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Playing at Colonization

Interpreting Imaginary Landscapes in the Video Game *Tropico*

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This article coins the term *gamescape* to offer a way of thinking about the implications of the way in which landscape in video games is actively constructed within a particular ideological framework. The author examines the spatial practices used to construct the gamescape in *Tropico* and their attendant dangers. The author concludes with a discussion of the theming of this gamescape, and the way in which the trope of tropicalization is used to stabilize *Tropico* as an "Othered" space.

Keywords: *video game theory; landscape theory; critical race approaches to technology; postcolonialism; space*

> As you know, *Tropico* is a small, underdeveloped, relatively impoverished Caribbean island quite remote from anywhere else. As Presidente, you have considerable flexibility in what goals you pursue and how you pursue them.
>
> *Tropico* manual (PopTop Software, 2001, p. 4)

Now a multibillion-dollar industry that has spawned its own films,[1] fan clubs, and exploitative labor practices,[2] video games have become significant players in the media marketplace. Complete with masculinist histories that tell stories of founding fathers seated at flickering monitors programming frantically in darkened rooms (Baer, 2001), video games have become omnipresent on the cultural landscape—ranging in content from the religious to the hedonistic.[3] This article argues that video games have become a landscape of their own. They have become a *gamescape*—an imagined landscape for cooped-up children, an escapist landscape for bored adults, and, all too frequently, a landscape of colonization for players who would be kings.[4]

Part of the goal of landscape theory is a revision of what it means to be a landscape, and thus a broadening of formerly restrictive definitions (Corner, 1999b). This involves moving beyond an understanding of landscape as simply "land" or the "environment" (Corner, 1999c, p. x) and understanding that a "landscape park may be more palpable but no more real, nor less imaginary, than a landscape painting or poem"

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(Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988, p. 1). This article is part of this revision—and following from landscape, the term *gamescape* offers a way of thinking about the implications of the way in which landscape is actively constructed within video games—one that highlights how the gamespace works to shape a player's particular understanding of a larger set of spatial ideologies inherent to the game. I also use the term *gamescape* to underline the fact that the virtual landscapes found in video games are not static objects "to-be-looked-at,"[5] but are dynamic and require the active involvement of the player in their construction. Thus, this article examines landscape "less like a palimpsest whose 'real' or 'authentic' meanings can somehow be recovered with the correct techniques, theories or ideologies" and instead as "a flickering text displayed on the word-processor screen whose meaning can be created, extended, altered, read, elaborated and finally obliterated by the merest touch of a button" (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988, p. 8).

Although *Tropico* is part of a larger subset of building-oriented games,[6] I have chosen this game as my focus because of the interest some players have shown in using *Tropico* as an educational instrument to teach American children about governance (Squire, 2002). It is noteworthy that the Tropican gamescape is so effective in concealing the underlying assumptions of the game, many of which are intimately tied to ideas about U.S. imperialist expansion, that it could posited as a useful education tool.

In her article "Space Matters: The Power and Practice of Space," Shome (2003) argued that power is organized spatially, and as such, space is not the backdrop to cultural politics but is responsible for the shaping of power relations themselves. Following from Shome, I understand power in *Tropico* to be intimately connected to the spatial logic of the game, and I analyze the spatial practices that are made available to the player to interrogate how the gamespace works to interpellate the player into a colonizing framework. I analyze the organization of space within *Tropico*, the spatial practices used to constitute its gamescape, and the spatial relationship of the player to the game. In so doing, I seek to answer the following questions:

> How does the *Tropico* gamescape simultaneously represent and conceal assumptions about the Spanish Caribbean and the U.S. role within this space?
>
> What assumptions are made about the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality within this game and how are these assumptions obfuscated by the *Tropico* gamescape?

I begin this article with a detailed description of the fundamental elements of *Tropico*.[7] I then theorize the way in which the game represents a colonized gamescape which interpellates[8] its players through the twin discourses of capitalism and colonialism and note the attendant dangers of the game's ideological underpinnings. I accomplish this task through a discussion of how the gamescape and player are produced, including the specific spatial techniques used to construct both. I conclude by examining the theming of *Tropico*'s landscape and the implications of the trope of tropicalization for this game.

Tropico: The Gamespace

> You, the newly installed dictator of an obscure Caribbean Island, must create a life of prosperity and happiness for your people. Build farms to feed them, tenements to house them, pubs to lift their spirits and churches to save their souls. (*Tropico* back cover, PopTop Software, 2001)

Tropico[9] begins with a demo introduction that takes you on a quick tour of the island where the game will take place. Tropico is Spanish speaking, as can be noted by the fact that the Tropican citizens usually greet el presidente with "hola." Heading down a busy Tropican street on the way to the Presidential Palace, you see stereotypical scenes representing "global" Spanish Caribbean street life. From the sex worker to the fruit seller to the revolutionaries unloading explosives out of the back of a military truck, the characters that inhabit this game are fully recognizable cardboard cutouts—each of whom signifies a different form of essentialized Latina/o identity. Everything in the game is viewed from a first-person point of view. You are el presidente of Tropico and see the world out of "your" eyes. Your tour takes you right up through the palace gates to your office—designated by the *El Presidente* on the door. Stationed at your office is a guard who salutes you—making it clear that the view you are seeing is out of your avatar's eyes. This "technologized form of vision . . . becomes a component and extension of the body; it replaces our body, or rather extends its capacities" (Lahti, 2003, p. 164). This is a game that treats your avatar[10] as a sort of "imaginary prosthesis" (Lahti, 2003, p. 161), fully encouraging you to identify with this virtual self. This additionally is accomplished by an emphasis in *Tropico* on the axis of depth, which creates a "sense of penetration into the computer and the represented world behind the screen"—drawing you into the gamescape (Lahti, 2003, p. 161). This spatial technique, imported into video games from cinema, attempts to lure "the player into invading the world behind the computer screen" (Lahti, 2003, p. 159) by providing a "seamless loop between the computer and the player" (Lahti, 2003, p. 163). The movement in the game feels as if you are simply following your own gaze with the mouse as you move around the map of Tropico.

