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Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism

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Abstract

The postcolonial has still remained on the margins of Game Studies, which has now incorporated at length, contemporary debates of race, gender, and other areas that challenge the canon. It is difficult to believe, however, that it has not defined the way in which video games are perceived; the effect, it can be argued, is subtle. For the millions of Indians playing games such as *Empire: Total War* or *East India Company*, their encounter with colonial history is direct and unavoidable, especially given the pervasiveness of postcolonial reactions in everything from academia to day-to-day conversation around them. The ways in which games construct conceptions of spatiality, political systems, ethics, and society are often deeply imbued with a notion of the colonial and therefore also with the questioning of colonialism. This article aims to examine the complexities that the postcolonial undertones in video games bring to the ways in which we read them.

Keywords

postcolonialism, subaltern, cartography, race, orientalism

Postcolonial Thinking and Video Games: An Introduction

The postcolonial has still remained on the margins of Game Studies, which has now incorporated at length, contemporary debates of race, gender, and other areas that

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challenge the canon. It is difficult to believe, however, that postcolonial ideas do not influence the way in which video games are perceived; the effect, it can be argued, is often subtle. For the millions of Indian gamers, it is a moot question whether their gameplay of *Max Payne 3* (2012) or *Assassin's Creed* (2007) is influenced in any way by their colonial history. When they play games such as *Empire: Total War* (2009) or *East India Company* (2009), however, their encounter with colonial history is direct and unavoidable. Likewise, the Syrian youth playing *America's Army* (2002) or, conversely, mods such as *Under Ash* as well as the gamer from Central Africa playing *Far Cry 2* (2008) could certainly be expected to engage with a distinct political consciousness where discourses of power and colonization are involved. This article aims to examine the complex ways in which some video games construct conceptions of spatiality, political systems, ethics, and society that are often deeply imbued with a notion of the colonial and therefore also with the questioning of colonialism.

Taking as its point of departure the work of Lisa Nakamura (2002) on race in video games, of Sybille Lammes (2010) and Shoshana Magnet (2006) on postcolonial spatiality in video games, and my own earlier essay on colonial cartography in video games (Mukherjee, 2015), this analysis will also engage with current postcolonial theory such as that framed by commentators such as Homi Bhabha (1994), Edward Said (1979), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999). The term "postcolonialism" itself needs some spelling out here. Ashcroft and Tiffin concur seeing it as the "interaction between imperial culture and the complex of indigenous cultural practices" and a term that "addresses all aspects of the colonial process from the beginning of colonial contact" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2005, p. 2). Before proceeding to discuss the concept in relation to video games, it is also useful to speak briefly about one of the key words in the title of this article: "subaltern." The subaltern is a concept that has been borrowed from Antonio Gramsci by a group of historians and theorists, led by Ranajit Guha, concerned with writing "history from below" and with being "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). Complicating Guha's initial definition, Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" points out the risks of construing the subaltern as yet another voice of protest as an "essence" or an ontologically well-defined entity. Instead, Spivak sees the subaltern as a voice from below that can never articulate itself. Commentators on Spivak state that "there is no subaltern subject that can know and speak itself" (Nelson & Grossberg 1988, p. 27).

Considering the above positions on postcolonialism and the subaltern, the argument made in this article will be a threefold examination of the postcolonial in video games and an exploration of how the video game might become a medium of subalternity. The first section will address the cartographic presentations of space in real-time strategy games and how they perpetuate the colonial ways of "defining" geopolitics. Importantly, possibilities of alternative history(ies) and mapping emerge in video games as a latent discourse that challenges the above-mentioned colonial

framework. The next strand of the argument will examine a similar parallel in exploring identity in video games from a postcolonial perspective. Lastly, the perceptions and representations of the ''orient'' in video games and the putative reasons that prompt game developers to include such representations in their games while simultaneously erasing certain elements will be examined.

Where the earlier analyses have looked separately at the cartographic elements or the construction of identity in these games, the aim here is to examine how the different aspects of postcolonial thinking tie into each other in framing the perception, both external and self-reflexive, of the postcolonial subject. In understanding the subject position, the reactions to colonial hegemony and simultaneously the problems with such reactions will illustrate the processes of protest and subalternity. Finally, the key outcome of this analysis is to examine the way in which the postcolonial subject is (re)defined on looking through the lenses of video games and their players.

