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## POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES IN GAME STUDIES

# The Work of Postcolonial Game Studies in the Play of Culture

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This article considers larger methodological questions of what political work is undertaken when scholars engage in postcolonial critiques of video games within academic intellectual frameworks. What is postcolonial game studies, and what is its purpose, within the context of larger issues of inclusion, representation, diversity, and the challenging of hegemonic power structures? After surveying some of the key literature in postcolonial game studies, the author provides critical frameworks for understanding the means by which these approaches have largely been excluded from video game studies, and their crucial function in operating against the grain of profit and innovation-driven discourses in games. This work is the extension of a larger discussion of inclusion, diversity, and tolerance discourse within the liberal academy, and particularly the functions of postcolonial, postmodern and other critical cultural scholarly interventions. In this article, the author argues for a postcolonial approach to game studies, but one that refuses to be reduced to an institutional cultural labor of due diligence, or according to Slavoj Žižek's term, a 'culturalization of politics'. Through the work of Stuart Hall and Sara Ahmed on intellectual diversity work within the context of large systems and academic institutions, this article asserts that the perception that critical theorizations (like postcolonial game studies) exert pressure on efficiency and innovation is greatly outweighed by the rich toolkits they bring to video games as maturing cultural forms.

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## Introduction: A Provocation

While delivering a keynote address at a critical game studies symposium, game designer and scholar Paolo Pedercini (around whom there was palpable excitement) began his lecture to some three hundred college students by criticizing the function of critical game studies itself. Pedercini, most known for his ongoing radical video game design project entitled *Molleindustria*, complained that critical game studies followed rote strategies, which he diagrammed in the following way in a presentation slide: 'You think [pop culture artifact] is cool and progressive but here's how it reinforces [capitalism/sexism/militarism]' (Pedercini, 2016) (see **Figure 1**).



**Figure 1:** Screenshot of tweet showing Paolo Pedercini's presentation slide as shared by Alenda Chang on Twitter. Screenshot credit: Soraya Murray.

The above formula, Pedercini claimed, is fundamentally the way game studies works. First, there is the identification of an offensive gamic text, then there is textual analysis, a proverbial mic drop occurs, and the critical work is considered done. Yet nothing transformative has really occurred, and video games have not gotten any better. This notable speaker's frustration around what was perceived to be methodologically lazy, pop-inflected cultural criticism drove him to actually design games that critique the dominant ideology embedded in mainstream games—rather than just criticizing existing games for their shortcomings.

Needless to say, this opening was stunning to all of the scholars participating in the symposium (myself included) who had presented their critical studies papers earlier that day. Further consideration should be given to students in attendance, who may have interpreted this expert's position as dismissive of the worth of critical video game studies as a whole. Through this sardonic use of a formula, Pedercini suggested that a facile and somewhat habituated form of critical engagement dominates in critical game studies, and that this must be disrupted. Underlying this was that authentic intervention into the conversation will come at the level of makers, not theorists.

This mock formula encapsulates a great deal of noise that surrounds the study of video games from a critical cultural perspective more generally, and a postcolonial perspective more specifically. It seems that before it is possible to fully form anything that might be called a 'postcolonial game studies', it is necessary to first contend with this 'those who can, do, and those who cannot, theorize' position. If we can take Pedercini's provocation seriously as more than the contrarian behavior of a guest who snubbed his fellow speakers and hosts, or an intolerant dismissal of the work of socially committed cultural critics, what can be said about this characterization? How do these larger questions of critical analysis bear down upon the very notion of postcolonial critique as a form of critical game studies? What is the use of this kind of theorization? And is it any longer enough to employ conventional liberal academic strategies of pointing out the neocolonial visions, the global capitalist drives, the sexism and militarism in games and then assume that some critical political work has been done?

Meanwhile, video games are figuring prominently in questions of diversity and inclusion. While there remain few close textual analyses of games from a postcolonial perspective, several scholars have indeed modeled rigorous and incisive deconstructions of the neocolonial, neoliberal, and neo-Oriental underpinnings of mainstream games. I engage with some of these below.

This article considers larger methodological questions of what political work is undertaken when scholars engage in postcolonial critiques of video games within academic intellectual frameworks. What is postcolonial game studies, and what is its purpose, within larger issues of inclusion, representation, diversity, and the challenging of hegemonic power structures? After surveying some of the key literature in postcolonial game studies, I provide critical frameworks for understanding the means by which these approaches have largely been excluded from game studies, and their crucial function in operating against the grain of profit- and innovation-driven discourses in games. This work is the extension of a larger discussion of inclusion, diversity, and tolerance discourse within the liberal academy; and particularly the functions of postcolonial, postmodern and other critical cultural scholarly interventions. In this article, I argue for a postcolonial game studies, but one that refuses to be reduced to an institutional cultural labor of due diligence, or according to Slavoj Žižek's term, a 'culturalization of politics' (Žižek, 2008). Through the work of Stuart Hall and Sara Ahmed on intellectual diversity work within the context of large systems and academic institutions, this article asserts that the perception that critical theorizations (such as postcolonial game studies) exert pressure on efficiency and innovation is greatly outweighed by the rich toolkits they bring to games as maturing cultural forms.

