

Article

Divide and the Rules: A Study on the Colonial Inheritance of Digital Games

Prabhash Ranjan Tripathy 

School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi 110067, India;
prabhashtripathy@yahoo.com.au

Abstract: The current article is an exploration into the colonial inheritance of digital games. It argues that the pervasiveness and persistence of discursive practices, like imagining the play world as the otherworld and valuing the play world for its pedagogical potential, are tied to the colonial logic of exclusion, extraction and exploitation. Perpetuation of these colonial conceptualizations in the discourse surrounding digital games makes attempts at decolonization ineffective. The essay seeks to explicate the colonial in these discursive formulations.

Keywords: colonialism; videogames; hunting; OWW; gameworlds

1. Introduction

The scholarship on coloniality and videogames has been an attempt to show how the older forms of imperial oppression and discrimination work in and through the new media of digital games. There has been a surge in academic studies of orientalist themes and representation in game narratives, like *Resident Evil* (Capcom 1996), *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2007), *Uncharted* (Naughty Dog 2007), etc. Game mechanics of extremely popular games, like Sid Meier's *Civilization* (MicroProse 1991), *Colonization* (Firefly Studios 2008), *Age of Empires 3* (Microsoft 2005) and *Tropica* (PopTop 2001), have been scrutinized for their colonial logic.¹ In addition to in-depth examination of game representation and mechanics, academics in the discipline of game studies have also analysed the structural links between digital games and colonialism. Some have brought attention to the continual perpetuation of colonial logic via videogames; for instance, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter build upon the notion of empire proposed by Negri and Hart in 'Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games' (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2013) and propose that virtual games, given their (1) origin in the US military industrial complex; (2) their creation by the new intellectual labour of the hacker; (3) the accumulative tendencies of the gaming industry; and (4) the games themselves acting as incubators for advanced mechanisms of production and control, are to be considered as 'exemplary media of the empire' (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford (2013, pp. 29–30). Daniel Dooghan has shown how widely popular games like *Minecraft* rehearse and justify neocolonial practices of conquest and extraction by making them rewarding and fun. Games act as training rooms for crafting the docile and replaceable neoliberal worker who understands the 'futility of resistance' (Dooghan 2016, pp. 82–83). More recently, R.L. Van der Merwe has introduced the theory of 'imperial play' to demonstrate how colonial attitudes perpetuate via 'procedural logic of mastery' and the mantra of 'beating the game' at various levels of mainstream gaming, i.e., at the level of narrative, in-game action and game development (van der Merwe 2021, p. 10). These studies have brought significant insight into how colonialism operates through digital games. Since these works study the relationship between the ludic and colonialism within a singular and universalist 'history of the medium (videogames)', when treated as frameworks for individual game analysis, they become detrimental to postcolonial game studies by limiting it to a repeated and routine analysis of colonial themes and