Video Game Cartography and the Postcolonial

Colonial empire has often been described in terms of the ludic. Nineteenth-century adventurers in Central Asia, exploring and marking out potential territory for their English or Russian masters, called their enterprise of espionage, surveillance, and mapping the ''Great Game'' or the ''tournament of shadows'' (Hopkirk, 2006). Popularized by Rudyard Kipling in *Kim*, the phrase is attributed to a Colonel Stoddart who probably had the game of Rugby in his mind when he thought of the epithet. Bearing a close resemblance to the (perhaps apocryphal) ''playing fields of Eton'' comment about Waterloo, the term seems to imply a larger than life activity played out according to mutually agreed upon rules. The apparent playfulness hides much that is of serious and world-changing import. In Kipling's novel, Kim is taught to play with gems by the mysterious Lurgan Sahib—a game where the boy is, unwittingly, indoctrinated into the skills necessary for surveying uncharted territory. In a similarly ludic experience, games such as *Age of Empires* or *Tropico* (PopTop Software, 2001) implicitly involve the player into the larger discourse of colonialism and possession.

Video games, in general, are associated with neoliberalism and capitalism by commentators who claim an intrinsic connect with colonialism and empire. According to Andrew Baerg (2009), ''the digital game, and its processes of computational representation, enacts rules driving a symbolic system that represents processes at work in neoliberalism'' (p. 119). He invokes Ian Bogost's (2010) concept of procedural rhetoric as ''the computer's ability to process, calculate, and manipulate massive numbers of rule-based symbols'' (Baerg, 2009, p. 119) to enable the shaping of ''our understanding of the world around us [. . .] with processes that can influence and potentially persuade.'' Baerg sees the procedural rhetoric of video games as supporting a twofold impact: first, in mirroring the choice-driven progressive expansion of free markets and second, having an economically inflected rationality behind

the making of these choices. This analysis does not imply that such concerns apply to *all* video games; instead, it concerns itself with the many games that relate to the framework of impact suggested above, either overtly or without realizing that they do so. To look at a specific comparison, Magnet's commentary on the mechanics of *Tropico* clearly points out the similar principles behind the game:

> *Tropico's* resources are referred to as yours—as are its citizens. Although the game specifies that your people have free will, it reminds you that they can be tempted to obey your orders through your use of money—or, failing this tactic, military power. You may go so far as to institute martial law. Capitalism is central to the game. (Magnet, 2006, p. 144)

Taken in themselves, these characteristics of the game reflect an imperial mechanism that is similar to that in the colonies, albeit with a hint of the parodic and the critical. Tropico is an island where, although the imperialist powers have gone, the process of empire continues, albeit in a different way. Speaking of a similar phenomenon, political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001) declaim that "along with the global market and global circuits of production has emerged a global order, a new logic and structure of rule—in short, a new form of sovereignty" (p. xi). They famously call this power that regulates global exchanges, Empire.

There is still a similarity with the colonial empires in principle here, and although the red, blue, and green patches indicating the various empires on the world maps have disappeared, it is useful to examine how video games represent the principles of empire in their various forms—both modern and colonial—thus providing a commentary that better elucidates and develops on current perspectives. Speaking of maps, cartography has always been a key element in the colonial construction of space, and the construction of maps in empire-building video games, such as the *Age of Empires* series (1997–2014), *Empire: Total War* (2007), *Rise of Nations* (2003), and *Empire Earth* (2001) to name a few, offers an intriguing perspective. Speaking of the role of mapping in colonial expansion, Tom Bassett states that:

> The cartographic partition of Africa inextricably linked to mapmaking and empire building. Yet the act of drawing lines on maps is only one example of how cartography furthered imperialism. Maps were used in various ways to extend European hegemony over foreign and often unknown territory. (Bassett, 1994, pp. 316–335)

The Great Trigonometric Survey of India led by Colonel George Everest was therefore an important part of the British colonial enterprise and historian John Keay (2000) calls it "the trunk of a tree, the spinal cord of a skeleton [. . .] and on the inch-perfect accuracy of its plotted locations, all other surveys and locations depended" (p. xix). Everest gave his name to the world's highest peak; like the naming of Mount Everest, the act of naming is significant for the expansionist agenda of Empire. One can say the same of flags and landscapes. As the British stand-up comedian, Eddie