Although your gender is not made explicit within the context of the game itself, the picture of you found on the cover of the game reveals you to be a racialized man sporting some of the conventional signifiers of Latinidad[11]—you have a full beard, you are smoking a cigar, and your military uniform looks like something in which Fidel Castro would feel at home. The game itself interpellates you as male through the use of continuity—the same cigar shown between the lips of the man on the game cover is again shown in the game half-smoked, lying in an ashtray on your desk. It is notable that the game cover finds you standing atop "your" island—your people seemingly crushed beneath your feet.

Power is a central theme of *Tropico*. References are continually made to your power, to your wealth, and to the size of Tropico's coffers. 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. You must accept the occasional bribe to meet your "need" for profit, and the point of the game is to maximize your profits while keeping your citizens from rebelling and overthrowing you altogether.

In keeping with Foucault's (1975) assertion of the connection between vision and power, the centrality of power in *Tropico* is revealed by the view presented to the players through the virtual eyes of their avatar presidente. The view of Tropico presented is totalizing—you may zoom in or out. Your gaze down on the island below is reminiscent of de Certeau's (1984) godlike view of New York City described in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. de Certeau described the pleasures of the view from above that presents the space below as a whole. Unlike de Certeau's view of New York, which he argued was a "visual simulacrum" because the spatial practices used to inhabit the city below cannot be seen, this total view of Tropico is indeed holistic. There is no actual movement below other than what you as presidente allow. This total vision "affords a powerful set of instruments to not only describe the world but also to condition and control it" (Corner, 1999a, p. 155). The colonizing aspects of this gaze are described in further detail below.

Each of your citizens has a number of needs that you must fulfill. These include hunger, rest, religion, entertainment, and health care. Each citizen has different degrees of these five needs, resulting in their individual personalities. If they try to resolve their needs themselves, "the results are generally poor, and the people become unhappy" (*Tropico* tutorial, PopTop Software, 2001). You must balance the people's needs with your own need for profit. As the game tutorial tells us: "The people, they like corn because it keeps them well fed—but what do they know! There are more lucrative crops—tobacco, sugar, bananas" (*Tropico* tutorial, PopTop Software, 2001). In general, the goals of the game are to (a) stay in power, (b) build your population, (c) manage disasters (including weather and military coups), and (d) accomplish the above while maintaining "positive foreign relations with the US and USSR." Otherwise, you will "suffer the consequences" (*Tropico* back cover, PopTop Software, 2001). You may either follow a "socialist path of factories, mines, logging and fishing, or chase capitalist dollars by building resorts to lure Yanqui tourists" (*Tropico* back cover, PopTop Software, 2001). However, money is your chief motivator, so the socialist model possible for *Tropico* might be—at its most generous—compared to a lax form of China's "open door" policy.[12] For this reason, the emphasis of my analysis is on the "capitalist" mode of the game. Tropico, at its most socialist, remains a planned economy that allows for capitalist expansion and foreign investment.

Tropico as Colonized Gamespace—Producing the Player and Gamescape

In this section, I discuss the construction of the *Tropico* player and gamescape. I begin with a description of the way in which the *Tropico* gamescape interpellates the player into a maculinist ideology. I then draw on theories of space to think about how *Tropico* is produced as a colonizing gamescape. I conclude this section with a detailed

examination of two techniques included as part of *Tropico* that contribute to this process.

Gendering the Colonizer: Heteronormativity

In *Tropico*, continuity interpellates the player as male. The view of Tropico is totalizing and reduces the island to the object of the player's gaze—an object that may be manipulated at will. This totalizing gaze has been imported from cinema and is reminiscent of the male gaze identified by Mulvey (1975) in her landmark article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." The game additionally claims heterosexuality by picturing presidente flocked by two large-breasted women at whom he is gazing lustfully. However, there are possible homosocial aspects of the game. As the dictator of *Tropico* is always represented as male, for men, the blurring of the self with the prosthesis may result in a homoerotic connection with presidente.[13] Although there is queer potential in the identification of male players with the *Tropico* presidente, ultimately, the way in which this subject position serves to uphold hegemonic power formations prevents it from actualizing its subversive potential.

In her discussion of Lara Croft, heroine of the video game *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, Schleiner (2001) asserted that identifying with Lara—despite the fact that she is a hypersexualized femme fatale—may provide pleasurable possibilities for the female player. She argued that through identification with the ass-kicking Lara Croft, girl gamers may actively participate in the destruction of "enemies of woman"—a position that allows them to move from abject to subject (Schleiner, 2001). Although I agree with Schleiner's analysis of the possibilities for pleasure for female players with respect to *Tomb Raider*, these same subversive possibilities are absent in *Tropico*.

Following from Murray (1998), Banks (1998), and Consalvo (2003), a game is not "simply a text to be read, but an experience to be had, and so we must also consider the performative level of gameplay" (Consalvo, 2003, p. 173). In this case, it is important to note that the fun in *Tropico* comes in large part from getting a chance to play dictator-god—and have your will be law. As a result, all players, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, are incorporated into the gamescape through the historically male paradigm of colonizer. Similar to strategies of White supremacy in which the definition of who is White must expand to maintain hegemonic power relations,[14] here all players are initiated into a fundamentally homosocial brotherhood—the brotherhood of imperialism. Duggan (2003) describes *homonormativity* as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency anchored in domesticity and consumption" (p. 175). The gaming experience offered by *Tropico* embodies the neoliberal strategy of homonormativity rather than transgressive queer pleasure. Instead of providing opportunities to challenge the oppressive power relations present in the game, the player is indoctrinated into the rules of imperialism—naturalized as the rules of the game.

Producing the Gamescape: The Production of Space in *Tropico*

Delimiting the Gamescape

In *The Production of Space* (1974), Henri Lefebvre asserted that space is articulated through spatial practices. Chun (2003) argued that in cyberspace, space is produced through repetitious spatial practices such as surfing. With video games, space is produced through repetitious spatial practices; however, here it is the spatial practice of gameplay that is the means of the production of space. When a player performs a repetitive move—in *Tropico* this most frequently involves an act of construction (a house, a rum distillery, a resort)—the gamescape of *Tropico* is delimited. Thus, space is produced in *Tropico* through imaging and through the modification of the image. Gameplay for *Tropico* is literally that which produces the gamescape through the production of images. Understanding the way in which space is produced in the form of a gamescape helps to highlight the importance of using landscape theory as a tool of analysis for the images produced in *Tropico*.