In considering larger methodological questions regarding the political interventions made when we engage in postcolonial critiques of video games, rather than, for example, undertaking a close reading of a specific game at the level of representation, I am not seeking to deligitimize the important work of scholars in the field. Rather, I want to clarify what the work actually is, and what impact it has within the academy and scholarly publishing. Lastly, I am interested in the role of postcolonial scholars within these systems and the critical cultural work

they undertake. There is a lot at play in both Pedercini's compelling frustration, and more specifically in the function of postcolonial critique within academic spaces. This article aims to tease out some of these issues, and more importantly than this, dislodge certain presumptions that seem to lay beneath postcolonial game studies. As someone both intellectually informed by the postcolonial critique and personally deeply shaped by the postcolonial condition, I see this undertaking not as the gesture of a postcolonial turncoat, but as a call for internal self-criticality, and an outward-facing awareness that yesterday's strategies may need reinvention.

### **The Beginnings of a Postcolonial Game Studies**

For the sake of the questions at hand, let us think of postcolonial studies as the consideration of the functions and impacts of large-scale domination and subjection, in the form of imperialism and colonization; as well as more fundamentally deconstructing the colonizing impulse and its rationalizations evidenced in cultural manifestations in the arts, humanities, and sciences. Postcolonial studies is commonly associated with sites of previous and current imperial expansion and the study of their subsequent cultures, societies, politics, and economics. Already the notion of a postcolonial game studies is interesting in this sense, because the analysis is unusually 'sited' within a space that is a simulated, playable model, as opposed to a contextualized lived space within a particular time and history. So, examining games whose form, content, and affordances engage with the postcolonial condition; or which engage in neocolonial ideologies, has become the predominant means by which game studies engages with the postcolonial. This section considers some of the most prominent interventions thus far. This is undertaken for two primary reasons. Firstly, conveys the direction of such research for those who may be less familiar. Secondly, it provides a bird's-eye view of the kinds of critiques being made, in relation to their negative characterization as evidenced in Pedercini's troublesome formula.

Looking through the lens of a larger methodological problem regarding how postcolonial game studies functions, how can we revisit some of the significant critical efforts to create conversation around postcoloniality and the meaning-making

of video games? Many postcolonial interventions into games—of which there are actually quite few—focus on the cultural work that is done within the context of a given game as a text for analysis, teasing out the nature of the representational practices at play in the game: there is often a particular focus on the gameworld's logics regarding the control and exploitation of territories, peoples and resources.

In 'Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism', Souvik Mukherjee identifies what he calls the 'postcolonial undertones' in games and thinks through how more attention can be paid to these issues within game studies, given that their audience is now global (Mukherjee, 2016). Mukherjee's article focuses on how some video games meaningfully address the kinds of spatial relations, political systems, ethics, and societal values of colonialism; and how as media representations that are effectively actionable they also provide the possibility of intervention or insight into the neoliberal, capitalist, and expansionist rhetorics modeled within them. Mukherjee also addresses the construction of space within games, the imaging of particular identities, and the Orientalizing impulses of some of the games in question. Importantly, Mukherjee also positions the postcolonial subject as a player of games (rather than merely as a figure represented in games); as well as introducing the more profoundly voiceless and inarticulate subaltern subject. The article agitates potent questions in its readers. What are the underlying presumptions of the postcolonial critiques themselves? What are the presumptive qualities of those who play? How can we think about players as more diverse and discerning subjects? How can we revise our notions of complicity? Because a player plays, does that necessarily mean that they collude with the game's ideologies? Surely, because one plays to see what will happen, it does not mean one is on board with the game's value system, or in some way uncritically engaged with the content and form. Ultimately, Mukherjee points to the very medium of the video game as an ambivalent form which affords 'the simultaneous possibilities of subalternity, protest, elitism, and hegemony' during play (Mukherjee, 2016: 15). This work has been attenuated and enhanced in the recent publication of his *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*, which marks the most substantive intervention on the subject to date (Mukherjee, 2017).