Izzard, brilliantly laughs in his piece "Do You Have a Flag?": "We stole countries with the cunning use of flags! Yeah, just sail around the world and stick a flag in.—I claim India for Britain!" (Jordan, 1999). In *Flora's Empire* (2011), Eugenia Herbert describes how the British colonialists in India strove to change the landscape with their gardens, imported foliage, and even playing fields created out of scrubland to facilitate games of golf and cricket. Now think of any empire-building video game's basic mechanics. Maps are of paramount importance here and the key facilitators of gameplay is the removal of the "fog of war," the remapping of the game space according to one's in-game affordances, and also the construction of buildings on the game map. In contrast to map boards in nondigital games, Lammes and Wilmot (2013) sum up the video game map as a "navigational interface [that] does not so much proscribe to 'mimic' environments but rather to transform them by navigating through them with specific game-rules in mind." An unavoidable parallel in history are the words attributed to Cecil Rhodes:

> [t]o think of these stars that you see overhead at night, these vast worlds which we can never reach. I would annex the planets if I could; I often think of that. It makes me sad to see them so clear and yet so far. (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 222)

One would be tempted toward a comparison with a game of *Starcraft*, which presents the narrative of colonization of planets in a far-flung corner of the Milky Way.

In her theorizing of the spatiality of *Tropico*, Magnet (2006) shows the game's space as "a colonized gamescape which interpellates its players through the twin discourses of capitalism and colonialism" and undertakes to "note the attendant dangers of the game's ideological underpinnings" (p. 143). The author, following Louis Althusser, understands "interpellation" as the way in which the player is "hailed" by the existing ideology of the game, namely, capitalism and colonialism. Lammes adds to this in her analysis of empire-building games, stating that "employing colonial techniques of domination like exploring, trading, map-making and military manoeuvring, players create their personal colonial pasts and futures." In Lammes's analysis, the "gamescape" that Magnet speaks of becomes the "postcolonial playground."

Lammes (2010) argues that these games might not be about how former colonized cultures deal with their colonial past in the present but that they are nevertheless postcolonial in that it is a "more complex term that deals with how inheritances of colonial cultures reverberate in contemporary culture in hybridised and transformed ways" (pp. 1–6). While this is a valid entry point to the discussion, Lammes's argument fails to consider the millions of players from the Indian subcontinent, Africa, and the Middle East for whom these empire-building games actually provide a more direct experience of engaging with their colonial history. These games' portrayal of the colonies is often simplistic and contains inaccuracies that are immediately obvious to players from these regions. For example, even an otherwise carefully researched game such as *Empire: Total War* has a few very

obvious glitches: Ignoring the diversity of cultures in India, it speaks of the "Indian way of doing things"; tea plantations are shown a century ahead of the British discovery of tea in Assam in 1824; indigo plantations, later the reason for much popular outcry, are nowhere to be seen; in the Mughal empire, there are no Islamic religious centers on the map; Benaras, the holy city of the Hindus, is one of the "great ashrams" where nothing like this existed and the ashrams are historically very different institutions; finally, the nineteenth-century Maratha empire is shown as using the Indian national flag—which was not officially used until as late as 1947.

The video game's map is also a space where alternative history(ies) are made possible. Here, it is possible to reverse the colonial process and conquer the erstwhile imperial powers. As Lammes (2010) rightly points out, there is a high degree of personal involvement in the in-game cartography: "in *AOE* maps acquire hybridized and personalized qualities, quite dissimilar from how colonial cultures would like to represent their power relations" (pp. 1–6). Just to illustrate this further, here's a comment from the *Empire: Total War* forum:

> I played a campaign as Prussia and by 1735 Maratha [*sic*] had not only conquered India, Persia and Afganistan [*sic*], but had taken Antigua from the Pirates. By 1740 they actually sailed through the Baltic to land in Courland, destroying them on the turn after they landed. This actually worked out because it gave me an excuse to take Courland without going to war with my immediate neighbors as I built up my defense, but by 1750 any historical realism was long gone. (Den of Earth, 2010)

How is one to read this reversal of colonialism, then? There is certainly an element (probably unintended) of a possible postcolonial reaction here. Comparably, during the early days after the colonial powers left Africa, there were suggestions that "Africans should sit down with a square rule and redraw the map" (Ramutsindela, 2006, p. 128).