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mechanics in digital games. Soraya Murray has warned against such endless pursuit to reveal colonialism in each and every game, as it might reduce postcolonial game studies to a “formulaic performance of diversity work”, by which she means, “the function of enacting a prescribed role within the university (*or discipline*), 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 (*or discipline, case in point games studies*) may then say it has ‘dealt’ with diversity.” (Murray 2018, pp. 12–13). It is paramount for postcolonial game studies to resist the disciplinary demand of remaining within the history of the medium and embrace a pluralistic idea of videogame histories, histories that might be messy and intertwined with ludic forms other than videogames, like toys, sports, board games, local games² and also with other media forms, like cinema and television (Keogh 2014). In a nutshell, postcolonial game studies must become anti-game studies. Sabine Harrer is not wrong in implicating game studies research as an active participant of what she calls the ‘casual empire’. She argues that games research, alongside game play and game design, are responsible for the pervasiveness of colonial themes and mechanics in digital games; however, she limits her accusation to the formalist strand of games studies (Harrer 2018). Yet, in its present state, postcolonial games studies research, apart from doing diversity work for the discipline, also carries the additional burden of arbitrating between the alleged redemptive qualities of play and the obvious ties between games and colonialism. As a result, sharp critiques emerging from the field are often followed by conclusions that perform a tepid politics of hope by singling out a few game designers and specific games or by penning an apology for offering a critique. In doing so, postcolonial games studies also become an extension of what Harrer has called casual academia. That said, the burden to arbitrate has also produced interesting insights as to how the act of playing games can subvert and halt the progress of the global empire. Souvik Mukherjee, in ‘Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back’ (Mukherjee 2017), identifies videogames as the newest sites for postcolonial critique and also as sites to ‘play back’ against the empire of global capitalism Mukherjee (2017). He argues that the possibility of playing alternate histories in videogames provides opportunities for both propagation and criticism of the colonial logic, given that the colonial logic provides the postcolonial subject an opportunity to break the boundaries between the colonizer and colonized. Similarly, Christopher B Patterson sees videogames as part of and as a differing iteration of what he calls the ‘open world empire’ of information technology (IT), where freedom is equated with openness, experimentation and increasing transparency, rather than ownership or rights conferred by the state. He suggests, ‘the freedom in open world videogames alludes to perverse, erotic forms of play’ which have the potential to counteract neoliberal notions of self-optimization; open world videogames have the potential ‘of transforming the well adjusted into the maladjusted.’ (Patterson 2020, pp. 4–5).

The current article is informed by, and shares the concerns of, the stated literature and, in that, it is also an investigation of the relationship between coloniality and videogames. However, it distances itself from ascribing any radical potential to ‘playing back’ as a mere style of play; this because, upon considering the pervasiveness of the colonial logic of extraction and exploitation in the mechanics, narrative, development (hardware and software), history, architecture and infrastructure of videogames, it seems unfair to put the onus of playing back on the player. Moreover, ‘playing back’, when conceived as a style, is reduced to another rehearsal of the libertarian conceit of ‘beating the game’ and ‘gaming the system’ and is bereft of the decolonial politics to oust, change, reclaim or/and reimagine the game (system). That said, in the uncomfortable resolution of the structure–agency problem offered by the idea of playing back, one can still recognize and sympathise with the enormous challenge that game studies scholars are faced with, which is to theorise a mode to decolonise games. This has been a problem that predates the establishment of game studies. Scholars from the disciplines of sociology, anthropology and history working at the intersections of the ludic and colonization have likewise encountered and unsuccessfully grappled with this dilemma. For example, Arjun Appadurai in ‘Playing

with Modernity: The decolonization of Indian cricket' finds the successful indigenization and decolonization of Indian cricket puzzling, given that cricket and all rule-governed competitive sport are a 'hard cultural form that changes those who are socialized into it more readily than it is itself changed' (Appadurai 1996, p. 90) and wherefore should resist all attempts of indigenization and decolonization. Interestingly, while the essay begins with the assumption that cricket has been decolonized in India, it concludes by reintroducing the problem of decolonizing the hard cultural form of a game. The essay's conclusion, by posing questions such as whether the 'de-Victorianization' of sports and adoption of a more commercially oriented, aggressive form of play should be considered the decolonization or the vernacularisation of cricket or whether this should be considered a mere transition from liberal values to neoliberal values, provokes and invites the reader to rethink decolonization of games. This brings to attention that the game (as a system) offers a unique set of challenges to attempts at decolonization and vernacularisation. More than often, the ludic practices that seem to be indigenous are not active acts of decolonization but ludic expressions that arise from widespread poverty and lack of resources, e.g., children playing cricket in a narrow lane with a stick for a bat indicates the lack of equipment and playgrounds rather than an indigenous decolonial variation of cricket and should not be celebrated as such. The challenge to decolonize games has become more pressing and urgent in the context of digital games, especially due to the exponential and unprecedented increase in the numbers of both games and players and the way games are becoming a part of everyday.

