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POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES IN GAME STUDIES

Hybridity, Reflexivity and Mapping: A Collaborative Ethnography of Postcolonial Gameplay

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To date, game studies has largely undertheorized the co-production of postcolonial stories, exploration, and mapping in games. Furthermore, as has been noted before (Carr, 2006), the work that has been done on postcolonialism and play so far often leaves the player out of the equation, even sometimes as a theoretical construct. Yet player experience is crucial to understanding such games, as narratives are not only built on the 'master' level of game mechanics, but also through the personal stories players processually (Ash, 2009; Thrift, 2008) develop through their journey of touring and mapping, thereby developing spatial stories (De Certeau, 1984; Jenkins, 2004; Lammes, 2009) that may present us with conflicting spatio-temporal accounts. Through a comparative and collaborative auto-ethnographic analysis of *Civilization VI* (Sid Meier, 2016) – a turn-based strategy game – we want to push this discussion further and improve our theoretical understanding and analytical purchase of the triad relation between narrative and postcolonialism in games, thereby contributing to the field of postcolonial theory and game studies. Drawing on postcolonial geography, science and technology studies (STS), non-representational theory and game studies, we argue that games, through their playful, explorative and emergent qualities, are a powerful means of rethinking and reimagining colonial (hi)stories in this postcolonial era (Lammes, 2009, 2010) including issues of spatio-temporality, cartography and the hybrid relation between women and machines.

I am going to play Civilization VI for the first time since its release. I have downloaded the game and now click on the play button in my Steam library, anticipating that the game will soon start. Instead the text 'Loading. . . Please wait' appears on my computer screen. Taking advantage of this moment, I think about the last time I played Civilization and feel a bit uneasy since it has been almost 10 years since I last engaged with games like this and examined them as postcolonial practices. Will I still understand the basic principles? Will play-researching this new version bring any new insights?

As the cutscene opens, I see a full moon that reflects its light on the waves of the sea. A creaking sound can be heard and the camera pans back to a wooden ship where a man, clad in robes, is sitting with a map spread in front of him. He dips his wooden pen in ink and makes notes on map. The dirty white map displays some sea and some islands. I can read the name of the island Corsica at the centre of the map. Now I see a close-up of a woman opening the door of the room where the man is working. She has slightly brown skin, freckles and big brown eyes. She speaks with a British accent when she speaks to the man: 'You are plotting a new course again, aren't you?' The man replies in a less identifiable accent for me: 'The currents before us are always changing. We must adapt and press forward, before we know how our journey ends.' He puts his ruler over the map and draws a straight line over the island of Corsica. The woman replies: 'And how do we know when we get there?' After this long opening, short scenes follow at a fast pace, showing me a series of architectural, artistic, military and technical developments. The last image is that of a desolate moon-like landscape, in sepia hues, with a big statue of Atlas carrying the world on his shoulders. The logo of the game appears: 'Civilization VI by Sid Meier'.

A new screen is loading with the title of the game displayed on it and a long list of copyright info, which I am not really interested in. Yet now another screen appears which finally allows me to start the game: blue, with two circular maps of the earth and a compass superimposed. Would I like to proceed to: single player, multiplayer, game options, additional content, tutorial, benchmark or credits? Or would I rather exit the game? I have agreed with Stephanie that we will play a multiplayer game. When we are waiting, and discussing the opening scene, she tells me that, unlike me, she spent a great

deal of time reading the copyright info. I can now tap a button that seems to bring me to the start of the game.

As Espen Aarseth wrote in 2000: '[t]he defining element in computer games is spatiality. Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation, and therefore a classification of computer games can be based on how they represent – or, perhaps, *implement* – space' (Aarseth, 2000: 154). By sandwiching the opening cinematics between two 'mapping moments' (Dodge et al., 2011: 220–43), a strong emphasis is placed on mapping as a dominant and constant technology needed to explore and dominate the world, thereby fitting neatly in a (post)colonial cartographical discourse in which mapping is an essential 'immutable mobile' (Latour, 1990): a technology that does not lose shape when put in a different context, and is used to create and sustain asymmetrical power relations (Lammes, 2016). Thus, the opening scene of the game largely seems to celebrate colonial exploration by implementing space through mapping and other technologies.

At first glance this seems to match many postcolonial readings on *Civilization*, which provide critical analyses of the game's Western-centric narration of history (Mukherjee, 2015), arguing that the game's structure develops an imperialist narrative (Ford, 2016), where discourses of geopolitical order become naturalised (Nohr, 2010). Although we don't contest that this game is resonating with neo-liberal ideologies through emphasising the connection between mapping and mastering territory – as our opening vignette indeed confirms – our aim is to unearth 'alternative' affordances in which mapping gains new meaning that can be critical and reflective at the same time. After all, as has also been learned from cultural studies, master narratives may often adhere to dominant ideologies, but it is through doing and making our own stories that we appropriate meaning and start to make our own personal itineraries.

To push this discussion further, we conducted an auto-ethnographical analysis of our private online multiplayer gameplay sessions in *Civilization VI* (Sid Meier, 2016). Auto-ethnography 'is a type of ethnography centred on the players' self. As a method, it acknowledges the subjective self as part of the process of doing ethnography and

seeks to document the feelings, thoughts, and experiences generated by research and embodied by the researcher' (Brown, 2015: 85). It illustrates how 'research is always personal and iterative' as it 'changes shape as it proceeds' (Crang & Cook, 2007: 157). This subjective method allows us to focus on the embodied affective dimensions of gameplay in relation to narrative construction. The question we ask is how such stories unfolded for us and to what extent we can literally play with dominant discourses.