As I argue elsewhere, though, the recombinatorial characteristics of the strategy game's map offer far more complexities than a simple redrawing of the colonial maps in just the same way, as postcolonialism itself is much more complicated. Here, it will be instructive to introduce Edward Soja's concept of *thirdspace*, which he derives from Henri Lefebvre's classification of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces, where the physical, the cartographic, and the experiential spaces operate simultaneously in one's comprehension of a space. Soja builds on the Lefebvrian "lived space" to propose what he calls "thirdspace." He describes thirdspace as "real-and-imagined spaces" where it is not possible to separate the imaginary space constructed by the perception of space from its physical and cartographic planes. According to Soja (1996),

> [T]hirdspace ... is rooted in just such a recombinatorial and radically open perspective. In what I will call a critical strategy of othering, I try to open up our spatial imaginaries to ways of thinking and acting politically that responds to all binarisms, to

> any attempt to confine political thought and action to only two alternatives by interjecting an-Other set of choices. (p. 5)

In opening up the spatial imaginaries, he brings the "Other" set of choices to challenge the center–periphery binarism of the earlier conceptions of empire space. In the thirdspace, there is also an engagement with the marginal part of society that is often elided in the traditional representations of space. Comparably, in the video game *Empire: Total War*, often the map of the game responds with the unexpected: When the empire is hurtling toward industrial progress, players find themselves unexpectedly having to tackle revolts and as a player complains on a game forum: "Just wondering how you stop rebellions in regions, I have full garrisons with generals in then, and have exempted them from tax, also kicked some of the ministers with no luck" (atco, 2009). Existing on the level of lived space, this is the thirdspace that Soja identifies. As in the writings of postcolonial thinkers, this thirdspace of protest is a problem in the video game empires, as it is in their real-life counterparts. Even by winning the game and conquering the entire space of the video game map, it is not possible to abolish the other—the protests continue, as does life within the dynamic map space of the game. In her postcolonial critique, Spivak points out how problems exist even after the end of the British Empire in India and how decolonization itself becomes a misleading word from the perspective of the spaces of the subproletariat or the subaltern. For Spivak (1993), such spaces have "no established agencies of traffic with the culture of imperialism" and are also "outside of organized labour and below the attempted reversals of capitalist logic" (p. 78). For Spivak, decolonization loses meaning for those groups, including the subproletariat, that do not share in the regulative logic of the more advantaged elite. As mentioned earlier, they constitute the subaltern.

A Brief Digression Regarding Subalternity and Protest

In speaking of the subaltern in terms of cyberculture, Radhika Gajjala (2014) asks, "when is the subaltern brought online and for what purpose?" (p. 29) This is a question that this article will also explore but in a different sense from what Gajjala addresses in her book *Cyberculture and the Subaltern*, where she discusses the subaltern subject position in terms of capital and with respect to online microfinance. Gajjala defines the subaltern as the "individual who does not have the tools or the agency to actively and freely participate in a social order [and] the subaltern is also deemed as not to have the voice to speak for her/himself" (p. 161). How far this definition applies to postcolonial elements in game cultures is a moot question and the understanding of "active" and "free" needs qualification. Of course, if one is to consider gold farming[1] in *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*; Blizzard Entertainment, 2014) servers, perhaps this description works well for the marginalized gamer who is voiceless, nameless, and certainly sans freedom to play in any way he or she likes.

However, such a direct similarity might not always be in evidence; in his article how video games relate to Gramscian thought, Roberto Cassar (2013) states that "hegemonic struggle is very much alive in video games" (p. 332). Cassar points out how games such as *America's Army* establish hegemonic scenarios where a dominant group (American soldiers) is privileged over those (Arabs) whom it constructs as the Other and as the enemy. Imagine a Iraqi gamer playing *America's Army* (2002) or a player from Zaire playing *Far Cry 2* (2008): The game's rules constrain him or her to follow certain assumptions about his or her culture that he or she, being marginal to the identity the game constructs, is unable to protest.

In a different scenario, some games, albeit few and little known, protest against the dominant order quite clearly:

> In *Under Siege*, Afkar Media (its developers) attempts to bring some balance to the equation by celebrating the heroism of the anti-Zionist resistance, dramatizing the events of the Second Intifada between 1999 and 2002. Afkar Media claims that their game is not propagandistic [and] that since media in general demonizes Muslims, they have tried to tell their side of the story. (Cassar, 2013, p. 346)

Another example is the *Bhagat Singh* (2000) game, one of the earliest First-person Shooter made in India. Here the protagonist is an Indian freedom fighter whose enemies are policemen in the British Raj. This is yet another clear example of a reaction against colonial hegemony, but it is certainly not a silent one. The question arises as to whether games that protest against hegemony in a more active and direct manner can be called subaltern.