Landscape theory expands conventional definitions of landscape. Using landscape theory to consider *Tropico*, we see that the space constructed by the player in *Tropico* constitutes its own gamescape, as described above. Rather than including only landscapes that are "pastoral scenery or garden planting" (Corner, 1999c, p. ix), landscape has come to include a rich number of images including urban landscapes, infrastructure, maps, and landscape paintings. Through this process, landscape becomes less a "quantifiable object" than it is a "cultural way of seeing and as such it remains open to interpretation, design, and transformation" (Corner, 1999b, p. x). Vision plays an increasingly central role in this new definition of landscape, and as a result, it becomes possible to imagine video games included within this definition.

As Corner (1999a) reminds us in the edited collection *Recovering Landscape*, "Landscape and image are inseparable. Without image there is no such thing as landscape" (p. 153). In fact, a landscape "is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings" (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988, p. 1) and thus imaging is key to the "forging of landscape" (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988, p. 153). It is the images of *Tropico* that delimit the terrain for the player. The player—the tourist-ruler become dictator—is able to stand outside the *Tropico* gamescape and observe it "as an object, a thing to behold, and not only scenically but instrumentally and ideologically" (Corner, 1999a, p. 155). You as presidente must study the Tropico map and decide where to build—a project much like that of other real life rulers who make decisions based on cartography.

Tropico is a highly themed gamescape constructed around the notion of a "pan–Latin American" identity. Like other themed environments, *Tropico* is constructed on the basis of motifs—chief among them is the motif of nature. Easily recognizable to anyone who has seen a brochure advertising a vacation in the Caribbean, nature on Tropico consists largely of the representation of a lush green land environment coupled with a sky blue ocean and white sand beaches. Wolf (2001b) identified 10 types of spaces used in video games.[15] It is Wolf's ninth category, an interactive three-

dimensional environment, which best describes *Tropico*. This type of spatial configuration allows the player the most control over the gamescape, as it can be "viewed from multiple angles and viewpoints" (Wolf, 2001b, p. 66). This spatial layout is often combined with a first-person perspective—a technique also adopted by *Tropico*. Such spaces usually include their own maps that help to represent off-screen space and that offer a further level of control over the gamescape—another technique adopted in *Tropico*.

The Dangers of Gamescapes: What Is Made Visible and What Is Concealed

Landscape is often constructed as a place to escape: "Whether as theme park, wilderness area, or scenic drive, landscape has become a huge, exotic attraction onto itself, a place of entertainment, fantasy, escape and refuge" (Corner, 1999c, p. 15). Video games promise similar pleasures—combining entertainment with fantasy hideaways. Much like the country landscape that offers a getaway from the everyday "ills of the present and the anxieties of the future" (Corner, 1999c, p. 9), video games offer to take you elsewhere. They attempt to "suck you into the game" (Friedman, 1999, p. 137) until you enter the "meditative state" of the concentrated player and forget your surroundings (Friedman, 1999, p. 137).[16] However, this theme of escape and the "sentimental aestheticization" (Corner, 1999c, p. 9) that accompanies it "compounds the difficulty of forging a critical landscape" (Corner, 1999c, p. 9). Rather than demanding a critical look, instead a distancing, a cultivated placelessness encourages the players to lose themselves in the game and forget the implications of the gamescape that they are constructing.

One particularly disturbing manifestation of this phenomenon is the way in which video games are emphasized by the video game industry and by some video game theorists as alternative (if inferior) spaces for children—particularly for urban children who do not have access to real-life outdoor landscapes. These imaginary landscapes are proffered as a chance to escape the confines of their built environments. Discussing his son's confinement to apartment complexes and asphalt parking lots, Jenkins (1999) posited video games as freeing for his son—taking "him across the lakes of fire, through cities in the clouds, [and] along dark and gloomy back streets" (p. 263). Jenkins suggested that

> [v]ideo games constitute virtual play spaces which allow home-bound children like [his] son to extend their reach, to explore, manipulate and interact with a more diverse range of imaginary places than constitute the often drab, predictable, and overly-familiar spaces of their everyday lives. (p. 263)

Gender also plays a role here. For little girls, games may provide a virtual landscape that they may explore without fear. Whereas "[b]oys have lots of space to explore the forbidden . . . girls have a fairly narrow space of the forbidden within our culture" and thus this virtual landscape provides one that they may fully explore without fear (Ward, 2004, p. I2). Thus, virtual gamescapes substitute for real ones for boys and for

girls. In addition, gamescapes are posited as a substitute for the failure to ensure safe real spaces for girls.[17] Both are highly problematic.

A longer discussion is needed of this characterization of gamescapes as substitutes for play in real-life spaces. However, this article is concerned with the manipulation that occurs in these "imaginary spaces" and the implications of the roles allotted to the players in these virtual landscapes. What are the ramifications of constructing a gamescape of colonization, such as the one offered by *Tropico*? What are the ramifications of children assuming the role of colonizer in these colonizing gamescapes? Real-life landscapes are too often viewed as part of the cultureless natural world, and the gamescapes of video games have adopted this problematic "contradiction in terms" (Corner, 1999c, p. 3). Video games cannot be treated as "culture-free" game spaces. If these video gamescapes provide new spaces for play, players' roles in relation to the gamescape must be problematized.