Games, through their playful, explorative and emergent qualities, are a powerful means of creating and producing (hi)stories (Lammes, 2010) and memories (Hammar, 2016). We wish to shine light on such processes by drawing attention to the player's role in co-constructing postcolonial spatial stories through an analysis while playing the game ourselves, together, in multiplayer mode. Through revisiting Michel de Certeau's work (1984) on spatial stories, we contend that a new approach to mapping and touring as hybridised, instead of frictional yet separate, practices is needed to understand such processes properly. In the strategy game *CIV*, the player sees herself touring the map, and hence actively collapsing the delineation of going and looking during micro-interactions. Furthermore, we show that postcolonial time spaces (Thrift, 1996, 2004) can gain new meanings through such playful hybridisation processes. This reconsideration enables us to explore playful geographies of digital games and how they both enable and constrain the player as a postcolonial subject in co-constructing alternative conceptualisations of history. Moreover, we approach these 'moments of gamic actions' as constant negotiations between player, machine and information (Galloway, 2006: 17). By building on Galloway's (2006: 3) conceptualisation of games as both 'object and process', we argue that this enactment is best visualised through auto-ethnographic narration that zooms into 'gamic actions' between the diegetic and non-diegetic, processual, (im)material and subjective. Thus, our approach is to focus on those micro-interactions between the player's movements and mapping as spatial dynamics in playful postcolonial spaces, resulting in a dual argument weaved throughout this article. On the one hand, we set out to illustrate the productivity of using collaborative auto-ethnography as a

method. On the other hand, the empirical insights drawn from our vignettes foreground the spatio-temporal hybridity of gameplay and the entanglement of the player as a postcolonial subject in the construction of *CIV*'s spatial narrative.

Vignette 1: Mapping

We intentionally opened this article with an auto-ethnographical vignette of Sybille Lammes's experience of starting up the game *Civilization VI* and watching the cinematic openings, not least because it presents us with the most important tropes in the game in relation to postcolonial play as spatial practice: we see the act of writing, of plotting a course, of pushing buttons and of interacting between subjects. We see that the map is not a static object, but a thing or 'actor' mediating an assemblage (Latour, 2005), and a central artefact in how the story unfolds.

What is also established in the opening cutscene is how mapping reappears over time. The first map appears within seconds on screen: as soon as we see the man who is central in this scene on board of the ship, he is bent over a map. He is using it to navigate the seas, and using a ruler and pen as additional technologies. In the only conversation between him and the woman, he explains what he is doing: 'The currents before us are always changing. We must adapt and press forward, before we know how our journey ends.' Suffice to say for now that this remark goes beyond a sheer description of what he is doing. A strong and partly metaphorical connection is made between mapping, exploring and traversing places. At the end of the scene we see yet again a cartographic artefact, now in the shape of a statue depicting a globe carried on the bent shoulders of a man (**Fig. 1**). This time the whole world is rendered cartographically, and the weight seems almost too much to carry for Atlas, the Titan who was forced to support the heavens as a punishment for revolting against Zeus. This is a more dramatic cartographical imagination (Cosgrove, 2001; Pickles, 2004; Smith, 2016), significantly different from the Atlas depicted in 16th-century atlases – powerful means in shaping European ideas about territory (Akerman, 2008) – in which the globe is also depicted as a ball to play with. Here cartographical knowledge – indeed knowing and having the whole world at one's disposal – is linked to responsibility, strength and even a sense of burden. Thus,



Figure 1: Cover of *Mercator Atlas* 1595 (Creative Commons) and a screenshot of the Atlas statue in *Civilization VI*.

another layer is added to the meaning of mapping in the game: through mapping, civilizations can be built, which is a mighty task that comes with a prize.

In postcolonial readings of *Civilization*, most authors concentrate on the meta-level of the game, as we also do in our description and analysis of the opening cinematics in the introduction. In his article, Dom Ford (2016), for example, explores whether *Civilization V* can be a tool for critical thinking in an educational setting. His answer is a negative one as he argues that the narrative of empire building in *Civilization* creates a 'Western-centric notion of history', which makes it difficult to stimulate alternative ways of thinking in classroom settings. Like Souvik Mukherjee (2016), he draws on the work of Spivak and Trouillot to argue that the subaltern position of the other becomes invisible and therefore impossible to identify with. To sustain the existing power construction that the game presents players with, abstraction

is key in this process as it enables alternative 'voices' to be erased. Ford's analysis is based on a semiotic reading of the game as an ideological representation in which the player is treated as a theoretical construct. He mainly focuses on landing screens, timeline and the tech tree to examine the neoliberal overtones of the game. What he engages less with is processual approaches to gameplay (what happens when one is playing) and players' experience.

