earn \$142 908 a year, while a software engineer working at amazon in South Africa earns an average base salary of R819 621 a year which, when converted into dollars, is about \$43 000 a year as of the time of this essay. (Indeed, 2024) (Indeed, 2024) This is a disparity of more than two thirds of the pay for assumedly the same work.
- Extractive. This typically refers to the minerals that are mined from a colonised country, which are then used to enrich the coloniser. In this context though, the extraction refers to the extraction of user data for use in advertising, language models, or anything else that benefits the company rather than the end users. (Sareeta, 2020) Of course, there is also the more direct extraction of rare earth minerals, such as in the recent case of child labour being used in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to supply cobalt to major tech companies such as Apple, Microsoft and Tesla. (Ogao, 2024) While the court ruled in favour of the companies, this was because they were not directly involved in the labour, not because they did not profit from it.

From this analysis, we can observe that the current technological industry exists on the same colonial framework that was set out in Amrute's article. The next point to discuss is how these labour practices relate to the South African market.

As mentioned above, the South African labour market is exploited globally as a source of cheap labour, owing to our struggling economy and high rate of unemployment. (Trading Economics, 2024) However, this exploitation does not reach the level of the disparity in currency strength. Once again referring to the Indeed statistics, South African developers are paid about 30% of the amount paid to Silicon Valley developers. However, the South African rand is about 6% as strong as the American dollar, (Forbes, 2024) and as such, we can leverage our pay much more effectively in South Africa than we would be able to in America.

More specifically, though, while the labour value of workers in South Africa is clearly being extracted to huge external companies, the economy can be better stimulated by the higher-than-national-average pay (\$43000 against \$12471 (GlobalData, 2021)) that we receive in compensation. This money can and should be used to stimulate local economy and businesses. This, in effect, can function as an injection of money into the economy when handled appropriately. This conjecture is evidenced by the fact that the inverse effect is observed when large multinational companies gain a foothold in local markets and siphon employment out of those communities in a similar, but opposite fashion. (Neumark, et al., 2008)

On a more personal level though, what can we, as South African developers do about this situation? Well, to fix it entirely, unfortunately, is not something that can be done as a singular person, but rather as a collective, since systemic change can only be achieved through large-scale sweeping policies, rather than through a single actor, especially one in a systematically disadvantaged position. However, we can enact decolonial practices interpersonally and within our work. By doing so, it can be possible to engender a culture of decolonialism within our workplaces, which may eventually lead to broader changes. These practices include, but are not limited to:

- Inclusion. Ensuring that our workplaces are inclusive of marginalised and disadvantaged identities.
- Progressiveness. Ensuring that the same workplaces contain a culture of acceptance, accountability, transparency and compassion.
- Accessibility. Ensuring that the things we create can help as many people as possible.

Through these practices, we as South Africans can begin to create a change in culture that can eventually lead to positive outcomes not just for ourselves, but for those marginalised around us.

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