In one definition, they are indeed "voices from below," certainly even in the video game industry and worldwide game culture; in another, by becoming vocal nevertheless, such games have emerged beyond the margins. Whichever way one views them, games like *Bhagat Singh* are platforms of ideological protest, and using the Gramscian concept of "suture," Cassar (2013) sees them as being "more in touch with the subordinate classes and therefore they are quicker to react when specific ideological stances mutate [. . .] so that they can portray dominant and subordinate ideologies in an interconnected way" (p. 247).

The Player as Colonized/Colonizer: Postcolonial Identity in Video Games

In *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (2013), one plays as a black sailor who finds himself shipwrecked in eighteenth-century Haiti, where slavery is common practice. The game offers a zone of active protest against slavery through the protagonist and on another level, there is a silent response from the slaves you free. While it is not possible to experience the game from the point of view of the slaves (except for a brief part where the protagonist disguises as a slave), taking on identity of the protagonist is also quite complex. Whether from a formerly colonized nation or otherwise, the player taking on the identity of the freed slave turned pirate is in

uneasy shoes: He or she has to become the Other. The colonial administrator would struggle with the identity of himself or herself vis-à-vis the so-called natives. On the one hand, there was the need to keep apart, while on the other, Europeans taking on the identity of the Indians, such as Kipling's Kim or of the Bedouin, such as Lawrence of Arabia was also evidenced. The Indian Gentleman's Guide to Etiquette declares:

> The Indian gentleman, with all self-respect to himself, should not enter into a compartment reserved for Europeans, any more than he should enter a carriage set apart for ladies. Although you may have acquired the habits and manners of the European, have the courage to show that you are not ashamed of being Indian, and in all cases, identify with the race to which you belong. (Hardiman, 1920)

The contradiction here is obvious. Despite encouraging the Indian man to acquire European habits, the lesson imparted is to stay with his own kind—a rather hybrid existence. Just as this article had started looking at cartography and imperialism through the real-life figure of Cecil Rhodes, it will be instructive to have another real-life character to introduce the postcolonial notions of identity: Colonel T. E. Lawrence, better known as "Lawrence of Arabia." In David Lean's eponymous film, Lawrence is shown in the robes of a Bedouin *sherif* and even walks into the officer's mess in what are called "wog clothes" by his fellow Britishers. Later on in the film, however, he tells his Arab companion: "Look, Ali, look. (He pinches the white, fair skin of his chest.) That's me. What color is it? That's me, and there's nothing I can do about it" (Lean, 1962). Within the system of colonialism, the identities of both colonizer and colonized are uneasy, suspect, and under threat.

In her pioneering work on race in cyberspace, Lisa Nakamura approaches the issue of identity-formation online by what can be seen as a parallel to the stereotypes in colonial Britain described above and the problems therein. Pointing out that "stereotype" is itself a word drawn from the language of machinery, she introduces a neologism "cybertypes" to describe similar phenomena in the digital world. Early theorists of the web (such as Sherry Turkle) seemed to think that

> regulatory and oppressive social norms such as racism and sexism are linked to users' 'unitary and solid' identities offscreen [and that] supposedly, leaving the body behind in the service of gaining more 'fluid identities' means acquiring the ability to carve out new, less oppressive norms, and gaining the capacity to 'acknowledge diversity' in ever more effective ways. (Nakamura, 2002, p. 13)

Disagreeing with this, Nakamura (2002) states that

> Chosen identities enabled by technology, such as online avatars, cosmetic and transgender surgery and body modifications, and other cyberprostheses are not breaking the mold of unitary identity but rather shifting identity into the realm of the 'virtual,' a

> place not without its own laws and hierarchies. Supposedly 'fluid' selves are no less subject to cultural hegemonies, rules of conduct, and regulating cultural norms than are 'solid.' (p. 4)

Games studies research has already pointed out the way game design often mirrors the logic of colonialism when it comes to defining race and identity. Alexander Galloway's critique of Sid Meier's *Civilization* (1991) highlights the colonial expansionist model and the assumptions of Caucasian racial superiority in the game. According to Galloway,