My attempt in this article is not so much to suggest ways to decolonize games but to explicate the discursive conditions that enable games to resist attempts of decolonization. At present, the infinite world-making capacity of digital games is inseparably bound to standardised modes of immersion and interaction which are modelled on colonial/neocolonial logic and practices. World making in digital games, by concentrating on the designing, detailing, and animating of a space while retaining colonial and neo-colonial modes of interaction and immersion, stands in direct opposition to decolonial world making, which emphasizes the constitution and excavation of pluralistic and diverse ways of engaging with (interacting) and living (immersing) in the world. Digital games, with their countless worlds and limited modes of interaction and immersion, perpetuate the singular reality of what John Law has termed the doctrine of OWW (one world world) (Law 2015).

I argue that the established and taken-for-granted conceptualizations of (1) play as otherworld, (2) world of play as temporarily inhabitable as opposed to the permanently habitable real and (3) world of play as pedagogical, act as colonial technologies of exclusion and extraction. This I call the colonial inheritance of digital games, which influences the concepts central to digital games, i.e., world making, interaction and immersion. In order to explore this inheritance, the article engages with key western philosophers of games and play and draws parallels between digital games and non-digital ludic forms, like colonial hunting and sports. The first section explores the ways by which conceptualization of play as otherworld enables and legitimizes playing the world of the Other. I seek to demonstrate how games worked as technologies of classifying people into player–non player (NPC) and as playmates and playthings. The second investigates how the colonial logic of classification operates through games; here, I discuss player as a status and argue that the status of a player is exclusively available to the rational liberal subject due to his perceived capacity to form an extractivist–pedagogical relationship with the world of play (think rational recreation). The third and final section discusses another essential criterion for being a player, i.e., the capacity to return to a real. I argue that this real is constituted of private property. The conclusion, as usual, is reserved for hope.

2. Divided and Undivided Worlds

Both in the popular imagination and scholarly discourse, the play world is perceived as the 'otherworld.' In a limited sense, the usual uproar amongst sports fan to 'keep politics out of sport/play/game' replicates Plato's call to keep 'poetry out of the republic'. Game,

as a different world, continues to inform the contemporary discussions around digital games. Terms like gameworlds, virtual worlds, cyberworlds, synthetic worlds, etc., are deployed regularly in the study of digital games³; in addition, concepts such as Huizinga's 'Magic Circle' alongside Roger Caillois's typology of games enjoy significant currency in digital games research. In this section, I seek to examine the political stakes that entail from the pervasive presumption of games as the otherworld. I ask if the otherworldliness of games is tied to the idea of the colony as the otherworld and to what extent does the view of *game as otherworld* justify *playing (with) the world of the Other*.

2.1. Play as Otherworld and World of Other as Play

The tendency to establish games/play as distinct from and supplementary, complimentary or subordinate to the real/ordinary/serious/everyday/real world can be observed in the canonical literature on play and games. A complete rehearsal of this literature is outside the scope of the essay, but as a way of example, a select few works can be recounted. Johan Huizinga, in his seminal work *Homo Ludens*, identifies play as distinct from the real because it represents a primordial force from which all culture and civilization (read real) emanates (Huizinga 1950). Bernard Herbert Suits argues that while the play world and the world of work coexist in the present society, technological advancement would create a utopic future of total play (Suits 1978). Eugen Fink takes the middle path and views play world as an 'oasis of happiness', a break from the tiring everyday pursuit (Fink 2016). I argue, that irrespective of the reasons, a theorisation of play world as distinct and in a differential relationship to the real, is privy to the colonial logic mainly because such a conceptualization simultaneously manufactures the idea of a fractured or *divided world* which is fundamental to the practice of colonial world making.

