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Postcolonial Playgrounds: Games as postcolonial cultures

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Many games touch upon issues that are related to the postcolonial culture we live in. Be it in the shape of referring to how it has generated ethnic differences, subscribing to (post) capitalist values of winning and gaining, or by employing militarist strategies that have been partly shaped our colonial histories, cultural notions that are related to our colonial past are often resonant in games.

However, one particular strand of strategy games takes the notion of colonialism as its most central focus. Games like *Age Of Empires* (AOE), *Civilization* and *Rise of Nations*, may differ greatly in certain ludological aspects, but all share a strong fascination with colonial history, including its militaristic, economic and technoscientific dimensions. Through employing colonial techniques of domination like exploring, trading, map-making and military manoeuvring, players create their personal colonial pasts and futures.

Even though it is evident that such games share an explicit fascination with colonial history, it remains less clear in what way they may be called *post*colonial. In this article I will shed light on why and how such games can be called postcolonial and should even be conceived as one of the most significant arenas to express the tensions and frictions that are part of the postcolonial culture we live in. As postcolonial playgrounds they offer the perfect means to play with and make sense of how colonial spatial practices have shaped contemporary culture. I will argue that the very character of digital games, as well as the specific game mechanics of historical strategy games, makes games postcolonial playgrounds *par excellence*.

As human geographer Nash notes in her article *Cultural Geography: Postcolonial Cultural Geographies* (2002), post-colonial theorists vary greatly in the definitions they employ for demarcating post-colonialism as a term. One prevailing definition focuses on how former colonized people and nations deal with their colonial past and celebrate the end of colonialism. Hence the emphasis is put on how former colonized cultures deal with their colonial past in the present. Surely, when such a definition is used, the games under scrutiny in this article cannot straightforwardly be called postcolonial. On the contrary, they are produced in (post) capitalist cultures that have a strong legacy in former colonizing cultures. Even more, players are invited to be a dominating and warmongering colonizer: being successful in the game means that you have to play that role well and to avoid becoming subordinate to other nations. Then the game would be over.

Another circulating definition of postcolonialism emphasises the reproduction of colonialism in the present as a means of its continuation. Although this definition may at first glance seem rather apt for describing the games under scrutiny here, it fails short in that these games do not *re*-produce a colonial past. In *Civilization* one can

for example play an Aztec Indian and invent space travel, quite unlike a reproduction of power relations in the past. And even AOE, the maps and landscapes may appear historical accurate, but are only loosely based upon a 'real-world' geography. Furthermore, even here, the question is not so much how colonial power relations can be reproduced, but rather to query what would have happened if power relations would have evolved differently. Whether more ironic or earnest in tone, such games don't simply reproduce the past, but play with it, thus altering and transforming our colonial legacies.

So two prevailing meanings of postcolonialism seem to be unsuitable to describe and understand historical strategy games. The first one because it speaks from the position of the former colonized, the second for accentuating the aspect of reproduction of the past as a continuation of colonialism. Nevertheless, Nash also identifies a third definition of post-colonialism that is more in tune with what these games are about:

> Yet other work suggests that the 'post' in postcolonial registers neither a celebration of the end of colonialism nor the simple reproduction of the colonial in the present, but the mutated, impure and unsettling legacies of colonialism. (Nash 2002, p.225)

In this explanation the accent shifts to postcolonialism as a more complex term that deals with how inheritances of colonial cultures reverberate in contemporary culture in hybridised and transformed ways. I would argue that games offer exceptional means to express this disconcerting and transforming heritage of colonialism. The main reason for this lies in an intrinsic potency of all digital games, namely for players to have agency in how environments take shape.

"Game mechanics" always stimulate players to explore and alter environments (Sicart 2008), and engage in activities of probing, transforming and pushing the limits. This offers great possibilities to foreground the mutated and impure inheritance of colonialism of which Nash speaks. Historical strategy games employ this inherent potency by asking players to explicitly engage with colonial history. By walking, shooting, harvesting, building, digging, stabbing, sailing, navigating, mapping and giving orders, players explore and rework historical relations between identity and space. Following game theorist Järvinen assertion that the player's agency can be best described by using verbs (2008, p.254), but adding to it that game mechanics are always cultural mechanisms as well, one could state that the player's basic activity consists of probing, transforming and pushing the limits of colonial spatial transformations.

The player as cartographer

These cultural dynamics are clearly discernable in how maps figure in such games. The player embarks on an imaginary expedition, and creates a story by travelling through landscapes. During this process maps and landscapes are mutable instead of fixed, changing appearances according to where the player travels and what is being altered in environments (e.g. mining, founding trade-posts or towns, expanding borders). Right through this explorative journey the player both develops a spatial

story with her- or himself as the main character, as well as being an imaginary (military) cartographer who interacts with maps and changes them according to the spatial advancements that are made.