In a more critical stance, and positioning himself in the tradition of Edward Said (2003), Souvik Mukherjee (2016, 2017), one of the few authors who explicitly links his interpretation of computer games as postcolonial to mapping, argues that the dominant system of the game frames the theoretical player in a (post)colonial discourse of othering and domination. In his book *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (2017) and his article 'Playing Subaltern: Videogames and postcolonialism' (2016), he discusses postcolonial games as pushing players into a system that resonates mostly with Western colonial ideologies of domination and othering and leaves little space for alternative meanings:

Alternative narratives can be written into being in the game world but only within the system that the game provides. The player, whether from the erstwhile colonized countries or elsewhere, nevertheless, both writes and writes back in games that engage with the questions relating to colonialism whether he or she chooses to or not. (Mukherjee, 2016: 15)

Yet Mukherjee stresses that such games can also invite players to step outside this dominant discourse as they can include the logic and affordances of protest and counter-readings. Indeed, some authors have drawn attention to how subversive meanings can be created through counterplaying games, thereby proposing alternative approaches to reading such games as propagating hegemonic discourse. Whilst his focus is on masculinity and history rather than postcolonialism, Emil Hammar, for example, writes in this context about how the playing of a game like *Assassin's Creed* from a counter-perspective can actually bring about a 'recognition of marginalized identities within contemporary historical discourses' (2016: 1).

More directly related to postcolonial culture is the work of counterplaying artist Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga, which demonstrates how an active and creative countering of dominant gaming strategies can create new meanings that do not fit neatly into dominant discourses of borders and colonisation (Taylor, 2011).

Although counterplaying is a strong example of new creative methods that have the potential of appropriating postcolonial meanings – resonating with insights developed in British cultural studies (e.g. Fiske, 2010) – to a certain extent they still start from the assumption that the game ‘in itself’ propagates a clear hegemony and conveys a Western-centred message regarding race, geopolitics, gender and history. The use of the term *counterplay* or *counter-hegemony*, after all, still points to a dichotomy between the dominant meanings that games ‘convey’ and how players/researchers can oppose them.

Even though such an approach can yield very interesting results, we would like to go a step further in thinking about games and power, especially in relation to postcolonialism. On the whole, we don’t disagree with interpretations of games like *Civilization V* propagating hegemonic notions of colonial history, race and gender. Neither do we contest that alternative stories can unfold when such games are approached in alternative ways. Yet when we are really addressing *postcolonialism* we have to also take notice of how our position as players cannot be reduced to either one of these positions. We actually should approach such games as presenting players with affordances to hybridise both positions, being neither one or the other and both at the same time. Or as Emma Fraser (2016) argues in relation to ruins in games as ‘breaks in the teleological march of history’, games can simultaneously reinforce and resist hegemonic discourse.

Play is in essence an activity of hybridisation, as it brings play in ‘networks of control’ (Galloway & Thacker 2007) as – what one of us called elsewhere – ‘ludic assemblages’ (Lammes, Perkins & Wilmott, 2016: 18), thereby defeating strict demarcations between hegemonies and counter-hegemonies. This connects directly to how we approach *Civilization* as a *postcolonial* game in which the player occupies a ‘third space’ in which ambivalent meanings are created (Bhabha, 1995). We are

aware of the many definitions and conceptual frameworks that have been developed in postcolonial studies to understand contemporary global culture in relation to colonial pasts and heritages (e.g. Appadurai, 1996, 2016). Yet we relate most strongly to work in this field that is more concerned with how new transcultural exchanges have emerged that make it more problematic to speak of the colonised and the coloniser, especially during daily practices. This is even more the case in games where positions of being played by the system and playing the system become trickier. Take, for example, the development side of a game and the active role of players in the development process. From a very early phase in a game's production, players are enlisted in testing and shaping the gameplay experience. Although testers still have to work within the ideological framework as devised by the designers, there is some play in such gaming assemblages, that is, testers can play to some extent a role in the (moral) value system in the game. As de Smale, Kors and Sandoval (2017), for instance, show, a tester can create gameplay surrounding complex (war) histories and cultural trauma, thereby modifying 'the' system. And this is not even taking into account the continuous tweaking and developing of a product when it is being released whose immateriality affords it being in a constant state of change, as illustrated in the release of downloadable content, new features or patches.

Thus, as Nash writes: '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: 225). Likewise, we approach 'the' postcolonial as a non-dichotomous cultural phenomenon that can be best approached through the lens of hybridity. So, although games like *Civilization* tap into a nostalgia for a colonial past in which players are free to conquer new territories through mapping, playing such games can simultaneously be a way to create plural, fluid and even paradoxical meanings. As we will show throughout this article, mapping is a dominant device for players to reflect on and transform such colonial tempo-spatial meanings (Lammes, 2009) and mapping has a strong potency for expressing and *doing* postcolonial cultures.

Space places

During the stages of game development, when the game's architecture is set up through players' input, strategies are developed for how an individual should operate within the game's parameters. But these parameters are by no means totally fixed and a player can deploy tactics to appropriate and change meanings, for instance by communicating with others through headsets – as the game rules allow – or using cheats to advance in the game. The interactions between the game as an architectural assemblage and the player's (embodied) actions are best conceptualised by the terms 'strategies' and 'tactics' as coined by de Certeau (1984).

Influenced by Michel Foucault, the French philosopher and Jesuit (a significant detail in this context), Michel de Certeau (1984) differentiates between dominant institutions and structures that construct places, and between individuals moving through these places. While place is constructed through strategies of those in power, this does not mean that those with little power are powerless. Instead, individuals use everyday tactics in which they manipulate and divert these places, turning them into a space. In the case of this article, we focused on governing structures and rules that informed our spatial narrative. Furthermore, as indicated before, we argue that in digital games a clear distinction between the two terms becomes untenable, as the game architecture enables play, thereby not simply superimposing place on the player, but also explicitly inviting players to tinker with places and spaces as distinct categories. In other words, the player is engaged in creating places as well, primarily through creating mini-maps – places – while touring the landscape.