Colonial world making is based upon establishing a singular hierarchical world order which involves discovery, assessment and classification of other world (views) as primitive, inferior, irrational and infantile and hence open to subjugation, exploitation, dispossession and elimination. In this scheme, the question as to whether a world is divided or undivided (between real and play), functions as a criterion to judge and classify cultures as civilized or primitive. Consider Huizinga's application of his theory of play to understand the primitive society:

By considering the whole sphere of so-called primitive culture as a play-sphere we pave the way to a more direct and more general understanding of its peculiarities than any meticulous psychological or sociological analysis would allow. . . the savage knows nothing of the conceptual distinctions between "being" and "playing"; he knows nothing of "identity"/"image" or "symbol". (Huizinga 1950, pp. 25–26)

Here, one can observe the colonial aspect of the dual-world theory as it enables Huizinga to (1) identify the undivided world of the savage as primitive and a total play world; and (2) to ascribe values of civilization, progress and playfulness to the divided world and primitiveness, savagery, confusion and irrationality to the undivided world. This colonial aspect of dual-world theory becomes more evident in the theorization of another canonical play theorist Roger Caillois, who introduces the notion of *paideia* and *ludus*, and argues that while *paideia* (or play) can be found in all cultures, it in itself does not have any civilizing quality. It is only when *Paideia* is transformed or disciplined into *ludus*, which he defines as a "taste for gratuitous difficulty," that it begins to possess a civilizing quality. Further he elaborates that the path from *paideia* to *ludus* is not the "only conceivable metamorphosis"; cultures that are not driven by the "spirit of enterprise and need for progress" might not develop pure and excellent games as those in the Western civilization but pave a different destiny for themselves as the failed civilization of China had (Caillois 1961, pp. 27–35). Huizinga's and Caillois's ludic theories have been critiqued for perpetuating and normalizing the orientalist distinction of the civilized West and the primitive East by Jacques Ehrmann et al. (1968) and more recently by Tara Finkle (2019). However, the conceptualizing of game as otherworld is not restricted to the works of

the play theorists, it rather predates them and has played an active role in the process of colonization.

I propose that theorization play/game as otherworld is a central feature of the OWW due to the following reasons. First, it generates a stable idea of the 'real' that is available only to the divided world of the West/North. A 'real' that predicates the 'West's' ability to arrogate to itself the right to be "the world" and to relegate all other worlds to its rules, to a state of subordination or to nonexistence. It is thus an imperialist, colonial notion (Escobar 2020, pp. 14–15). The West's right to be "the world" is contingent on imagining itself as divided. Second, characterizing the world of the other as undivided implies that it is incapable of producing pleasure via play and progress via work and hence is a realm of belief and superstition and devoid of scientific rationality and incapable of progress. The two reasons stated above resonate in the writings of colonial administrators and school masters, which are full of rants about the native's inability to work (the myth of the lazy native) and to play. As an example, when a colonial missionary/schoolmaster named Tyndale-Biscoe tried to introduce football to an upper caste school in Kashmir, the children would not touch the ball as it was made of leather (an untouchable object for the upper caste), which led the school master to punish the unruly and un-ludic students via cold public baths and beatings (Sen 2015, pp. 64–66).⁴ Third and finally, play/game as otherworld establishes the metropole and acquired land as the 'real world' and the rest as the play world. The division between the play world and the real world helps justify acts of extreme violence, plunder and exploitation of the other worlds.

Considering the stated reasons, it can be argued that the 4X games (eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate), a subgenre of digital strategy games like Civilization (MicroProse 1991) or Colonization (Firefly Studios 2008), which are often critiqued for gamifying the colonial logic, in fact explicate that the 4X logic can only play out in a game or by perceiving a space as a game. *4X logic is not merely imposed on a game, rather it is conceivable only within a game.*