Others have gone beyond representation to address the same sorts of critiques on the level of form itself—describing the ways in which the very logics and affordances of some games reinforce entrenched values of empire. For example, Shoshana Magnet's interpretation of gamespaces from a postcolonial perspective is useful in modeling a methodology that takes into account the notions of landscape in video games as ideologically loaded. Magnet coins the term 'gamescape'<sup>1</sup> to signal 'the way in which landscape in video games is actively constructed within a particular ideological framework' and then offers one example of a close reading that applies a postcolonial critique to a gamescape (Magnet, 2006: 142). One of her primary concerns is to communicate how the activated participation of the player is constitutive of the gamescape, while the gamescape also shapes the player's understanding, and that their subsequent meanings are shifting and provisional (Magnet, 2006: 143). Magnet then goes on to analyze how her particular game of interest, far from the benign diversion it seems to be, uses its gamescape to interpellate the player into both a colonizing and masculinist ideology. Though the work seems highly critical of video games as a form, and does not seem to significantly take into account the possibility of a discerning postcolonial subject as player, the article broaches a necessary conversation between games and postcolonial studies. While one may contest the specific game analysis, the larger notion that games are good at, as game designer Anna Anthropy captures it, 'forcing the player to inhabit a political ideology' remains relevant today (Anthropy, 2012: 122).

There have been a number of other well-argued discussions of games as play-training in the value systems of empire. Of particular note is 'Postcolonial Playgrounds: Games as Postcolonial Cultures', in which Sybille Lammes argues that the 'very character of digital games, as well as the specific game mechanics of historical strategy games, makes games postcolonial playgrounds *par excellence*' (Lammes, 2010: 1). Lammes suggests that such playable representations as *Age of Empires* and *Civilization* not only model a colonial perspective, but personalize and make

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning that Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska also use the term 'gamescape' in their book on video games from the same year, especially in Chapter 2. However, they do so without the specific reference to the relation between game space and ideology (see King and Krzywinska, 2006).

subjective what were once colonial histories. Johan Höglund, meanwhile, analyses games from the perspective of neo-Orientalism, and particularly how military games set in the Middle East contribute to a notion of that region 'as a frontier zone where a perpetual war between US interests and Islamic terrorism is enacted' (Höglund, 2008: n. pag.). Using a cultural studies perspective, Höglund points to the ways in which military games contribute to and/or reflect a larger ideology of empire, which turns on the notion of a new American form of Orientalism that constructs the Middle East in a manner intended to validate US foreign policy. Ultimately, Höglund argues that:

...the Military Entertainment Complex functions to commodify the notion of perpetual war. From this perspective, the Military Entertainment Complex allows both the American and the global citizen to consume and, through this consumption, purchase a military identity while at the same time presenting a sanitized, bi-polar and fundamentally Orientalist image of military violence conducted in the Middle East. (Höglund, 2008: n. pag.)

Höglund also cites Vít Šisler's 'Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games', another seminal example of an Edward Said style critique of representational problematics within a larger culture that vilifies the Arab as a kind of twenty-first century political boogeyman (Šisler, 2008). One crucial point that Höglund articulates very well is the ongoing challenge of critical cultural game analyses to be supported on the basis that the dominant writing on games remains entertainment-based, and unsophisticated in relation to possible political interpretations:

Unlike critics of other forms of popular culture such as movies, books, television shows, and music, game reviewers tend to depoliticize computer games. As sometimes [sic] the case within the field of Game Studies, the focus in game reviews is often on storytelling, game experience, and technological advances. The generation that grows up reading the mainstream magazines and visiting the most popular game sites and looking for them to explain the game experience will be very poorly equipped indeed to deal with the political dimension of what they are playing. (Höglund, 2008: n. pag.)

This observation is key because it suggests that a sense of critical cultural literacy and agency, such as one might expect someone to have when reading a book or looking at a film, remains underdeveloped in video games. Of course, video games are complex manifestations that require equally incisive consideration—and a rich body of scholarship is building in journals like *Game Studies*, *Games and Culture*, *Loading ...*, and *The Journal of Games Criticism*; and increasingly make appearances in the journals of preexisting disciplines. But the popular depoliticization of video games as part of a larger perception that they do not constitute a part of culture contributes to a troubling and persistent lack of a complex engagement with this dimension of games. As Höglund notes, the origin of games writing as product reviewing has contributed to how game studies has been integrated into the academy, and the terms by which it is considered worthy of study. Today, although games writing has surely moved beyond product reviewing, the residue of these entertainment-writing origins still remains.

Not to be ignored, as well, are larger cultural shifts toward neoliberalism within academic institutions. Cultural critic and scholar Henry Giroux has stated of this shift that, '[u]nable to legitimate its purpose and meaning according to such important democratic practices and principles, higher education now narrates itself in terms that are more instrumental, commercial, and practical' (Giroux, 2008: 46). This is a point to which I will return, since postcolonial critique can sometimes be reduced to a form of diversity work within a neoliberal system whose values are fundamentally instrumental, commercial, and practical.