Yet in a formal sense, the game world of *Civilization* belongs to the governing structures de Certeau speaks about. In a similar manner to Nakamura and Wirman (2005), we see the game world, its objects and its rules as a structure in the world that the player traverses. By imposing a strategy, the game attempts to control the player, but also to provide a basis from which to interact with objects in the game world. However, by deploying tactics in traversing these spaces, this place is defined not only by the game's developer, but also other platforms that are used by the player during gameplay. These structures, however, are enacted by the player, and are part of

the player's game world nonetheless. Combined, these structures afford possibilities for action that the player may deploy when moving through the places in the game world while translating them back to spaces on the mini-map. This is exactly where our argument transcends the discourse of hegemonic gaming vs. counter-gaming.

What we can learn from de Certeau is that the hybridisation of tactics and strategies may be observed by zooming in on the spatial practices while playing – in other words, by describing the way in which players traverse a game space through different modes of operations. As individuals move through space, they craft personal stories that they imbue with meaning and translations. These personal itineraries, as de Certeau rightly argues, are conveyed to others through writing, and are important in the formation of social structures in everyday life. For de Certeau (1984: 118), 'space is a practiced place' and can be seen as the effect produced by different mobile elements. Spatial stories are a culmination between spatial practices and 'textual' narratives. Spatial stories of games concern for us the everyday tactics of individual players, in which they describe the structures that govern the place (the order and logic of the places encountered) but also how they produce the geographies of action. For de Certeau, these geographies of action are objective spatial relations ('first I went here' or 'then I clicked this button'), but also subjective spatial descriptions, which are concrete, dynamic and personal descriptions ('because of my inexperience I chose this route' or 'I was interested in maps, so my eye drifted there'). de Certeau maintains that during such daily processes mapping and touring are both encountered, although they do not combine very well. We take this a step further by showing how *Civilization* invites players to hybridise them, thereby introducing a postcolonial flux between master narratives and personal stories.

Method: Vignettes as collaborative auto-ethnographic spatial narratives

Vignettes are an appropriate method for documenting these spatial narratives because they emphasise both the master structures and the player's actions. Furthermore, rather than assuming that the researcher is invisible in the research they con-

duct, they allow us to acknowledge our subjective dual role as player and researcher. Our epistemological premise is that to know the construction of postcolonial stories is to understand the embodied experience of playing. By choosing auto-ethnography as our main method we were able to pay attention to the different material and immaterial relationships that were at work when co-constructing our spatial narratives. Furthermore, for this qualitative study we incorporated a *collaborative* element into our auto-ethnographic experience. Collaborative auto-ethnography, as the term suggests, focuses on group interaction between researchers (Chang, Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2013). As can be derived from the two vignettes that follow, we not only opted for thick descriptions of sections of the game through auto-ethnography, but also decided to play together, thereby adding the experimental method of *co-ethnography* to our analysis of the game.

Practically, we used our own gameplay experiences of multiplayer mode to explore our colonial mapping practices in relation to *Civilization VI*. In undertaking an analysis of translations between the gaming Self in relation to the playable Other – in this case the game's colonial narrative – our data collection consisted of recording our gameplay sessions, taking notes and screenshots during gameplay, writing gameplay diaries afterwards and discussing our reflections regularly. In the multiplayer campaign, we focused on the multiplayer mode, where we played against one another. Since the online multiplayer mode leaves many choices up to the player creating the game, we discuss the different options, and how these co-constructed our gameplay experience. One limitation in the recording of the multiplayer session is that both of us used different means of documentation. Where Stephanie de Smale opted to record both the screen and audio, Sybille Lammes opted to take screenshots and take notes while playing. However, in our view, the use of two differently embodied modes of documentation enriches our analysis. While one of us was more reflective during the entire process because of the physical act of writing down notes, the other was freer to use both hands for playing while making use of audio recordings. Nevertheless, we both reflected on our experiences during gameplay together with the other author during our conversations.

As we will return to later, waiting had an important reflective function in this co-ethnographic process.

Our analysis of the spatial narrative of *Civilization VI* rests on several vignettes of our recordings and field diaries. Narratives vignettes are 'vivid portrayals of the conduct of an event of everyday life' (Erickson in Humphreys, 2005: 842). The aim is to bring the reflexive experience to life and to gain understanding in the lifeworld of the researcher. Approaching the analysis from a feminist perspective in which game researchers are adopting a 'researcher-as-player' perspective (Aarseth, 2003; Lankoski & Björk, 2015), we believe vignettes provide micro-ethnographies of play (Giddings, 2014) that narrate the researcher's subjective, embodied and situated experience.

Vignette 2: Mapping True Start Location Earth

Stephanie de Smale: When discussing maps with Sybille, there are several options to determine the type of map, map size, and city states already on the map (Fig. 2). We discuss how we want the geography of our world to be and look at the options together. Some of the maps are clear geographic shapes related to different parts and areas of our world, like Panagea, island plates, inland seas, continents, but what particularly strikes me is the option 'True Start Location Earth'. When choosing this option, we are not able to adjust the map settings. The consequence of this setting is that the number of city states that are included in the game is 12, and the map size is standard. We are intrigued to find out what True Start Location Earth means for our colonial gameplay, and after discussing it with Sybille I choose this setting.