Mitchell (1994) reminded us that

> the appreciation of landscape as an aesthetic object cannot be an occasion for complacency or untroubled contemplation; rather, it must be the focus of a historical, political, and (yes) aesthetic alertness to the violence and evil written on the land, projected there by the gazing eye. (p. 29)

Mitchell further asserted that "landscape itself is the medium by which this evil is veiled and naturalized" (p. 30). How does this inform our understanding of the *Tropico* gamescape? We have seen the connection of vision to power—the way in which the player takes in the gamescape of *Tropico* through her or his all-seeing eyes, which read and revise the images presented through the course of the game. In this case "[t]otal vision affords a powerful set of instruments to control the land" (Corner, 1999a, p. 155) and these tools are put to use on the Island of Tropico. The player-dictator visually reads the gamescape to control it. By necessity, the player adopts the view of the tourist-ruler who "views landscape as an object, a thing to behold, and not only scenically but instrumentally and ideologically" (Corner, 1999a, p. 155). This sets the stage for viewing *Tropico* gamescape as one of colonization. Just as there is no "neutral or passive imaging . . . landscape, too, as image, is neither active nor benign" (Corner, 1999a, p. 155).

Although the player's scenic view of Tropico from above "is an apparently benign situation that presents a delightful view," this is simply another occurrence of where a "judiciously styled visual landscape" obfuscates its inherent inequalities (Corner, 1999a, p. 157). The *Tropico* gamescape, beautiful from above, conceals the suffering of its citizens below. Although the game tells you that your citizens are caused suffering through an overall decrease in your bank account, there is no trace of their grief, hunger, or unhappiness. The only marker of their discomfort is that, if the player is sufficiently "zoomed in," a small thought bubble will appear above their heads indicating that a specific need such as food or health care is on their mind. (For example, a bed appears in a thought bubble above a particular character's head when that character is tired.) Thus, the emotionality of the citizens is largely absent from the picturing of

Tropico. Furthermore, most of the time, to play the game effectively it makes sense to be zoomed out. As a result, your citizens appear as small dots on the landscape—making it possible for the player to focus on the "overall picture" and to disregard their unhappiness entirely.[18]

The Dangers of Gamescapes: Tropico *as Heterotopia and Constructing Colonized Space*

Foucault's (1986) "Of Other Spaces" is helpful to understanding the production of colonial game space in *Tropico*. In his review of the history of space, Foucault defined two distinct spaces: utopias and heterotopias. *Utopias* are defined as perfect, placeless spaces, spaces that are not real. By contrast, *heterotopias* are defined as existing spaces in which all other sites that may be found in society are "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." For Foucault, the mirror is utopia because "it is a placeless place" and heterotopia because the mirror also does exist in real space and shapes the person that gazes on its surface. One looks into the mirror to see oneself where one does not exist:

> I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. (Foucault, 1986, n.p.)

Tropico also embodies this spatial contradiction. Players look into the gamescape to visualize themselves "there where [they] are not," although, like Foucault's mirror, the game does exist in real space, and thus the players' gaze into the virtual gamescape serves to shape their real-space identities. In the case of *Tropico*, the game works to incorporate the user into an imperialist spatial ideology. Foucault's categorizations thus serve as spatial referents that help to explain how *Tropico* functions as a space of colonization.

This point is additionally clarified by looking to Foucault's further categorization of heterotopias. One might understand *Tropico* as combining a heterotopia of illusion ("a space of illusion that exposes every real space") with a heterotopia of compensation (a space in which perfect order reigns and where space is regulated at every turn).[19] This is best captured by the way in which the highly regulated space of *Tropico* clearly identifies it as an oppressive space (the player is explicitly called a dictator, and continual references to colonization are revealed by the parameters of the game) but attempts to mystify this identity with a pretty visual interface that conceals any suffering engendered by its spatial configuration. This means that the user is unconsciously incorporated into the game ideology and, as a result, unproblematically reproduces a particular kind of colonial landscape without being aware that *Tropico*'s game rules naturalize certain historical specificities—such as a U.S.–centric worldview. This problematic undercurrent is made evident by the fact that the player must continually make choices about the relationship of Tropico with the United States—from how far the island is located from the United States, to how to lure U.S. tourists, to how to

maintain good relations with the United States to better attract foreign aid. It is in this way that ideas about the centrality of the United States become naturalized: "As these ideas are coded into the game rules they appear as . . . historical rules" (Douglas, 2002, n.p.).[20]

As a result of the control afforded to players of *Tropico*, playing the game becomes synonymous with "playing the colonizer."[21] In *Tropico*, you are a tourist-ruler solicited from outside to repair Tropico's state of disarray. This coming from afar not only interpellates the player as an outsider, a visitor become resident, but also draws on past colonial archetypes. It is easy to imagine your avatar "presidente" in the role of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) banker or U.S. puppet government official coming in to fix the "unruly" problems of the locals through oppressive governance and micromanagement. This is made particularly unsettling by the contemporary situation in Iraq and by the history of the United States as colonizer—both of which bear witness to oppressive U.S. intervention.[22] Explicit reference to this form of U.S. colonial intervention is made in the gaming rules, most notably in that you have to decide how to maintain good relations with the United States so that it will direct aid and tourists in your direction. If you fail to comply with U.S. policies, they will attack, and as the manual tells you "such an invasion will cause an immediate end to your regime and a hasty exile for you" (*Tropico* manual, PopTop Software, 2001, p. 45). It is simply not possible for Tropico to withstand a U.S. invasion. This feature of *Tropico* makes the game more like an explicit ideological lesson than a mindless leisure activity. Although the rhetoric of the game attempts to obfuscate this by pretending that a number of game options are possible, it is far easier to win if you comply with the game rules, oppress your workers, give in to U.S. capitalist pressure and build resorts to lure "Yanqui" tourists. You can minimize U.S. influence by locating Tropico farther from the United States; however, the United States always influences the Island to some degree. *Tropico* thus supports colonial understandings of space, minimizing U.S. imperialism while maintaining a model of center and/or periphery relations that remains U.S. centric. This is also reflected in the production of an Othered Latinidad while stabilizing the U.S. "self." I discuss this in further detail below.