Before moving to the neoliberal impact on game scholarship itself, there are also recent meaningful critical interventions that critique games as neoliberal play-training. Daniel Dooghan's well-argued postcolonial intervention into the very form of mainstream titles suggests that the rules and affordances of sandbox games like *Minecraft* are not politically neutral. Dooghan characterizes *Minecraft* as contributing to an overall neoliberal worldview in which myths of empire, capital, and dominance over global resources become normalized (Dooghan, 2016). While manifesting itself as an apolitical form, *Minecraft*, Dooghan claims, becomes a 'neoliberal utopia' whose game mechanics 'not only encourage this kind of expansionist thinking but

go further by representing the physical and cultural violence of territorial expansion as a pleasurable challenge' (Dooghan, 2016: 4–5). This includes idealized forms that combine schematic modes of neo-imperial pursuits that conflate 'economic domination with personal freedom engendered by the broader neoliberal project' (Dooghan, 2016: 16). This, Dooghan argues, 'allows players a space in which to practice political and economic activities under the highly simplified rules by which they mythically work'; and encourages a sense that the fantasies promised by this system are attainable (Dooghan, 2016: 16). Dooghan does point to other games whose self-conscious interruption of a player's sense of universal agency constitutes a ray of hope when compared with the fantasies of mastery and dominance offered by other training games (Dooghan, 2016: 17). But his work does much to instill a sense of criticality around the terms set forth for engagement in the game world. Dom Ford does a similar kind of work in his thoughtful and detailed critique of *Civilization V*, utilizing postcolonial and affect theories (Ford, 2016). While stopping short of the assertion that the game serves as a training tool for ruthless imperialism, he does deem the game a particular version of history that images a distinctly Western perspective and—in the absence of a critical pedagogical framework—submerges any kind of critique of imperialism. In the end, he points back not to the failure of the game, but to larger concerns of history through which such imaging practices as *Civilization V* issue.

In a highly provocative analysis, Paul Martin undertakes a close reading of the 2009 game *Resident Evil 5* as transcultural text (Martin, 2016). He explicates its possible meanings, bearing in mind its culturally specific development and publication by Capcom (a major Japanese game company); its African setting; and its predominantly black/white racial dichotomy. The article draws on the postwar history of Japan, its relation to the United States, whiteness and blackness as constructed in the West, as well as sense of Japan's own sense of its colonial past. Martin deconstructs the Japanese social imaginary around all of these elements in relation to the experience of the imagined player, while engaging with a game that does not seem overtly Japanese in its themes. Martin makes the argument that although the game appears on the surface to merely adopt a black/white binary

targeted to a Western audience, it refers to Japan's colonial past; as well as the country's social imaginary around its perceived sense of national sovereignty, in light of its historical and contemporary concerns (Martin, 2016: 13). He deftly theorizes that, on the one hand, the racial politics of the game point to a Japanese subjectivity that mobilizes 'strategic hybridism' (a concept taken from Koichi Iwabuchi); or 'the supposed essential Japanese ability to take in, adapt, and control foreign cultural influences' (Martin, 2016: 8). On the other hand, Martin suggests that the heart-of-darkness theme within *Resident Evil 5*, with its stereotyped African setting, addresses itself less to European imperialism than to a suppressed and problematic Japanese colonial memory (Martin, 2016: 5):

The game provides the implied Japanese player with two performative opportunities. The first is to perform a sanitized and exuberant version of colonialism without guilt. The second is to perform a normalized contemporary global Japanese subjectivity (Martin, 2016: 13).

Without a doubt, Martin's work does insightful analysis, accounting for a uniquely Japanese intra-cultural struggle for recognition that may not be self-evident on the more superficial levels of the game's apparent representations.

The above interventions are all consequential and timely in their call for various modes of criticality in relation to video games. They point to both story-level problems of neoliberal, neo-Orientalist, and colonizing values that come across through textual reading. They also point to the paucity of theorization regarding the player within these theorizations, and question the underlying presumption of who exactly that player actually might be. And many of these important works delve deeper into the very form of games, into game mechanics and rule-based systems, unveiling the ways in which the aforementioned values are built into their substrates. Their observations matter, as do the larger sense in which they model methodological possibilities for cracking through the impressive veneer of video games to produce deeper and more useful meanings.

While I agree with many of these textual analyses on the level of close reading, I remain troubled by the question of what work these readings do to intervene on an

institutional level. What are the larger relations between diversity and inclusion in game studies, and critical studies in general? What is the function of such analyses in a larger system in which the critique of empire and institutional exclusion operates within relations that mirror a center/periphery debate? What is the function and the viability of textual analysis in this case? Do these analyses merely perform difference within the context of a system that ultimately verifies the dominant order? Is this about the calibration of appropriate representations? Will the demand for corrective representations solve our problems? In the following section, I offer a consideration of some of these analyses as a means of discussing the overarching state of the postcolonial game analysis thus far.