This is rather different from how maps have figured in colonial ideologies. Since the renaissance maps have been constructed as fixed and objective, while they are actually socially produced (Lefèbvre 1991; Massey 1994), ideologically coded (Harley 1988; Harley 1989; Wood 1992; Crampton 2001; Wood 2002) and one of the main institutions for national states to 'imagine' their power (Anderson 1991). In this asymmetrical set-up maps appear as objective and fixed scientific representations, while they are actually socially produced. Surely these games do not reiterate this seemingly objective status of maps. Instead they 'grant' the player a position of power that is reminiscent of a (military) cartographer, giving players the means to transform maps according to their needs and purposes.

Let me elucidate this by looking at the use of mini-maps in AOE. In AOE the player is constantly moving through territory and changing it by clicking on figures like explorers, soldiers and civilians and moving them around. These activities are translated into transformations of the mini-map in a corner of the screen. This map expands and details are added to it according to the explorations that are being undertaken (e.g. the location of a trade post). Conversely, players can click on the mini-map to move to an area on the big screen. It is even possible to click on an explorer on the main screen, go back to the mini-map, click on the area you want to send him to and subsequently move him to that chosen spot on the main screen. Hence, mapping and exploring the landscape entertain a highly dynamic relationship in this game. In AOE maps acquire hybridized and personalized qualities, quite dissimilar from how colonial cultures would like to represent their power relations.

The practice of post-colonial life

The function of maps in strategy games is in this respect in contention with how the French philosopher De Certeau explained the concepts of touring and mapping in western cultures. In his well-known reflections on every day life, he asserted that people have to deal with two kinds of spatial categories that entertain an incongruous relationship. One the one hand we are confronted with maps that are abstract, timeless and stable and at odds with our personal spatial experiences. On the other hand we are dealing with more personal spatial activities of exploration, which he calls touring. The latter is concrete, known and changeable and part of a more personal spatial experience. In daily life we have to deal with both maps and tours, while they are at the same time at odds with each other.

He argues that although these terms are in essence intertwined, maps have become more and more separated from the experience of tours in western cultures. He states that their interaction is still clearly discernable on medieval maps, where the itineraries themselves remain basic, while the emphasis lies on how long it would take to travel and where to stop, hence a map being 'a memorandum prescribing action'. Gradually maps erased the traces of the touring that permitted their making. Maps became more formal and abstract and '[t]he tour describers have disappeared' (De Certeau 1984, p.121).

In the games under scrutiny in this article touring becomes exchangeable with cartography and mapping is no longer a clearly delineated and ordered practice either. Hence dominant colonial paradigms are not reproduced but translated into new spatial and hybridized connections. Spatial categories actually obtain so much fluidity that these games undermine De Certeau's argument that maps and tours have become separated realms in western cultures.

This could be clarified further by using his specification of the activities that mapping and touring entail. De Certeau relates maps to the act of *looking* and *going* to the act of touring. In historical strategy games, looking and exploring are constantly feeding into each other. This is clearly the case in the above example from AOE. But also for instance in the game *Civilization* this fluctuation is discernable. Here borders are superimposed on the landscape that has to be explored by the player (going), thus adding a cartographical layer (looking) to the landscape (cf. Friedman 1999). Even more, borders are shown as opaque lines that are not consolidated but ever-adapting to where the player is going: the player's sphere of influence changes when setting out to explore and borders shift accordingly. This oscillation between looking and going is always a crucial activity when one plays a historical strategy game: maps become more fluid and transformable, and are also loci to go to, while landscapes that have to be explored acquire cartographical qualities and a to-be looked-at-ness.

Playgrounds

Such a mutability of maps and landscapes cannot simply be described as a reproduction and continuation of colonialism. Surely such games entail nostalgia for being a colonial military strategist and/or new world explorer that marks out 'new' territory, as Fuller and Jenkins have pointed out (1995), their interactive disposition facilitating a performance of this nostalgia. Still, as the word nostalgia already implies, they involve not so much a spatial reproduction of being a new world explorer, but rather entail a transformation of past endeavours to map and conquer new lands. Being a new world traveller is not so much re-constructed, but rather transformed into a playful activity, in which mastering space becomes more a personal power struggle than an accurate historical re-iteration of how spatial relationships have been shaped by external hegemonic forces (Lammes 2003; Magnet 2006). Games translate spatial hegemonies into play, thus necessarily changing them into something more personal and subjective. In this sense one can speak of the hybridisation of spatial relations: players are endowed with a power of marking territories and empires and can thus create their own postcolonial stories by translating world histories into personal stories. Thus colonial histories are mutated and altered and our colonial legacies are being tested, scrutinized and transformed.

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