Video games allow the player "to explore [the game world] through the surrogate of the player character, and take an active role in its events" (Wolf, 2001b, p. 72). Although the video game is an active medium that often gives the player some "control over the point of view" (Wolf, 2001b, p. 52), on Tropico the player must literally "look down" on the citizens of Tropico and on the island itself. As noted above, this is a "god-like" view—the view reserved for the person controlling the landscape, or in this case, the gamescape. Although it seems as if the player has flexibility in choosing her or his point of view in this interactive medium (it is possible to zoom out and move North, West, East, and South as well as rotate in increments of 90 degrees) it is impossible to be on the same level as Tropico's inhabitants—one is forced by the gamespace continually to look down on them. This has been described as landscape's "dark side" in which landscape itself is used to mask the operations of power (Corner, 1999c, p. 10). In this case, the player's control over the gamescape is emphasized, and the limited choices afforded to the player as a result of the layout of the gamescape are

obscured. This is particularly problematic given that realism is a paramount value of the video game industry, and we are increasingly asked to derive our gaming pleasure from "blurring the distinction between the player and character" (Lahti, 2003, p. 159). Landscape theorists including James Corner and Denis Cosgrove tell us that landscape shapes and is shaped by its users. By extension, the *Tropico* gamescape interpellates and molds its player in the shape of a colonizer.

Players of *Tropico* must produce its gamescape using the limited number of spatial techniques allowed by the game's interface. Before moving on to thinking about how *Tropico* represents a highly themed, tropicalized landscape, I first look at two specific practices used in *Tropico* to delimit the gamescape—cartography and temporality—in greater detail.

Maps as a technique of colonization in Tropico.

> Give me a map: then let me see how much
> Is left for me to conquer all the world.
> (Marlowe, 1590 /1998, pp. 123-124).

Maps are a language of value-laden symbols—a language that has spoken most often of "colonization and conquering" (Harley, 1988, p. 278). This trend continues in *Tropico*. The game begins with the opening of a map on the wall of your/presidente's office. It is through this map that you choose the game you would like to play, including the level of difficulty. When you are actually playing the game a highly simplified map of Tropico is made available in the lower left-hand corner of your screen. As noted previously, players spatially navigate Tropico from above rather than from the point of view of the characters—as if the whole of Tropico were simply a map laid out before them (Lammes, 2004).

Cyberspace is rife with final frontier discourse including the assertion that new technologies are in the process of remapping the world and "making it ripe for [colonial] exploration once more" (Chun, 2003, p. 7). Maps are one of the means by which *Tropico* mystifies and makes explicit its connection to colonization. For example, it is possible to turn on a setting that maps each spot on Tropico where different crops would thrive. Then, the player may choose from a series of "cash crops" including tobacco and bananas and find out where on the map of Tropico these might be grown. In simply revealing good locations for planting cash crops, *Tropico* presents the preference for profit as cartographic fact. The map becomes a means to represent the values of the game "in the guise of scientific disinterestedness" (Harley, 1988, p. 279). There is no way to set Tropican land aside for preservation or public use, an ideological imperative of the game that is naturalized by the game rules.

Maps "are never value-free images—except in the narrowest Euclidean sense" (Harley, 1988, p. 278). Cartography has long been "the science of princes" (Harley, 1988, p. 281), and *Tropico* is no exception. We alone as player-dictator have access to Tropico's map, and it is only presidente who may alter Tropico through cartography. What a particular map chooses to highlight through positioning and coloration is

highly constructed. Maps regularly contain blatant distortions with an eye to promoting one-sided geopolitical agendas. They accomplish this, in part, by "manipulating scale," using "emotive color," and choosing which features of the map will be centered (Harley, 1988, p. 287). The map of Tropico is no exception. One simply clicks on the map where one wants to install a cash crop such as coffee, and the player is immediately gratified by an increase in her or his bank account. It is easy to ignore the implications of these cash crops for Tropican citizens. There is no graphic representation on the map that indicates overall human well-being or suffering. What the map of Tropico represents, and where, has a tremendous impact on how a player plays the game. The dollar amount of the player's bank account, as well as the contents of her or his Swiss bank account, are always available in the right-hand corner of the map statistics. In contrast, the player has to zoom in and click on individual citizens to determine whether they are happy or unhappy. Moreover, although we know that cash crops can ravage the land by draining nutrients out of the soil and requiring large amounts of fertilizer, there is no representation on the Tropican map of this phenomenon. The possibility of environmental damage is ignored entirely.

Housing is also overlooked on the map of Tropico. Again, to determine whether or not housing is problematic for the citizens of Tropico, one must click on them individually or pay attention to the occasional edicts that interrupt the game to tell you of your citizen's difficulties with housing. Through strategic choices in cartographic representation, the Tropico map makes it easier for the player to engage in oppressive behaviors. It is satisfying to see the graphic depiction of your rising bank account and easy to forget the continued and intensified unhappiness of your citizens. Maps are a form of discourse that help to neutralize the unequal distribution of power and resources. The Tropico map enacts the process of mystification by which the "silent lines of the paper landscape foster the notion of socially empty space" (Harley, 1988, p. 284), helping to minimize any sense of guilt experienced by the person responsible for radically changing the landscape.

Temporality in Tropico.

> You'll notice, Presidente, that nobody is moving. Your power is so great that you can control time itself!!! (*Tropico* tutorial, PopTop Software, 2001)

The gamescape of colonization constructed in *Tropico* does not occur only through imaging techniques. Temporality is additionally key to this process. Foucault (1986) reminded us that "[i]t is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space" (n.p.). In this section, I interrogate the way in which temporality is used in *Tropico* to control the gamescape.

In his discussion of time in the video game, Mark Wolf (2001c) asserted that games have made time increasingly malleable. Time may not only be compressed in video games but also may be slowed.[23] In addition, because of the repetitious nature of gameplay, it is possible for time to occur either in linear or nonlinear form—options that are impossible with most conventional literary or cinematic texts. As a general

rule, "the more interactive a video game is, the more control the player may have to control the game's duration" (Wolf, 2001c, p. 85).

Temporal restructuring is key to the landscape of colonization created by *Tropico*. One of the features of *Tropico* is that you may decide how quickly time will pass. It is easier to play if time moves more slowly. If time moves too quickly, the citizen's of *Tropico* become hungry and tired, and disasters can occur in the time it takes to get oriented to the gamescape. Because *Tropico* is not time limited, the time between beginning the game and winning is less important and will vary depending on the level of difficulty you choose and how quickly you set time to pass.[24] If you choose to speed up time, you increase the fervor with which your citizens labor and, as a result, increase your profits. Temporality thus becomes a strategy that you may choose to construct an efficient, driven society where profits accumulate with rapidity. Speeding up time also helps to keep your citizens occupied with their basic needs and may discourage their engagement in revolutionary discussion. In the rapid time mode fewer edicts complaining of poor housing or lack of medical care are issued. In *Tropico*, time intersects with space to give the player the greatest possible control over the gamescape.[25] I now turn to the way in which narratives of tropicalization serve to further constrain the possibilities of *Tropico*'s gamescape.