### **Neoliberalism and the Liberal Academy as the Site of Postcolonial Game Studies**

The need to even ask the above questions issues from the fact that critical cultural interventions in games have been so thoroughly excluded from what is considered legitimate to their proper study. Today, the overwhelming priority given to games within the academy has been in technical training, development and innovation. Games have also entered into scholarly discourse during a definitively neoliberal turn in the academy. In the wake of significant backlash against critical studies approaches, such theorization falls outside the increasingly corporatized structure of universities, within which nebulous pursuits with less obvious 'measurable outcomes' begin to fall prey to the institutional chopping block. As Andrew Baerg put it in his useful analysis of the relation between neoliberalism and video games:

It would seem that the digital game serves as a technology that has the potential to reproduce procedural rhetorics linked to neoliberal political rationalities. The extension of the neoliberal free market and its emphasis on free choice and expression in the parallel development of the digital game and its stress on player choice. The nature and telos of these choices, manifested in a calculative rationality applied to risk management, can also be found in the medium and the context in which it appears. Digital games potentially legitimize and naturalize these neoliberal ideals for subjects comfortable with this governing of their conduct. (Baerg, 2009: 125)

I argue that this potentiality extends beyond games as quintessential formations of neoliberalism. Critical game studies theorization is subject to these same pressures, as well. It is therefore key for postcolonial game studies scholars within the academy to be vigilant about not settling into a prescribed role, a formulaic performance of diversity work, one that simply contributes to a rationalist role of providing activist scholarship as a product. By 'formulaic performance of diversity work', I mean specifically the function of enacting a prescribed role within the university, in which the performance of difference in one's research (or even one's very bodily presence within institutional structures) becomes a means by which the organization may then say it has 'dealt' with diversity. It is performed both by the institution as well as the subject of diversity, and often in rote, prescriptive ways. Intersectional feminist scholar Sara Ahmed brilliantly unpacks this, as I discuss below.

This larger issue of activist scholarship as 'product' lies at the root of the mock formula set forth in the beginning of this article. In this sense, there is much more at stake than the vitality of postcolonial game studies and what it might become. On the one hand, the university in its classical formulation exists to cultivate the mind and intellect, on the other, the neoliberalist turn in the university has made the pursuit of dominance in the free market primary, and the intellectual interrogation of that pursuit extraneous. As Gregory Jay put it so well:

a fundamental tension arises between the academic mission of preparing students to be critical citizens and neoliberalism's demand that they subordinate themselves to the dictates of the market. Obviously, neoliberalism has no need or desire for academic research that questions its operation, as such criticism creates "inefficiency" in the market. (Jay, 2011: 4)

While neoliberalism exerts one kind of pressure on critical cultural interventions, the problem of cultural labor as liberal academia's product has also become a site of critique. As this is tied to the larger worth of critical studies approaches and activist scholarly intervention, it is key to examine the pitfalls of diversity work and tolerance discourse in relation to this subject. This has been taken up by notable thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek (via Wendy Brown) and Sara Ahmed. Through their

considerations, we can begin to understand how critical studies may fall into the trap of institutionalization, generating analysis as the products of academia's neoliberal turn. This bears directly upon the reception of postcolonial game studies, which labors under this same duress.

Žižek takes a strongly negative position on the role of critical cultural approaches, in particular the presence of tolerance discourses, that traffic in interventions at the level of culture, but fail to make any true intervention. His pointed discussion of this notion of the 'culturalization of politics' as a crucial political failure of liberalism, which mobilizes as its primary operation multicultural strategies of tolerance as a mode of indirect political solutions to pressing political problems. Žižek suggests that within spaces such as (but not exclusive to) the liberal academy, habits form around performing a certain kind of rote response to problems of inequality and exploitation, imperialism, injustice and the like. But these are only hypocritical gestures, because ultimately the liberal position is driven by a culture of tolerance ('tolerance discourse') which proposes that the radical difference experienced in the presence of others is thought of as 'cultural'. In this rationalization process, that which would otherwise be perceived as morally or politically outrageous becomes 'tolerated' as a form of political correctness in which we understand those differences as cultural, and as given. He calls upon Brown's criticism that in these liberal institutional gestures of politics, the base causes of rapacious capitalism, imperialism, equality and injustice are not addressed or interrupted. In the ingrained habits of tolerance culture and proper language of political correctness in the university, for example, its fundamental institutional structures persist and therefore nothing can really change (Brown, 2008). Žižek writes:

This obscene underground of habits is very difficult to change ... It is only in this way that the opposition between liberalism and its postcolonial, supposedly radical, critique can be overcome—through hard work on our own ideological underground. Only in this way can a universality emerge that is not ideological but a presupposition of every emancipatory struggle. (Žižek, 2008: 682)

Put another way, in the habits and empty gestures of politically correct tolerance discourse within the liberal institution, and which Žižek associates with the presence of cultural studies interventions, are a form of window-dressing that obscure the true neoliberal values that lie beneath. Further, it exchanges the possibility of authentic political change, for a mere change in culture. For him, it is through shared struggle and the mining of this underground of habits (*not* the modeling of tolerance) that any true transformation can occur.