> the *Civilization III* algorithm [. . .] erases any number of peoples existing throughout history the Inuit, the Irish, and on and on; it conflates a civilization with a specific national or tribal identity and ignores questions of hybridity and diaspora such as those of African Americans or Jews. (2006, p. 98)

Nakamura draws attention to how in *WoW* certain character types in the game are subject to racism and Jessica Langer contends that the game involves:

> constructions of power and hierarchy similar to those found in the real world: colonial subjects and other marginalized peoples—in this case the Horde—are cast largely as dirty, disorganized [and] primitive (in the cases of trolls, orcs and tauren). (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008, p. 91)

The above-mentioned aspect is clearly the colonial construction of the Other; in playing as a character from the Horde in *WoW* or as Adewale in *Freedom Cry*, however, the player engages in a "becoming Other." In postcolonial contexts, the experience of the colonizer to take on the identity of the colonized is of comparable interest. According to Said (1978),

> It is the wish-fantasy of someone who would like to think that everything is possible, that one can go anywhere and be anything. T.E. Lawrence in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* expresses this fantasy over and over, as he reminds us how he, a blond and blue-eyed Englishman, moved among the desert Arabs as if he were one of them. I call this a fantasy because, as both Kipling and Lawrence endlessly remind us, no one, least of all actual whites and non-whites in the colonies ever forgets that 'going native' or playing the Great Game are facts based on rock-like foundations, those of European power. Was there ever a native fooled by the blue or green-eyed Kims and Lawrences who passed among the inferior races as agent adventurers? I doubt it . . . (p. 44)

This passage is taken by Nakamura to frame her conception of "identity tourism" in online platforms and video games. In her article written in the early days of online games, she refers to players role-playing oriental stereotypes (about which more shall be said in the following section) in MUD object-oriented (MOO): "[t]o practitioners of identity tourism as I have described it above, LambdaMOO represents an

phantasmatic imperial space, much like Kipling's Anglo-India, which supplies a stage upon which the 'grand dream of a successful quest' can be enacted'' (Nakamura, 1995, p. 181).

The problematic clash of postcolonial identities in video games involves is perceived even in games where the colonial connection is not as direct: In *Max Payne 3*, the player is expected to run through the Brazilian *favela* and shoot hordes of Brazilian gangsters who stream on-screen almost endlessly. Although playing as Max Payne, the player might not be a Caucasian male as the game might presuppose; indeed, he or she might even be Brazilian. The identity tourism that Nakamura speaks of is quite palpably experienced: The player can choose from nine playable male avatars. Intriguingly, five of the nine are from regions with a colonial connection: Haiti, Brazil, Northern Ireland, Albania, and Mauritius. One of these, Quarbani Singh, is of interest here. Singh is described as Mauritian but in name and appearance he seems to be a Punjabi Sikh from Northern India. The indentured Indian immigrants who were taken to work the plantations in Mauritius were also from North India but were not from the Punjab. The story of *Far Cry 2* is set in an unnamed African country that seems to have been a former colony. An *Edge* magazine review describes the locale as ''the Africa of pothole-cratered roads, of rusty AK-47s, worthless money, dusty shantytowns, blistering poverty and unshakeable malaria.''

The story constantly connects to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and even has a level named after the novel. The difference here is that the journey into the depths of Africa is not being undertaken by a White man, Marlow (in the novel), or Captain Benjamin Willard (in its film adaptation, *Apocalypse Now*). Instead, playing as Quarbani Singh, the player is exploring a postcolonial locale *as a postcolonial subject.* However, such an exploration is also identity tourism—an attempt to take on a selfhood which can ''understand'' the postcolonial trauma of the unnamed African country with its blood diamond trade, its malaria-stricken poverty and the power politics between the two factions, characteristically named United Front for Labour and Liberation and Alliance for Popular Resistance. Both the parties claim to be about freedom and resistance, very important sentiments in the colonial and postcolonial worlds; however, both employ foreign mercenaries and are despite their claims of protest, the new elite. Playing as Singh, one starts the game from a subaltern position but after a while, the game makes the player sign for each of the factions, one after the other and then choose between factions. Playing as Singh, the player undertakes missions in different parts of the country and is rewarded in blood diamonds, which seem to be the de facto currency. In most of the missions, the factions deny any knowledge of the protagonist and the journeys have to be undertaken in near anonymity. There is the occasional meeting with the local padre who will provide tablets to counter attacks of malaria only if the player helps his unfortunate parishioners get papers to leave the country. The engagement with the much suffering (subaltern?) civilian population is scant, and when it does occur, it seems to be part of the game mechanics of getting malaria pills. For the *avatar*, Singh, as a