Tropicalizations and *Tropico*

Corner (1999b) tells us that "in constructing landscape, architects create some of the most revealing explorations of the interface between culture and nature" (p. x). The *Tropico* interface reveals the intersection of culture and nature to be scripted by the rhetoric of tropicalization. Aparicio and Chavez-Silverman (1997) define *tropicalization* to mean to "trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values. . . . To tropicalize from a privileged, First World location is undoubtedly a hegemonic move" (p. 8). Chun (2003) describes how the Internet uses hi-tech orientalism to define an Orient that can "never be subject" (p. 16). This process, a form of hi-tech tropicalization, also occurs in *Tropico*. The game narrative presents the Spanish Caribbean as that which is simultaneously homogeneous and incomprehensible—a foreign land that helps to stabilize North American identity as a self that is stable and in control. This caricaturization of the Spanish Caribbean may arise partially out of a fear of the Other and the power they wield. Just as "[o]rientalist narratives are not always comforting—they carry with them the fears of being taken over by the thing they seek to control—and by the fear of going native," this narrative of tropicalization contains the same possibilities (Chun, 2003, p. 30).[26]

The process of tropicalization occurs in a number of different ways in *Tropico*. One example is the lack of specificity used to identify the island: It is described as a "small, underdeveloped, relatively impoverished Spanish Caribbean island quite remote from anywhere else" (*Tropico* manual, PopTop Software, 2001, p. 4). By using these vague signifiers as stand-ins for specificity, this game permits the Island of Tropico to take on "a 'generic' quality that allows it to symbolize any number of places in Latin America" (Urraca, 1997, p. 8), thereby reducing Latinidad to a cartoon caricature. Essentializing

portraits of Latin America have often attempted to define it as a homogeneous group of "Banana Republics incapable of producing anything but raw materials, very good rum and fat dictators" (Lugo et al., 2002, n.p.). Tropico comes complete with rum distilleries. All of the stereotypes are upheld—as dictator you are primarily interested in filling your coffers. This information, in conjunction with the knowledge that you are the third presidente within a short time period (*Tropico* manual, PopTop Software, 2001, p. 1), serves to confirm the stereotype that Latin American governments are "despotic, uncivilized, and unstable" (Urraca, 1997, p. 32).

Cultural homogeneity and the collapsing of difference within a culture also are present in *Tropico*. On Tropico, hyphenated or hybrid identities are erased, and essentialized forms of Othered identities are presented. There is no cultural or linguistic diversity on Tropico. Although there is a significant emphasis on the importance of religion (you must keep building churches to satisfy the numerous religious members of your community), there are only Christians, no Jews, no Muslims, and no Hindus.[27] Moreover, Blackness is erased from the island—there are no Black Tropicans. This elimination of Blackness from narratives of Latina/o identity draws on a long history in which a hierarchy of Whiteness continues to be privileged (Cruz-Janzen, 2003). It should be noted that though there are no Black Tropicans, there are also no White Tropicans, allowing the Island of Tropico and its residents to retain the mystique of the Other.

Osborne (1988) tells us that "landscape, as in the French paysage, carries a sense of nationhood and cultural identity" (p. 162). Here, the sense of nationality that *Tropico* aims to promote is one of difference—of Latina/o "otherness"—that ultimately works to stabilize the North American self. Computer games such as *Tropico* serve the function of allowing the United States to "displace and transfer its own problems and internal social realities onto the Other south of the border" (Aparicio & Chavez-Silverman, 1997, p. 6). Thus, the United States projects its own anxieties about increasing urban poverty, political corruption, random violence, and a poor education system onto a homogenized Latinidad (Aparicio & Chavez-Silverman, 1997). "Computer games, particularly those with prepared worlds for our exploration . . . have designed worlds that thus existentially soothe us amid the terror that we otherwise feel" (Douglas, 2002, n.p.). Like other games of this genre, *Tropico* helps to naturalize ideological conclusions about Latinidad, specifically as an inherently unruly and unstable place that needs to be mined for its resources and governed by a North American puppet with an iron fist. This stereotypical representation of *Tropico* provides a foil for the United States and helps it to re-create itself as a "powerful, virile, unified nation" (Urraca, 1997, p. 26). Moreover, *Tropico* helps to confirm narratives about the centrality of the United States by having U.S. support for Tropico as a key feature of the game. Again, the United States is cast as the "'invisible center' that cannibalizes the Third World other" (Ferguson, 1990, p. 11).

Another stereotype associated with tropicalization has to do explicitly with landscape. Drawing on the work of Benz, Aparicio and Chavez-Silverman (1997) asserted that tropicalization may script "the Latin American land . . . as positive but its people

are represented negatively" (p. 9). This is apparent in *Tropico*'s emphasis on profit from the land rather than attention to the needs of its citizens. "Writing Latin Americans out of the script [or simply minimizing their presence in the landscape] is similar to representing them as primitive savages: in either case . . . *latinoamericanos* are dispossessed of their potential for . . . agency" (Aparicio & Chavez-Silverman, 1997, p. 9). The island gamescape of *Tropico* also suffers from tropicalization. In "Virtual Islands," Goldman (2004) highlighted the ways in which islands are defined simultaneously by their insularity and their spatial and cultural separation from other landscapes. Goldman noted that cyberspace may reconfigure this spatial relationship, allowing "for formerly non-contiguous spaces to be brought together without *necessarily* compromising their position or geographic specificity" (p. 380). The trope of tropicalization erases any sense of Tropican insularity and eliminates cultural and geographic specificity by having Tropico stand in for a globalized island identity. Whereas Goldman (2004) asserted that continued geographic specificity depends on a shared understanding of the real-life "architectural and geographic landscapes depicted" (p. 385), *Tropico* derives its tropicalized identity by the very opposite of this presumption, that the visitor to Tropico will be unfamiliar with the real-life landscape of the Spanish Caribbean—construed here as a gamescape of escape that players may visit to forget their real-life surroundings. Again, *Tropico* as Other is made intelligible through a series of essentializing and problematic gamescapes.