Žižek is indeed famous for his anti-cultural studies stance. Paul Bowman in his 'Cultural Studies and Slavoj Žižek' critiques the philosopher for his harsh position, characterizing it thusly:

Not only does Žižek view all of the "posts-" associated with cultural studies to be politically "resigned and cynical", then, he ultimately contends that *if* cultural studies is at the radical, challenging, cutting edge of anything at all, that thing is quite simply the advancement of the ideology of contemporary capitalism. In other words, although cultural studies may perhaps tout as radical its preoccupations with such subjects as democracy, emancipation, egalitarianism, identity formation, multiculturalism, postmodernism, feminism, queer studies, anti-racism, postcolonialism, marginality, hybridity and so on, in actual fact these are simply struggles at the cutting edge of capitalist expansion. For Žižek, cultural studies is thus a trailblazer of neoliberal ideology in order to ensure everyone is invested chiefly in their own "individuality" and "difference". This is unfortunate because it precludes effective political struggle, solidarity, and agency. (Bowman, 2006: 169)

This position staked out by Žižek is at the root of the problematic formula set forth by Pedercini, in which it is also proposed that critical cultural interventions into games do nothing beyond their own performance of the radical, hip, perhaps the politically right-minded—but without any substantive change. Can video games be addressed through the postcolonial, without merely delivering the institutional products that are often expected of us as a 'given' position in relation to the medium?

Ahmed takes on this subject of diversity work, but from the specific perspective of the laborer, who is tasked with the role of institutionalizing diversity. In her *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Ahmed describes several paradoxes of diversity work in the academic setting. The most notable of these is the reality that while diversity workers perform their labors, they ultimately reify the normative whiteness of the institution, while also verifying through their labor that the institution does not in fact have a problem with diversity. In her critique of the cultural labor undertaken by women and people of color committed to diversity in academic institutions, she writes:

Feminist work in addressing institutional failure can be used as evidence of institutional success. The very labor of feminist critique can end up supporting what is being critiqued. The tools you introduce to address a problem can be used as indicators that a problem has been addressed. The work you do to expose what is not being done can be used as evidence of what has been done. (Ahmed, 2016: n. pag.)

In other words, the diversity present, as well as the labor exacted, becomes proof that the institution has no diversity problem, that racism is something external to the institution, and that in itself, the diversity present is the solution to whatever problem did exist. This can even create the conditions by which, '[h]aving an institutional aim to make diversity a goal can even be a sign that diversity is *not* a goal' (Ahmed, 2012: 23, emphasis in original). Or, it can result in a fixation with installing the 'right image' and 'correcting the wrong one' while not attending to the underlying realities of the institution (Ahmed, 2012: 34). This has more to do with perceptions around the culture of the institution than substantive political transformation. And, this, according to Ahmed, creates diversity as a form of hospitality, the white institution as host, and those who signify that diversity as guests who should behave themselves as they are not at home (Ahmed, 2012: 42–3). She ultimately presents the diversity worker as potentially occupying an ironic role of what she calls a 'blockage': becoming a blockage one's self, while trying to resolve a blockage within flow of the institution (Ahmed, 2012: 185–7). Ahmed does not substantively address the other side of this

problem of cultural labor, which is that the cynical diversity worker may perform a rote role within the institutional technologies of diversity, as a strategy to survive and thrive in a space hostile to activist scholarly intervention. In this formulaic performance, the institution again satisfies its own metrics for 'diversity' without any substantive transformation.

If we apply this troubling paradigm of cultural labor to other kinds of interventions including the postcolonial, how are we to reconcile the core pitfall of this kind of cultural work? How can we face the reality that the work of deconstruction and analysis might come, perhaps, to stand in for any actual political transformation?

### **Provisional Conclusion: The Work of Postcolonial Game Studies**

Now I want to return to the problem of Pedercini's formula, set forth at the beginning of this article. As I have written earlier, and I still believe, tensions lie beneath the surface in regard to this idea that those who can, do, and those who cannot, theorize. The neoliberalism of the university has resulted in an environment in which the critical cultural theorist of technological forms is often made to feel that, as they are not 'making' something, what they are doing is not productive. Worse, their work is thought of as extraneous, or perhaps a drag on what would otherwise be efficient production. The producer of technological forms—in this case, the game designer—is also plagued, but with something else: namely, the problem of having to constantly innovate. There is the constant need to keep ahead of technological obsolescence, and the fear of irrelevance is always near. We witness this in the sped-up product development cycles, and demands of users, who encounter technological forms like video games with the expectation that they will be 'wowed' by new advances and capabilities (Murray, 2012). In a few games that have broken with this cycle, and innovated in terms of content, by making potent cultural connections and manipulating player expectations of form, it has been possible to see the beginnings of something far more refined and expressive (Murray, 2016). These are the beginnings of games as complex ethical engagements and therefore requiring of core ethical philosophy and a rigorous, nuanced language for thinking about the social, moral and ethical worldviews that are expressed through them.