Sybille Lammes: Although Stephanie and I are playing together, we don't seem to be able to meet on screen yet. Through audio we however keep the conversation going. Stephanie tells me that she already has a trade route. I am getting slightly frustrated that I seem not to be able to create one (she is far better at playing this game than I am). Being slightly irritated by my own lack of overview, I ignore an exclamation mark that is shown on screen and plot forwards exploring territory and looking for places to build and settle. 'Oh no,' I say to Stephanie. 'I have just destroyed a rainforest!'



Figure 2: De Smale, as the player who created the multiplayer game, sees the available options and in the end chooses the game state in which the game commences and progresses.

Through these vignettes, we focus on the way in which mapping and touring practices hybridise and inform one another while playing the game. That mapping related to a colonial ideology becomes again clear. With the map 'True Start Location Earth,' Stephanie can decide which world she wants to live in and dominate, taking her to the heart of the postcolonial project that governs the game's structure. The real centre is the earth, alluding to an anthropogenic endeavour to conquer the universe in an age when human forces can reshape the earth as a 'raw' material or unwritten surface. In this mode, the construction of a map becomes less malleable, as the ability for the player to choose the parameters of the map is taken away. From this perspective, an easy way to push forward is to contest the limited depiction of this spatial 'representation'. However, our argument shows that mapping (at first glance objective, representational and abstract) how it is rendered in the game world goes hand in hand with how the player travels this place through touring. Playing around with setting up a multiplayer game can be seen as part of this practice. As authors we discussed the developers rationale for choosing the map settings, which is a conscious decision led by the spontaneous

reactions to choices. Discovering a procedure in the game that claimed to have a 'true start location' is something that we both found intriguing through our active spatial touring for mapping elements that looked to structure our player experience.

This brings us to one of the main points of our argument about hybridisation: how *Civilization VI* merges ways of doing and seeing and how this relates to postcolonialism. Before the Internet and digital games really kicked off, de Certeau tried to understand the tension between how spaces are lived and experienced and how they are represented. He introduced a difference between *going* as how we make sense of spatial relations 'on our feet' and *seeing* as the main *modus operandi* for looking at spaces from above through maps and other abstractions. He respectively referred to these positions as touring and mapping. The latter could indeed be interpreted as a colonial gaze, an expression of 'orientalism' (Said, 2003) in which maps figure as means of surveillance and domination of the 'other'. Or as Beardsell defines the colonial gaze: 'establishing the subject/object relationship . . . it indicates at its point of emanation the location of the subject, and at its point of contact the location of the object' (Beardsell, 2000: 8).

Let us explain this further through looking at the screenshot that Lammes made when she started playing the game. As can be seen in **Fig. 3**, the surface on which she is invited to spread her sphere of power holds the middle between a map and a landscape. The unexplored or unknown layer is no longer totally black, as in the earliest versions of *Civilization*, and the game has thus moved away from a more straightforward ideological depiction in which uncolonised territory is depicted as what Fuller and Jenkins (1995) identified as the void, uninhabited and yet to be filled with light by the player as coloniser. Instead, a yellowed set of mapping quadrants is shown in this newer version; its association with old maps is heightened further by the depiction of magical beasts, dragons similar to the ones figuring on 16th-century maps now being the guards that block the unknown. In a take on Borges (1975) in the postcolonial and cartographical imagination of *Civilization*, the map becomes the landscape and the landscape become the map, folded into the spatial stories woven by the player.



Figure 3: Screenshot of Lammes playing *Civilization VI* compared with *Civilization II* (Sid Meier, 1996).

In de Certeau's perception of daily life, we have to deal with both touring and mapping positions at once: the master narratives as propagated by mapping and at the same time the spatial stories we weave ourselves through going. Yet since the beginning of the digital age we have seen the emergence of cultural practices in which both positions truly collapse and mapping and touring hybridise. This is exactly what is established in *Civilization* through mapping the landscape and landscaping the map. To repeat what we said earlier, we as players engage with activities to 'implement – space' (Aarseth, 2001: 154). Yet in *Civilization* this implementation of space literally takes place on – or even in – the map. In our view this hybridisation of mapping and

going, or gazing and looking, is directly related to postcolonialism when subject and object positions are no longer easily distinguishable and we are travelling through spacetime by constantly translating between spatial stories and master narratives about our postcolonial identities. Furthermore, play, in this setting, is an important tool for opening this third space, enabling processes of hybridisation (Bhabha, 1995) or creolisation to be set in motion that are so central to this postcolonial era.

Vignette 3: Loading, please wait. . . (Waiting & talking)

Stephanie de Smale: 'Shall we play?' Sybille asks me via Steam Chat. We agree to connect via voice chat and talk through our first gameplay. After I look up in the Steam forum how to start a voice chat, we connect and start the game. I click play and the familiar 'loading please wait' stage commences. Skipping the opening cutscene [which I have watched too many times], I click the multiplayer > internet > option and create a new game.