postcolonial subject himself, there is an ongoing negotiation between his identity as the subaltern as well as one complicit in the activities of the elite. For the player, influenced by his or her context, the experience of identity is complicated at a further remove. Just as in Lean's film, Lawrence in his Arab clothes is disparagingly called a "wog" by his countrymen and, at the same time, comes to the realization that he cannot *be* an Arab and is at best, an identity tourist, in the postcolonial setting of the video game, the player too struggles to figure out his or her identity.

In the face of such identity crises and an equally confusing geopolitics that admits alternative histories and reimaginings of maps, there is dominant tendency to force a resolution. The easiest way to do this is to fall back on what Said calls "orientalism." Like the repositioning of a physical map (also called "orienting"), both the geopolitical and the identity maps are "adjusted" by the colonial hegemonic system. The dichotomy of the identity tourist is replaced by confident stereotypes just as is seen in the extract from the *Indian Gentleman's Guide to Etiquette.*

Orientalism and Video Games

Said defines orientalism as "the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' destiny and so on." In fact, the construction of the orient is what helps define what the occident and European civilization is as well. Elaborating on the process, he states that:

> [b]y making statements about it [the 'Orient'], authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it, Orientalism [becomes] a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient [. . .] In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action. (Said, 1978, p. 38)

Whether it is the colonial administrator who learns Hindi and Persian to administer the colony or the European sitting at home and viewing the exotic East in Delacroix's paintings or it is Kim, learning the Great Game and mingling with the "natives," the images of the orient are always being manufactured and only represent things that colonial imperialism wishes to show and see. This is what influences how maps are charted and identities fixed. Nakamura, very usefully, identifies orientalism at work in the identity tourism that she finds in video games.

She points out how "a vast majority of male Asian characters deployed in the MOO fit into familiar stereotypes from popular electronic media such as video games, television, and film, and popular literary genres such as science fiction and historical romance" (Nakamura, 1995). With character names such as Chun Li and Liu Kang (in *Streetfighter*), these games "permit their users to perform a notion of the Oriental warrior adopted from popular media." Nakamura maintains that:

> This is an example of the crossing over effect of popular media into cyberspace, which is, as the latest comer to the array of electronic entertainment media, a bricolage of figurations and simulations. The Orientalized male persona, complete with sword, confirms the idea of the male oriental as potent, antique, exotic, and anachronistic. (1995)

Such constructs are eminently perceptible in the way non-Western characters have been constructed in video games. The portrayal of India in video games, rarely discussed hitherto, is of importance here. One of the earliest video games to feature an Indian character is *Streetfighter 2* (Capcom, 1991). Here Dhalsim is portrayed as kicking out in "yogic" posture and as wearing a torn saffron shorts and necklace of skulls so as to emphasize his oriental Indian mystique. He can spew fireballs, levitate and likes curry, and meditation. To add to his image of the oriental, he is very protective of his son Datta and his wife, who rather strangely is named Sari (after the dress worn by Indian women)! Another classic set of stereotypes is to be seen in the empire building games that feature India. Besides the points already made in connection with the inaccuracies in *Empire: Total War*, there are far greater problems that emerge in the stereotypes created by *Age of Empires 3: The Asian Dynasties* (2007), for example. Here, there are gross mistakes in that sepoys (as the Indian soldiers in colonial armies were called) are thought of as an ethnic community in themselves and that Brahmin priests are shown as warriors riding elephants. When cities such as London and Los Angeles are depicted so carefully in video games, the "Temple City Ambush" level in *Hitman: Silent Assassin* (2002) can only manage to show the protagonist moving from warehouse to warehouse and ultimately meeting an auto-rickshaw driver. Even more bizarre is *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*'s (2011) mission "Persona Non Grata" that is set in Himachal Pradesh. The ubiquitous Indian auto-rickshaw is to be seen but strangely, in a shootout between the British commandos and Russian terrorists, the Indian army or any Indians, for that matter, seem to have decided to stay away!