2.2. Playing the World of the Other

Perhaps this is the reason why colonization was played out like a game or why Kipling called it 'the great game'. Souvik Mukherjee observes that the ludic has been a longstanding metaphor for colonial expansion (Mukherjee 2017). Similarly, Siddhartha Chakraborti, in his study of representation of India in digital games, observes that India is still imagined as an exotic, unruly, irrational land in want of imperial intervention. In such games, the gamer plays the role of the colonial adventurer, whose job is to tame the irrational and magical space. For Chakraborti, such representations in digital games are attempts to justify western intervention in the East (Chakraborti 2015). This imagination of the colony as a game can be found in the innumerable hunting narratives produced by colonial hunters or sportsmen as they liked being called. The hunting narratives or *Shikar* books contain lengthy and detailed descriptions of the colony in terms of the 'game' that it offered. These descriptions were often aimed at luring new recruits from the metropole, by presenting the colony as an unruly world of play. It is important to note that sportsmanship constituted a core activity of colonial administration, and much time and resources were spent on killing beasts of prey (vermin), protecting beasts of compassion (game) and exploiting beasts of burden, all in the name of administration (MacKenzie 1988; Shresth 2009). This whole destructive process was based on the principle of subduing the barbaric forces of nature and preserving the compassionate forces of nature. The colony was seen as overrun with barbaric forces, where nature goes wild. For example, A.I.R Glasfurd in his account *Musings of an Old Shikari: Reflection of Life and Sport in Jungle India* (Glasfurd 1928), recalls his impressions of India from an early hunting trip, "all was strange, outstanding, puzzlingly delightful or frankly beastly." Henry Shakespear, in the preface to his shikar memoir *The Wild Sports of India* (Shakespear 1862), recommends hunting/sportsmanship as indispensable for colonial administration. He goes as far as to suggest that had the East Indian army practiced sportsmanship on a regular basis, the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857

could have been efficiently curbed, with no loss of British life. In the opening chapter of the same text, he appeals to the English parent to encourage sportsmanship in their boys and not deprive them from becoming “shikaris or hunters of large game of India’s magnificent forests” as “this will keep them fit for their duties as soldiers, both in body and inclination” and “excitement they (young boys) must have or die.” It is not surprising that the ‘excitement process’ identified by Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning as a parallel phenomenon to the civilizing process (Elias and Dunning 1986) finds a direct expression in a colonial hunter’s memoir. The colony (as a world of play) was conceived as a source of excitement, as is evident in the creative wording of the shikar book titles, *Jungle India* or *Wild Sports of India*, which were diligently designed to cater to the imperial imagination on multiple levels—India as a jungle which can be played, and the colonization of India in itself a wild sport. The sport of taming the total play world of the colony and establishing ludus proper (Caillois terminology) is to be identified as an essential part of the civilizing mission or colonial project.

In the colony, the divided world of play and real was exclusively available to the colonizer but only as a Western, liberal, capitalist subject. Subsequently, the burden that the civilizing mission placed on the colonial administrator was to travel between two worlds, to go to the world of the Other but to never ‘go native.’ The native, on the other hand, ‘being unable to distinguish between being and playing’ (as per Huizinga), unknowingly inhabited its barbaric, nature-driven play world and displayed no will to play with it or to change it (divide it). The native, in being the native of the play world, is similar to the NPC (non-player character) one finds in digital games. Souvik Mukherjee (2016), Tara Fickle (2019) and R. L. van der Merwe (2021) have all drawn such an analogy; however, they liken the passivity of the NPC⁵ with that of the subaltern. I study the NPC by looking at player and non-player as statuses. The native and the NPC are similar in that both inhabit the play world but are not identified as players. The colonial sportsmen distinguished themselves from native hunters on the following grounds: first, the native hunter lacked the spirit of sportsmanship (a code of conduct) and second, while the native inhabits the play world and engages in similar activities as the sportsman, he/she does so without identifying it as a play world. The native and the NPC are both denied the status of a player due to their supposed inability to identify a gameworld as a game world and to follow a set of unwritten rules.