Indeed, Pedercini's formula represents a problem in the work of postcolonial game studies. While new to game studies, this problem has taken many forms and is tied to deeper challenges of academic culture. In an illuminating essay entitled, 'Stuart Hall and the Tension Between Academic and Intellectual Work', Ien Ang reflects upon the cultural studies theorist's excoriation of academic culture and its protocols, in contradistinction to authentic intellectual engagement. She relates Hall's apprehensions, most potently articulated in his 'Cultural Studies and its Legacies' (1992), in which Hall identifies cultural studies ideally as field of inquiry that intersects with the political, and as a kind of process, that would allow for personal, intellectual and political engagement (Ang, 2015: 6). But as she puts it, Hall began to see how 'theoretical sophistication had become an end in itself, something for which Hall expressed an overt concern (Ang, 2015: 3). Ang identifies the irony that, despite Hall's own sense of foreboding, he lived to see the institutionalization of cultural studies into academic culture in his own lifetime. She cites this pointed statement from Hall:

There is no moment now, in American cultural studies, where we are not able, extensively and without end, to theorize power politics, race, class, and gender, subjugation, domination, exclusion, marginality, Otherness, etc. There is hardly anything in cultural studies which isn't so theorized. And yet, there is the nagging doubt that this overwhelming textualization of cultural studies' own discourses somehow constitutes power and politics as exclusively matters of language and textuality itself ... [where] power [is constituted] as an easy floating signifier which just leaves the crude exercise and connections of power and culture altogether emptied of any signification. (Hall, quoted in Ang, 2015: 3)

What Hall described is echoed in Žižek's 'culturalization of politics' and the similar charges made by Brown and Ahmed. Ang ultimately parts with Hall's skepticism, persisting in a belief that we should take academic work seriously. But she heeds Hall's sense that institutionalization is dangerous, and ultimately may impede the objectives that these kinds of interventions purportedly seek to make. She writes that:

...for Hall, what matters is the practice of cultural studies as a radical intellectual project to understand and intervene in the social and cultural struggles of the day, driven by an ineluctable longing for a better world. I think that Hall had given up on the institutional space of the university as a site for the kind of critical intellectual work he favored. (Ang, 2015: 9)

The suspicion with which Hall greeted the institutionalization of cultural studies is well noted in relation to the kinds of wicked problems postcolonial game studies faces, and question of what a postcolonial game studies can do. The purpose of interventions such as that of postcolonial game studies, then, is not for the express purpose of making a better game—although this is not to say that savvy game designers cannot benefit from such discussions. I am certain they can. It is also not ultimately about making a corrective gesture around the pursuit of ‘better’ representation. I would also say that it is not about the formalist value judgment of whether a game is ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Video games are already fully established, already a massive global enterprise, and have matured into form of mass culture. We could no longer beat them back as eliminate the presence of television or the internet. It is not likely to happen, and probably is not the objective, in any event. It is surely not my aim. Further, millions of people engage with video games on a regular basis. More constructive and key, for critical cultural studies including postcolonial, feminist, queer and ethnic studies among others, is the intervention into public debates as a counter-discourse to the prevailing narrative, which is ethically anemic. And such studies should continue to demonstrate a commitment to apply persistent pressure toward a public good.

In a much longer investigation of this vital function of cultural studies, I think through this notion of a ‘public good’ and what it means in relationship to a mass culture form that is still overburdened by the twin goals of economic development and technological innovation (Murray, 2018). However, for now, in relation to video games, I conceive of this ‘public good’ as the sparking of critical players and makers who engage with their own self-fashioning through the meaning-making of video games in activated and self-conscious ways. To a large extent, I conceptualize the

public good not as a narrow political position on a given issue or representation, but as an ongoing commitment to social awareness and self-reflexivity within the larger context of understanding one's self as a part of a public sphere. If we think of games and their study as worthy of the same critical self-reflexivity and methodological self-inquiry as the studies of literature, television, film, art, material culture, and other mediums of expression, then critical studies only contributes to both the vitality of video games, and the activation of players as agents within the workings of power that are at play in games.