Waiting again. Finally decided on the settings; however, the challenge we face now is connecting to find each other online. After reading about it on a post on the Steam forum, I now know that we have to befriend each other. As of yet, I've always refrained from using community functionalities on Steam, because I don't like how it draws you in, notifies you when another player is online, or when it compares your statistics to the other. I already feel a sense of discomfort seeing the number of hours I played – did I really do a 6-hour playing binge yesterday? After befriending Sybille, we try the voice chat option; again I have to search on Google how to create a connection, which redirects me to the Steam forum again. Ok, we are connected now and I'm starting up the game. As I click create multiplayer game, I am notified through a pop-up that Sybille is also playing the game. This is the second in-game notification I've received from Steam in Civilization VI. The first one notified me I was able to switch between the game and Steam by using ALT-TAB. The design of the pop-up is clearly different from the design of CIV. This small window is a reminder that there is another place which is part of the game world I am currently traversing.

The vignette where we as authors connect via the Steam platform challenges (Fig. 4) the notion that the game's spatial narrative emerges in a contained space

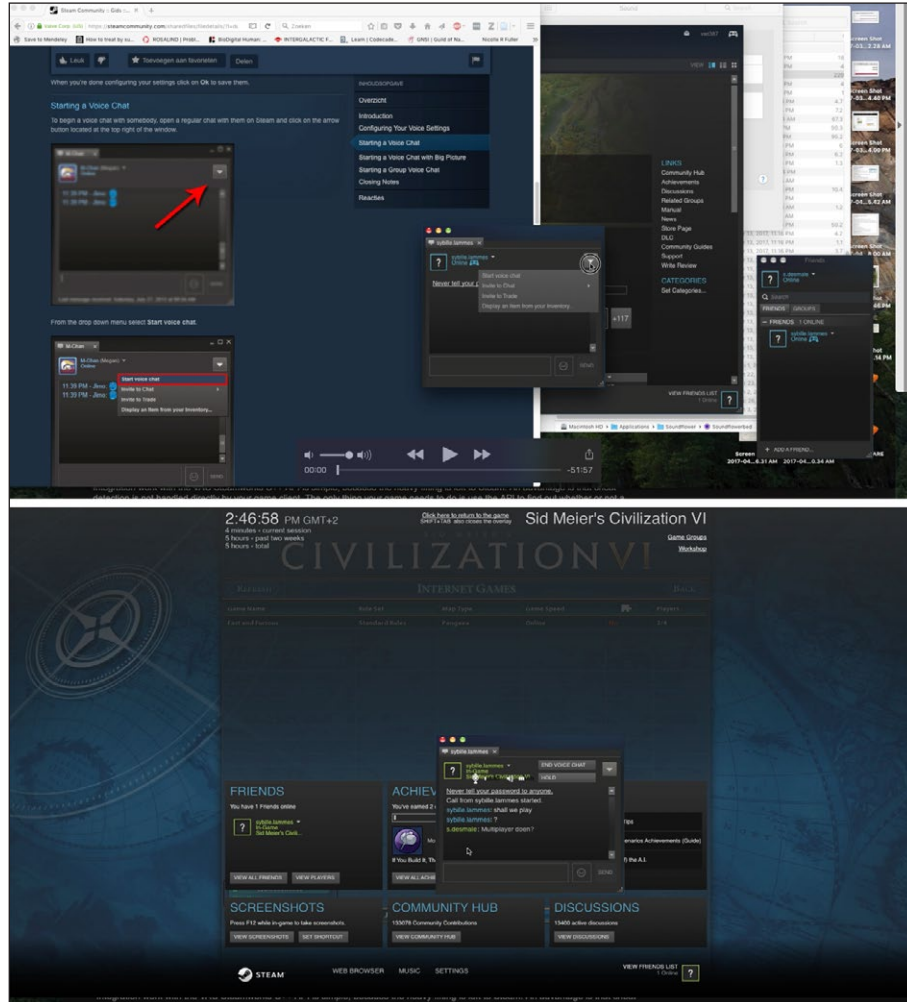


Figure 4: Screenshot of de Smale starting up playing *Civilization VI*.

even further by illustrating that the game's system extends the realm of the game world and cannot be conceptualised through the concept of the magic circle (Huizinga, 1938). After all, we were play-working at home in different cities and combined playing with waiting, making coffee or opening the door for the postman. Indeed, taking into account the virtual-physical reality as players, some game scholars have pointed out (e.g. Taylor, 2009) that games should be conceptualised as networks, made up of material, immaterial and discursive relationships. Instead of circles, games are magic networked assemblages (Lammes, 2008). Assemblages focus on the

instability of the spatial experience, and how different actants perform to shape the gameplay experience. This conceptualisation alters the way in which gameplay is not perceived as an isolated experience but a dynamic one, full of connections, errors and waiting time. And the rules that technically govern these connections are protocols issued by platforms.

As Galloway and Thacker (2007: 29) aptly describe, '[p]rotocol is twofold; it is both an apparatus that facilitates networks and a logic that governs how things are done within that apparatus'. The network that is facilitated is the Steam/*Civilization* integration, is made possible via exchanges between the game and the platform – visible and invisible for the player – or in the relatively easy to follow information on the Steam forum regarding how to use Steam voice chat while playing, or how to connect with friends. To make use of this integration, however, one must follow the protocol dictated by Steam, enacted through its Application Process Interface (API), through which it integrates functionalities such as voice chat. When we decide to play an online game, as with *Civilization*, the player is immediately confronted with the technical infrastructure needed to even set up a multiplayer game together. There is a logic to establishing these connections, and the seemingly easiest way to achieve this is to befriend each other on Steam, and then create a private game. In the Steam API, this process is called 'Matchmaking', which allows Steam users to find existing games or start a new game with a private or personal group. Matchmaking allows users to find existing games via server listings, or to start new games with a group through a lobby. For the protocol of this vignette, we made use of the friends' server list, which are game servers where friends are currently playing, in order to set up the multiplayer game (API Overview, 2017). In other words, in order to enjoy the potential advantages of talking to each other while playing the game, we are forced to make Steam an integrated part of our gameplay experience. The consequence of the affordance to talk to one another whilst playing created an unexpected temporal experience. What this example is illustrative of is another governing structure, where woman and machine hybridise and circles cannot be demarcated.