Much like other adventure games such as the *Civilization* series (Douglas, 2002), *Tropico* posits the revolutionary and uneducated inhabitants of Tropico as an obstacle to your success as dictator—particularly your ability to turn Tropico into a profitable society. Although "interpretive ruses"[28] are offered up by the game to divert the player's attention from the game's underlying ideological message, these reveal themselves as nothing but tricks that fail to deny the colonial underpinnings of the game. Although some of the Tropicans are educated revolutionaries, and although it is possible to play the game located farther from the United States to minimize U.S. interests, the revolutionaries can usually be bought off with money or by giving in to their rather meager demands. Moreover, it is necessary deliberately to choose to play the game farther from U.S. interests. In making this an uncommon setting—the default position in the capitalist mode of the game placing Tropico close to U.S. shores—it ultimately reaffirms the importance of the United States. *Tropico* mimics contemporary hegemonic North American ideology about the centrality of the United States to the world market and to global and local relations.

Conclusions: Interrupting the Colonial Discourse or Educating for Oppression

Foucault (1986) told us that "space itself has a history in Western experience" and that this history may not be separated from the West's colonial past (n.p.). It is thus necessary to interrogate space in *Tropico* with an eye to its historical context. Video

games are becoming such a constant feature of the media landscape that it is essential to problematize the ways in which they produce and are produced by the cultural context in which they are designed and marketed. Space in *Tropico* clearly is connected to the United States' colonial history. Yet *Tropico*'s gamescape might yet be reshaped. By their very nature, video gamescapes are flexible and participatory, they are landscape as "active surface, structuring the conditions for new relationships and interactions" (Wall, 1999, p. 233). "The veil of pretense that landscape erects, is not . . . impermeable . . . it is broken every day" (Corner, 1999a, p. 157). In real-life landscapes this may happen when we see an extermination truck in a gentrified neighborhood or a homeless person sleeping in a sterilized suburb (Corner, 1999a, p. 157). In considering *Tropico*, ways need to be found to disrupt the totalizing vision that is a constant feature of its gamescape. Given that space is "created in the act of imaging," this same imaging may be helpful to disrupting colonial understandings of space. One small way in which this might be accomplished is through the use of mods and patches—which are small programs created by players of the game and which, when downloaded, may alter its features.[29] Lammes (2004) argued that players can use patches to "converse with ideologies and change their meanings" thus helping to change the colonizing text of *Tropico*.

It is essential to interrogate the ideological implications of video games. They now rival Hollywood in their overall market share; the video game industry is valued at roughly 10 billion dollars (Wired News Staff, 2004). New funds are constantly being channeled into their development, and the industry is continually on the lookout for different demographics to target.[30] Video games now occupy more of the average North American's leisure time than going to the movies, and discussions of the potential of using games as educational tools are growing. Video games are already a significant component of military training and the overall education of soldiers (Foundation & Huntemann, 2001).

Caution must be exercised in thinking about the educational possibilities for *Tropico*. In an article on the potential of using video games to teach kids, Squire (2002) suggested that games such as *Tropico* could serve an instructional purpose with respect to teaching children about "island governance." Given the ways in which *Tropico* represents a gamescape of colonization, careful consideration as to the kind of cultural and capitalist messages that the game articulates would have to be an essential part of the educational process. It is frightening to imagine that a game such as *Tropico*, which represents essentialist stereotypes about Latina/os and Latinidad, could be used unreflexively as an educational tool.[31] *Tropico* points to a lack in the video game industry—a lack created by the paucity of games that are sensitive to the ways in which gameplay works to incorporate players into problematic gamescapes. This is only made worse by the fact that these gamescapes of inequality are mystified for the player by the interface of the games themselves. Continued attention needs to be paid to the ideological underpinnings of video games so that we do not make precipitous suggestions as to their merit.

Notes

1. Perhaps the best known of these films is *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (Director: Simon West; Writers: Sara B. Cooper, Mike Werb, Michael Colleary; Producers: Bobby Klein, 2001) based on the 1996 video game of the same name.

2. The video game industry is becoming known for its exploitative labor practices. Most recently, a class-action lawsuit against one of the major video game developers, Electronic Arts, was settled. Included in this suit was an employee suing the company for having to work 65 hours a week without overtime compensation. Other employees reported 80-hour work weeks, including an 8-hour shift on Sundays (Stross, 2004, p. B3). Electronic Arts has agreed to pay $15.6 million to settle the overtime dispute, pending Superior Court judge approval (Wolverton, 2005).

3. Video games on the market range from *Catechumen*, in which you must prevent Satan from controlling the Roman Empire to *Grand Theft Auto*, in which a player patrols the landscape purchasing sex workers, "gunning down police, committing carjacking, burglarizing homes, and dealing in other underworld activities" (Hananel, 2004, n.p.).

4. My focus on the way in which power is spatialized in *Tropico* draws on Raka Shome's (2003) theorizing of the centrality of space to the "production, organization, and distribution of cultural power" (p. 39). For the purposes of my analysis, I focus on a highly specialized space: the gamescape.

5. In her landmark article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey (1975) defined *to-be-looked-at-ness* as the way in which women are "simultaneously looked at and displayed" in film (p. 7). I would argue that landscapes are similarly objectified for the consumption and pleasure of the viewer.

6. Other examples include the *Civilization* and *Sims* series.

7. Some aspects of *Tropico* can be seen by viewing the official *Tropico* site: (http://tropico.godgames.com/index-tropico.html).

8. Following from Althusser (1986), I understand *interpellation* to be the process by which individuals are hailed by an existing ideology. I have applied his theory here to clarify the way in which players are interpellated by *Tropico*'s spatial ideology—the problematic or unconscious infrastructure—which underlies this text. However, I resist Althusser's notion that ideology is always and/or already overdetermining, and thus I conclude my article with possibilities for resisting the totalizing narrative presented by *Tropico*.