The creators of the recent *Assassin's Creed: Brahman* graphic novel are quite content with secondhand knowledge and Bollywood films to construct their image of India:

> Sadly, it was impossible for me to travel to India to directly research the story. I had to rely on tons of reading, hours of screening Bollywood films and the odd meeting with Indian expats here and there to clarify historical and cultural details. (Sophie, 2013)

Not surprisingly, the representation of India is flawed and reliant on stereotypes. More stereotypes come into play even in games such as *Far Cry 2* (2008) and *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*, which have been described earlier as games that attempt to consciously engage with the questions of postcolonialism. The stereotyping in both concerns the African civilians in the former and slaves in the latter, whom the protagonist either saves or frees. While these nonplayer characters have little or

nothing to say and no mechanism with which to actively protest, they already occupy the subaltern position in these games. However, the perception of their subalternity is further constructed through the game mechanics itself: In both the games, their freedom becomes a source of collecting points and upgrades. The more slaves the player frees, the more upgrades does the game allow to be unlocked. The ostensible act of liberation from the bondage imposed by the elite actually becomes a mechanism of generating in-game capital. The games' rule sets of "freeing" and "saving," therefore, effectively turn into a hegemonic system for both the player and the NPCs as well as an orienting on another level whereby the identity of the latter is stereotyped and read as human capital by the game. Having looked at the three different aspects of postcolonialism, cartography, identity, and how these are mediated by what Said calls orientalism, it is now possible to form some conclusions as to the role of the player when he or she engages with the game scenario.

Conclusion: Replaying the Postcolonial Subject

Two historical figures loom large in this analysis of how some video games relate to concepts of postcolonialism. Cecil Rhodes, as the colonizer par excellence, represents the imperial urge for possession seen as a "civilizing mission." The construction of the orient and its stereotypes is of paramount importance in its possession and governance. On a different level, Lawrence of Arabia is that representative of Western society who tries to meld with the colonized populace and is part of the orientalist agenda through the experience of identity tourism. In video games, whether, directly or indirectly related to questions of postcolonialism through the exploration of both identity and cartography, the player occupies a position that simultaneously straddles both types described above and questions them.

Ania Loomba (1998) points out, following Homi Bhabha and other critics, "the failure of colonial discourses to produce stable and fixed identities, and [. . .] crossovers of various sorts or 'hybridity' and 'ambivalence'" (p. 105). The player, too, in the engagement with the game is complicit with the action of the game while at the same time protesting it. For example, it is only by playing *Empire: Total War* that the player (re)frames the colonial map and in the creation of alternative history always already comes the playing according to the rules of the colonial game. Even in a game that registers an overt postcolonial message, such as *Under Ash* and *Bhagat Singh*, the process of making the point is by replacing one elite with another, effectively tying into the logic that they seek to overturn. Likewise, the critique of identity tourism also involves the being involved in the role-play that allows the exploration of identity and the realization of the shortcomings of such an attempt. Whether as Adewale fighting the French colonizers of Saint-Domingue or as Max Payne shooting the Brazilians in the favela, the player has to take on an identity that is not his or her own. In either case, depending on the player's context and ideological position among other things, there is both engagement with the avatar he or she plays as and the questioning of that role. If the postcolonial is a "writing back," then

it is an ambivalent writing back involving the apparatus of colonialism. This ambivalence involves "a strong articulation of repugnance and repudiation of the colonizer but also its mimicry" (Muppidi, 2004, p. 43). The video game, therefore, is a metaphor that makes this ambivalence all the more obvious: Alternative narratives can be written into being in the game world but only within the system that the game provides. The player, whether from the erstwhile colonized countries or elsewhere, nevertheless, both writes and writes back in games that engage with the questions relating to colonialism whether he or she chooses to or not. The video game medium offers the simultaneous possibilities of subalternity, protest, elitism, and hegemony; it is the actualization by the player that results in a deeper understanding and experience of the postcolonial.

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Note

1. The *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* (2010) defines Gold-farming as "the practice of playing an online game for long periods of time, often as a job for a gold farming company, in order to progress through the game and then sell game currency, valuable items or characters to other players for real money." This in-game currency is generated by economically disadvantaged groups (usually in South-East Asia and China) and is bought for real-world money by players all over the globe who can afford to buy this "money" without playing to earn it within the game.

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