Vignette: Reflexive Play

Stephanie de Smale: I am just filling my time by drinking some more tea, I say to Sybille. To pass the time Sybille asks me what my avatar looks like. Zooming into the map (Fig. 5), almost from a third person perspective, I focus on my avatars and describe what they look like. My warriors have some sort of animal head as a helmet, and their skin tone is tinted. Sybille's are definitely dark-skinned, she tells me. We discuss the way in which race is embedded in the avatars of the game.

Sybille Lammes: I am waiting for Stephanie and having a good look at the screen. I wonder how to pronounce that guy's name; it sounds African to me. It also strikes me that he looks slightly like a figure from a comic book. Nose, ears and mouth are over-pronounced. I also wonder if I should call Mvemba my avatar. He is a figure who will disappear from the screen very soon, as I know from having played the single player game before. I will from then on look through his strategic eyes, playing the god trick. I stop reminiscing as it is my turn again and I have to play.

What becomes clear in this vignette is that technologically mediated communication with another human being provides the opportunity to reflect upon the rules and aesthetics of the game, or even express ethical or ideological judgements. The turn-based system is a contributing factor, as players are repeatedly disengaged from influencing the game, but can still interact with other players. One affordance that permeates through the turn-based genre and is left unexplored so far is what happens in between turns. A pocket emerges, especially in the online multiplayer mode we've played. This is afforded by the interaction between the game's affordance of "Turn Time" in relation to what we call 'technical time'. Technical time is the amount of time it takes for us to load the game, which was different for each player, as we were playing on different devices, with different hardware capabilities and internet connections. The game on different devices, with different hardware and different Internet connections. While de Smale created the game, Lammes has a faster processor in her hardware. So, while the game creator is still waiting for the game to begin, the game joiner is already exploring the game world. This echoes Jesper Juul's (2005) assertion of play time as the amount of time spent playing a game



Figure 5: 37:50 – De Smale is waiting.

in relation to the game state. However, the material dependency of our hardware affected our play time, since it took more time to load each new game state. 'Turn Time' is an option that dictates how much time a player has to complete their turn. As Juul (ibid.) states, the difference between a real-time game and turn-based game is that the amount of play time is not set in advance. Although in *Civilization* there is an option to limit the amount of play time allotted to each player, the standard setting for turn time in creating an online multiplayer game is unlimited. The consequence of having no timer is that the turn only ends when each player is finished with their turn. The effect of this decision is that an asymmetry in turns emerges. Because de Smale has a higher number of units who need to be assigned tasks, her turns take longer. However, this experience of waiting provided time for Lammes to reflect on her situation and gameplay, and discuss this with de Smale through voice chat. In other words, the social affordance of voice chat in combination with the time afforded by unlimited time-setting in the multiplayer session allowed us to foreground reflexive gameplay. Reflexivity is understood here as the methodological, theoretical and practical experiences discussed in the game and how we as researchers relate to our object of study: the game vis-à-vis ourselves as playing subjects (Humphreys, 2005).

One very apparent example of this is how we discussed the avatars that were assigned randomly. By describing what they looked like, it became clearer to us as player-researchers how they related to an exotic imagination of the orientalist Other. Lammes, for example, was struggling to identify with the (for her) exotic name of her avatar, but also noticed that he was made into a caricature, which she didn't find that funny in fact as it rang of colonial stereotypical depictions in, for example, comic books of the 'other' (Hunt, 2002; Sheyahshe, 2013). This brings us back again to one of the central stances of our article, which is that these ideological critiques are surely valid and relevant, but that we take a less universalistic and dichotomous approach that does not annul such readings but rather complicates them. As Carr (2006) previously noted, imperialistic and colonial overtones definitely frame the game, but still other and more subtle and hybridised processes happen when we

bring playing the game and reflecting on the game into the equation. As two Western women and interdisciplinary researchers, we, for example, had our own way of dealing with the combative spirit of the game. Precisely because we don't believe in making general statements about gender or whiteness vis-à-vis playing *CIV*, our focus on micro-interactions offers a situated standpoint in our game analysis. This also means that the player's own history is intertwined with the game's postcolonial narrative, a translation that in our view is crucial for understanding the postcolonial condition. As Lammes has previously written:

This fluidity of time may be linked to a postcolonial and contemporary disorientation of belonging. At a time where great groups of people from mainly poor countries have migrated to the land of former colonisers, history cannot be easily retold in a singular way. Civilization III shows this postcolonial bewilderment by making time anachronistic. It nevertheless counters this unsettled feeling by emphasizing the uniformity within borders and making space and nations unproblematic categories. It thus still strives to overcome this heterogeneity of civilization. Seen from this perspective space is represented as in accordance with dominant ideologies, whilst time has a more unstable character in the game and is played out differently. It is at this temporal level that culture becomes messier and paradoxical qualities of postcolonial cultures seep through. (2003: 127)