Having said all of this, postcolonial studies has much to offer as one possible intellectual means to applying pressure toward a public good—that is, beyond the cynically instrumental, commercial, and practical—within a critical discussion of video games. One possible strategy is that of 'affirmative sabotage' set forth by philosopher Gayatri Spivak, a founder of postcolonial theory. In *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Spivak points back to the transformational potential of literature. She describes it as a discipline that demands a reader be effectively sustained in the subjectivity of another by peering into their life, their stories, their ways of seeing things. In other words, it encourages a radical empathy for the 'other' through a maintained connectedness to texts that give insight into their experiences. Robert Azzarello summarizes Spivak's intervention in *An Aesthetic Education* in this way:

Spivak's contribution ... is her rethinking of the "play drive", or *Spieltrieb* in the original German. For [Friedrich] Schiller, as for Spivak, "play" shuttles between the classical dualisms of rationality versus emotion, *logos* versus *pathos*. The training of the capacity to play and to play well, for both Schiller and Spivak, ought to be the core of an aesthetic education. For Schiller, play training will lead to the appreciation of true Beauty and thus to the experience of true Freedom, the two understood always as Platonic ideals. For Spivak, by contrast, play training will show us as teachers and students how to learn to live with the "double binds" of the contemporary world by playing them. (Azzarello, 2013: 66–7)

Spivak's call to embrace alterity and contradiction does not specifically address video games, but as sites of aesthetic expressiveness that suspend us in the stories of others, games can reflect the world as it is, and present tools for imagining what our place in it may be. Suspending one's self in another's text, as Spivak puts it, 'is basically training in the ethical impulse' (Spivak, 2012a). What can be gleaned from this in terms of strategies for thinking past the diversity labor of postcolonial interventions in academic game studies?

Among the many rich springboards of investigation proposed by Spivak is a strategy toward 'planetary', a freely chosen existence in a state of contradiction. This is not a syrupy vision of pluralism, not multiculturalism that seeks to preserve difference, or makes claims around acceptable ways of being authentically different. This is the radical move away from comfort zones of resolution, and an embrace of the ongoing position of alterity. Spivak writes that we must reimagine the planet anew. Globalization, she explains, presents a rational grid of a totalizing electronic capitalist order, and seeks to translate everything into a universal system of exchange. It is made of speed and non-places. It is one model. But the 'planet', conversely, is open, uneven, filled with alterity, including our own. We should, she insists, 'imagine ourselves as planetary accidents rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities' (Spivak, 2012b: 339).

This reimagining of subjectivity evades what has become the overbearing drive of globalization. It frees the imagination from constantly creating a binary in the form of masters and slaves, oppressors and oppressed, users and used, etc. We can begin to think then, through the frameworks of empathy, caretaking, and 'responsibility as a right rather than an obligation' (Spivak, 2012b: 341). We must struggle to discipline our minds away from global domination, expansion, and think instead of the fragility of our relations to 'planet'. This globalizing-to-planetary move presents a useful paradigm shift that can open up cracks that let in a bit of light and air and possibility, what she calls 'affirmative sabotage' that can repurpose existing tools for something else, or even an ethical intervention, perhaps (Spivak, 2012a).

Spivak, though herself a postcolonial subject, is a Europeanist, and as a continental scholar seeks to (among other things) wrest Enlightenment thinking from its own shortcomings—to see it live up to its own promise as a critical framework. In her scholarship, she models a strategy of sitting with and within Western paradigms, while also finding the critical space not to be entirely delimited by those constructs. Postcolonial game studies need not reject the framework of the academy, nor the medium of games, as inherently affording an exclusively neoliberal, rationalist, hypercapitalist, imperializing system of understanding. However, it is crucial that as postcolonial game studies scholars we are always critically reevaluating our relationship to the academy, rescuing game studies from its own shortcomings, and conceptualizing new pathways toward useful critical frameworks. It is important not to fall in line with its institutionalizing tendencies that bring rote, bureaucratic performance, that focus more on the appearance of compliance to inclusivity, while failing to politically intervene in any meaningful way. What is useful in what Spivak models in the one small example of ‘planetarity’ provided above is the capacity to disturb underlying presumptions and agitate other thoughts. Small conceptual shifts and disruptions have the capacity to open up provisional zones of innovative theorization through an ‘affirmative sabotage’ that can propel us beyond strictures that plague every discipline.

We must also maintain criticality toward the ‘professionalization’ or ‘institutionalization’ of what we do, that is, the slumping back into foregone conclusions of bias that exist in the ideologies of video games, as though these observations in themselves constitute a political intervention. Commodity culture seems to have an uncanny ability to absorb just about anything, and make that thing into its product. Still, we should continually strive not to be complicit, and to cultivate generative interpretations and ‘affirmative sabotage’ toward new possibilities for how we may imagine ourselves, each other, and our political relations to the world within our video games. It is imperative to push back on this tendency for institutions to absorb the work of diversity in academia and then reformulate it into rote expressions that only reify systemic biases. We as theorists are engaged in a process that does not ultimately seek corrective representations or cultural mediation, but larger political intervention. It will be fascinating to see how critical cultural approaches to

games—including, but not limited to postcolonial studies—will develop as more fully formed discourses, and inevitably change the games that are made. In time, games will surely respond directly to the discourse and critique, engendering new possible formations around the play of culture in video games.

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