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## **Decolonizing Historical Role-Playing Games for Education**

My primary interest when considering a topic for my thesis is games for education. This is not an unexplored topic by any means, so I set out to familiarize myself with the existing research to investigate any possible gaps in the literature or inspire new questions. I observed that there was an abundance of research conducted in the early 2000s following the explosion of digital gaming in popular culture in the 1990s. Researchers and educators alike were interested in harnessing the captivating “magic” of video games and applying it to classroom learning objectives (Squire, 2003). A solution seemed to present itself in the form of historical role-playing games (RPGs). There was already general interest in these kinds of games, so researchers began investigating what role they may play in the classroom or as informal teaching tools during recreational play (Squire, 2003; Squire & Jenkins, 2003). Games like the *Civilization* series, *Railroad Tycoon*, *Gettysburg*, *The Oregon Trail*, and *Revolution* were all lauded for potential learning outcomes. While these games have varying levels of specificity and accuracy—*Revolution* allows for a direct simulation of historical scenarios, whereas *Civilization* allows players to absorb more general lessons about the historical relationships between factors like natural resources, diplomacy, and economics—they have all been cited as increasing players' understanding of historical concepts.

While reading through reflections on these kinds of games, I was struck by how many of them revolved around role-playing the mechanics of colonialism. Unfortunately, the history of the Western world—around which many of these games are based—is steeped in imperialism. As a result, any games that model these histories also model the colonialist actions that were an inherent part of creating them and, in many cases, are still relevant in the present. This playing out of colonialism in digital games becomes concerning when we consider the effect video games can have on real-world actions.

In a 2019 survey, Quwaider et al. conducted a survey of how video games impact player's behavior. They report that games had both positive and negative effects on players' behavior depending on the game's content, time played, and mode of play. They cite over a dozen studies that support this claim and explain that “Most of popular video games change in-game environment dynamically which means that the behaviors of the players in-game may change with that changes in the game itself. This leads the player to adapt with that changes, which in turn can change the behavior of the player gradually. This means the player may change his personality in real life and become more adaptive” (Quwaider et al., 2019). Not all games

have the same impact on players, but there is a notable connection between digital gameplay and real-world behaviors that can be applied to historical RPGs.

The specific impact that colonial mechanics have on players has been a growing area of research and an expanding topic of interest amongst certain game design researchers. Meghna Jayanth, in her 2021 keynote address at DIGRA India, outlined 11 “injunctions of white protagonism” that she identifies as tools of the “colonialism-capitalism that video games are invited to collude with.” She presents concepts about the prototypical colonial protagonist like “The white protagonist is the only entity that matters in the world, which is to say the only human in a world of objects,” and “The white protagonist remakes the world as self-expression.” Many of the observations she and other researchers have made about the kind of mechanics that disguise colonialism in video games are present in historical RPGs. This understanding of colonial conventions, when paired with the knowledge that game mechanics may impact a player's real-world behaviors, sheds new light on the alarming consequences of using historical RPGs as educational tools. It seems clear to me that role-playing colonialism is likely to have negative consequences outside of the digital environment. Admittedly, Jayanth argues that this is true of almost all games. So why am I focused on historical RPGs? I am interested in two primary reasons. First, these RPGs have been lauded as tools for education, but given the evidence, it is likely that, while these games are certainly imparting knowledge, the lessons learned are much more sinister than intended. Secondly, I believe historical RPGs have the power to play a distinct role in the movement to decolonize game design and potentially encourage players to examine other games critically.

Historical RPGs are uniquely positioned to aid in the decolonization of the video game industry because of a few key features inherent to the nature of these games. First, despite my analysis, I do believe historical RPGs have the ability to teach history without imparting a colonialist mindset. I believe that when developed through anti-colonialist methods, past actions can be immersively experienced through a critical lens. Secondly, the connection that is drawn between the content of the game and the current socio-political landscape would be more straightforward and poignant when reflecting on real events. The difference between the digital landscape of colonial America and a fictional Mars colony is that the former allows players to more clearly identify which past decisions resulted in the oppressive structures and policies they must confront daily. This would—more than the valid but perhaps abstract anti-colonialist lessons taught in a fictional game environment—effectively train the critical lens that is needed when dismantling the dominant system. Once players can identify the constructs of colonialism in these games through historical understanding and individual application, they will be better prepared to distinguish those same patterns in fictional games. This would hopefully result in a consumer shift that decreases the demand for games that subscribe to the dominant system and present colonialist ideals.

Pondering these issues helped me arrive at the research question I am interested in exploring for my thesis: Is it possible to create an immersive game that teaches the colonial past without teaching the colonial mindset? I believe there are two ways I might address this issue:

developing a game that attempts to fulfill this challenge or creating a research-based framework that acts as a guide for developers attempting the task. An attempt to develop a game would be aided by a Research through Design methodology, while a development framework would more likely be achieved through traditional literature-based research. In both cases, I would conduct an exploration of current decolonization practices in both the education and game design fields. Examining the practices in both subjects would allow me to identify any intersecting methods that may achieve the goals of both movements.

All things considered, this is a broad issue that does not have a simple solution; it is necessary to narrow the focus of my individual exploration. During my thesis work, I would aim to create a game or framework that tackles just a few of the colonialist constructs that are pervasive in games today. During my undergraduate studies, I pursued a minor in environmental studies, as a result, I am drawn to address themes of landscape destruction, resource depletion, and neglectful land stewardship practices as constructs of colonialism. As Jayanth outlined in her keynote speech, “Every story in the world is there for the white protagonist’s consumption [...] in the ultimate fantasy, every tree, rock, environmental object can be acted upon and extracted from. Nothing in the game world has utility or purpose or value beyond what is given to it by the White Protagonist.” The dominant structure creates game environments where every piece of the digital landscape exists to serve the protagonist. There are often unlimited resources or a lack of consequences for depletion. These exploitative mechanics could be extremely harmful if internalized and acted on in the real world. As a result, it is these constructs that I would like to address.

This work would likely be of interest to anti-colonialist educators and game designers alike. It would contribute to both fields and would hopefully synthesize the subjects in an approachable and applicable way. This is a topic that I am passionate about and I am energized to continue researching.

## References

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