More importantly, describing this moment *in play* illustrates how waiting and talking as emergent affordances are a moment of enactment in which the ideological architecture and the player's situated history meet. Pragmatically, it emerged as the act of thinking through our decisions and assigned avatars. In these moments of waiting, very much a part of the act of being *in play*, our thoughts were not with strategies to progress in the game, thinking about winning, but rather on reflecting what our decisions meant in relation to the (re)production of postcolonial narratives. Sicart conceptualises this mode of player reflection as *ludic phronesis*: moral arguments that guides player decision-making and so inform the game experience

(Sicart, 2009). In this mode, we were able to reflect on the meaning of specific decisions, for instance when Lammes accidentally demolished a forest. Actively aware of how the decision conflicted with her own moral values, the time spent waiting for de Smale to finish her turn was spent in conversation on the way in which absent-mindedness can make you do things that go against your own moral compass.

Reflexivity is, in our view, even more of a challenge to draw out when we want to understand processual practices like play as we engage with an ongoing activity that leaves little room for taking a step back. As Bissell illustrates, dominant narratives (strategies) may be temporarily suspended through waiting, which allows for a different experience, in which a player can:

[. . .] to consider some of the ways in which all forms of transportational mobilities are constituted as much through the inactivity, the pauses and various suspensions experienced as part of the journey through time/space through the necessarily hybrid event of waiting. Considering how one comes to wait, endures waiting and experiences waiting as a corporeal phenomenon illuminates a conduit to explore and critique the notion of purposeful activity. (Bissell, 2007: 18)

Echoing Bissell, our shared experience of waiting helped us to overcome the dominant lack of reflection permitted during gameplay. In our above vignettes this is, for example, visible when we discuss the ways to set up collaborative play and how to make a decision to start playing. Yet it is not only the discussion of what needs to be done or what the other does on the spur of the moment that is foregrounded through a co-auto-ethnography. Collaborative play also made us think more about our own position, such as Lammes in the vignette below realising that she is less fanatical than de Smale in building a civilisation and the Lammes' disappointment when she discovered that she had destroyed a rainforest.

Reiterating the above, the networked relationship between the Steam platform and the game easily integrates social affordances such as voice chat. However, players

employ these tactics in order to traverse the strategies of the game space. Materially, these connections are visible through pop-ups, and via statistics tracked on the player's Steam account.

Conclusion

To summarise, this article was centred around a dual argument. First, we set out to illustrate how collaborative ethnography is a useful method to examine the situated experience of gameplay. Second, in presenting our empirical data we showed how postcolonial stories are constructed by players in the game space of *Civilization* by focusing on mapping a process of hybridisation. In building on, but adapting, de Certeau's differentiation between strategies and tactics, we argued that while the architecture of *Civilization VI* game space may be imbued with colonial ideologies, the playing subject may manipulate this environment by employing a combination of tactics and strategies, while when mapping the landscape, although players have little agency or power over the game's environment (except as testers of the game), their calculated actions are not powerless either. Indeed, it is by analysing the spatial stories of the player that this differentiation between ordering structures (mappings) and the subjective embodied experience of the player (touring) can be discerned. The potential of this hybridisation became particularly apparent during those moments of gamic action that we described in our vignettes: mapping and touring were no longer separate categories, while waiting and talking added a mode of reflection to playing the game. By analysing our dealings with (failing) technologies we also drew attention to the player as a very particular cyborg (Haraway, 2006, 2013), negotiating bodies, software, machines and other actors through playful interaction with, and interventions in, postcolonial ideologies.

Through the first vignette we examined the ideological overtones of the opening cutscene and the colonial ideologies of settling, exploitation and conquering that are presented through the dominant feature of mapping. In the second vignette, we further problematized the notion of the game as representational by illustrating the active and hybridised process of touring and mapping the game space and

showing that this is a processual practice in which dichotomies collapse and representational ideological reading loses its value. In the third vignette, we focused on the tactics we as players used during our gameplay session and how this extended the formal game space. In particular, we illustrated the importance of platforms such as Steam in nudging us to adopt specific translational practices of place-making. This vignette also drew attention to the importance of reflectivity in play. The social affordance of voice chat in congruence with the turn-based mechanic set by the players constructing the multiplayer game session accidentally afforded reflective waiting time, where we both were able to talk and think about their characters and actions, and what subjectivities this produced.

Our experiences of playing *Civilization VI* were a double-edged sword: they enabled reflective play but also raised ethical questions. On the positive side, in combination with the default setting of the turn timer in Multiplayer Mode, it allows pauses in gameplay, which stimulates playing subjects to think and reflect upon their behaviour. However, it is via offering these free services and stimulating players to create content and play together that spaces of racialised informational labour emerge (Nakamura, 2009). These spaces do not limit themselves to a critique of race on the representational plane, but as Nakamura's articulation of Asian worker players in *World of Warcraft* illustrates (2009), they emerge in the spatial practices of players in virtual worlds. So, while these researcher-players may have articulated and reflected on race from a theoretical point of view in a private multiplayer game, another view emerges in public online multiplayer games, where players are singled out, ridiculed and discriminated against by other players. In this article, we offer a perspective that situates how postcolonial narratives and postcolonial subjects are hybrids, visualised through the active and reflective process of constructing spatial narratives that focus on mapping and touring. In short, they are both an object to think with and a process to reflect on.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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