9. *Tropico* has been followed by *Tropico 2: Pirate Cove* (2002) and *Tropico Expansion: Paradise Island* (2002).

10. This term is used to refer to the body that you "wear" in a virtual environment.

11. For a longer discussion of these signifiers see Angharad Valdivia (2000) and Jillian Baez (in press).

12. For a game that presents socialist possibilities for governance, it is interesting to note that *Tropico* itself fits squarely into an industry that has tended to reproduce the "the political economy of the system of relations in both the structure (economical level) and superstructure (ideological level) that seems to be headed towards the exploitative labor practices of the model of Maquilas" (Lugo, Sampson, & Lossada, 2002, n.p.). This model has led to the proliferation of *maquilladoras* (factories in the Free Trade Zone adjoining the Mexico-U.S. border infamous for their terrible working conditions, low pay, and pollutants) in new free trade zones that engage in exploitative labor practices aimed at reducing manufacturing costs.

13. This is a likely player-character situation given that there are more male players than female players according to the Interactive Digital Software Association (2002).

14. For a more detailed discussion of how this phenomenon works, see David Roediger (1999).

15. These include (a) a single, contained screen; (b) a wraparound screen, such as the one found in Pacman; (c) a screen that scrolls spatially along one axis; (d) a screen that is able to scroll on two axes; (e) adjacent screen spaces that are displayed one at a time; (f) layers of independent moving planes; (g) spaces allowing z-axis movement into and out of the frame; (h) multiple, nonadjacent spaces displayed on-screen simultaneously; (i) an interactive three-dimensional environment; and (j) represented or mapped spaces (Wolf, 2001a, p. 11).

16. Lee McEnany Caraher is the vice president of corporate and consumer communications at Sega. She (Glos & Goldwin, 2000) described the game *Baku Baku* as her personal place of escape:

> Baku Baku . . . is a puzzle game. . . . Instead of putting shapes together, as in "Tetris," you want to match up animals with the food that they eat. . . . I could play this game for hours. In fact, if I can't sleep at night, I go downstairs and I put on "Baku Baku," and that's usually where my husband finds me, going, "What is the matter with you?" But it helps me relax. (p. 203).

17. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (1999) began to address this question in their edited collection *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games.*

18. In this way, *Tropico* functions much like *SimCity.* Shawn Miklaucic (2001) argued that possibilities for understanding the assumptions inherent to the *SimCity* design could have been made transparent to the player but were continually obfuscated by the game's spatial logic. For example, Miklaucic noted that increased policing to make the Sims' city safe becomes a naturalized feature of the game:

> To play SimCity, it can become not just ideological assertion, but empirically verifiable truth, that, for instance, putting a police station on every corner is the answer to crime. To play SimCity uncritically is not just to be told this is so, but is to learn it experimentally. Prison and police stations must be the answer to crime, one can come to believe, because look!—when I build more prisons my crime rate drops. Further, the simcriminals that inhabit these prisons have no race, no gender, no social class that complicates the model of crime and its punishment. (p. 8)

19. Wendy Chun (2003) highlighted that Foucault fails to describe the way in which "this placing of pure order simultaneously obfuscates, if not annihilates, other spaces/places already in existence" (p. 8).

20. Christopher Douglas (2002) noted the way in which players are transformed into "actors within the ideological staging" of the game, meaning that we as players naturalize certain ideological configurations just by playing the game by the rules.

21. This view would not be shared by Gonzalo Frasca (2003), who contends that the debate on media effects is "fruitless." I would argue that although the problematic tropes hidden in many video games do not necessarily have direct effect on their players, it is helpful to interrogate these messages because they are revealing about the larger cultural context in which they were created and its ideological underpinnings.

22. Examples of this include Panama, the Philippines, Vietnam, Nicaragua . . . the list is simply too long to detail fully.

23. Time compression is a technique that is frequently employed in film.

24. Markku Eskelinen (2001) argued that "in games there's only one necessary time scheme: the movement from the beginning to the winning or some other situation. In cases where another time scheme is invented, it is not as important as the first one" (n.p.). I disagree with Eskelinen's assertion and agree with Douglas (2002) who argues that Eskelinen's "taxonomy seems to overemphasize the movement from start to finish, ignoring the ludic pleasures of side-plots or repetitive play" (n.p.).

25. The combination of time and space as a tactic of control is a strategy that has been adopted by contemporary capitalism—for example, in *maquilladoras*.

26. One of the ways in which this fear has been made manifest is by the resistance of popular culture to including Latina/os in a way that does not essentialize or stereotype them (Valdivia, 2000). To date, the incorporation of Latina/os into U.S. popular culture often reflects the commodification of Latina/o identity.

27. The large number of Indians who live in the Spanish Caribbean are completely erased in *Tropico*.

28. This term was used by Christopher Douglas (2002) to describe the way in which the *Civilization* game series attempts to mask the ideological underpinnings of the game—for example, by having the "hordes of barbarians" that threaten your civilization identified sometimes as pink skinned. However, in a careful analysis of *Civilization*, Douglas revealed these to be only attempts at concealing the overwhelming message that barbarians are not, and cannot become, a civilization.

29. These patches are very popular. They exist for a wide range of games including *Civilization* and *Tomb Raider.*

30. In a trend to attempt to capture the elusive girl gamer demographic, a number of disturbing games designed to appeal to women have been released. These include *Children of the Nile*—a game that sounds remarkably like *Tropico*: "As you play Pharaoh on the banks of the Euphrates, you lead your people to a better future by farming, hunting and bartering with neighboring tribes" (Globe & Mail, 2004, p. E9). Other games (2004) teach women how to "flirt up their lives." In order to win, players must find "the perfect apartment, decor and mate and still keep themselves happy and tidy" (Kennedy, 2004, p. E9).

31. It recently was pointed out to me that it might be possible to use *Tropico* as an educational tool if it were accompanied by a critical curriculum designed to reveal the assumptions embedded within the game.

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