‘Sportsmanship’ rationalized the act of hunting; it gave a purpose other than sustenance. Unlike the native hunter, a successful hunt for the colonial hunter was determined not by the death of the animal but by achieving that end without violating any of the principles or rules of the code of conduct (Shresth 2009). The development of the ‘sporting code’ in 15th century Europe was targeted at distinguishing the hunt of aristocracy from sustenance hunting of the lower classes, and in this regard the sporting code added a moral and symbolic value to the aristocratic hunt (MacKenzie 1988, pp. 15–16). According to Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, the sportization of ludic practices, which involved standardization of rules and tempering of violence in pastimes, were integral to the civilizing process. Taking the example of fox hunting in England, Elias argues that sportization of hunting via rules and code of conduct marked a change in the location of pleasure. “The ultimate killing of the fox—the triumph of victory—still remained the climax of the hunt. But it was no longer by itself the main source of pleasure. That function had shifted to the hunting of the animal, to the pursuit” (Elias and Dunning 1986, pp. 166–67). The sustenance hunting of the local *shikari*, apart from being perceived as violent and uncivilized was also incomprehensible to the colonizer because on the one hand sustenance hunting was not play as it did not seek prolongment of pleasure by locating it in the pursuit, but neither was it work as it did not change the world. Eventually, sustenance hunting was banned (in both the metropole and the colony) because it was a claim on the resources of the land.

Colonial world making depends on segregation, dehumanization and dispossession of the local population, and the figuration of the colony as a play world facilitates this goal by classifying people into the category of playmates and playthings. The inhabitants of the

colony (play world) were categorized as playthings through the process of dehumanization of their knowledge systems and ways of life. For instance, the skills of the native hunter, i.e., her tracking abilities and sharp eyesight, were credited to her animalistic instincts rather than as skills that belong to a different knowledge system. However, it is crucial to note that the native hunter/savage, despite of not being a player, played a crucial role in the construction of the play world. The native hunter tracked the animal, carried the guns, set the camps and made other arrangements for the grand ritual of colonial hunting; however, he was deprived from shooting the animal: the final shot was reserved for the *Sahib*. Thus, the native hunter's abilities found a new subordinate role in the codified game of hunting. A role designed to strip her from her prey or game, her forests and her identity of a *Shikari*⁶. As a plaything, the Other populated the magic circle, at times got accidentally shot and at others facilitated play sometimes by literally forming the circumference of the magic circle. For example, in the colonial sport of 'pig sticking,' the role of the native beaters was to drive the boar out of the bushes and (magic) encircle it in the designated open field so that the colonial sportsmen mounted on their horses could take turns and drive spears into the boar (Shresth 2009). The contemporary counterparts of the beaters are the workers who maintain the cricket pitch or the football field, or the thousands of migrant labourers who die making a football world cup possible or the cheap labour extracted from the Global South to produce gaming consoles.

While the construction and maintenance of the magic circle depends on the labour and existence of the native, it can also act to imprison them. In the prison of the magic circle, the native is instructed or lured to play, only to be measured and racialized. John Hoberman, in his book *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and Dehumanization of Sports* (Hoberman 1992), explains how sports acts as a prison-lab. He explains how sports in the colony were indispensable to the racial medical discourse; the native's sprints and jumps and swims were carefully measured and compared to create racial profiles (Hoberman 1992, pp. 55–56). Similarly, Gyan Prakash's analysis of 'museum gymnastikk sports' (Museum Gymnastic Sports) confirms the existence of a similar usage of the magic circle in colonial India. Prakash explains how natives were lured into the museum by creating a festival-like environment only for anthropometrical measurements (Prakash 1999, pp. 45–46). Even today, the athlete's body is most closely monitored for both prevention and experimentation of PEDs (performance enhancing drugs). The usage of otherworld of play as prison-lab continues in digital games, as is evident in the ongoing extraction of game data. Each act of play is transformed into data and helps in profiling, commonly referred to as 'game analytics' or 'game metrics' (Canossa 2014). One of the NSA documents revealed by Edward Snowden in 2013 was titled *Games: A Look at Emerging Trends, Uses, Threats, and Opportunities in Influence Activities* (Science Applications International Corporation 2007). It advocated for a constant surveillance of the virtual environments for potential terrorist activities and, on the positive side, recommended that the state should use the medium for propaganda and education of people. Similarly, in-game targeted advertisement and the psychological manipulation of gamer/users has been discussed elaborately by Mark Andrejevic (2007). In discussing issues of digital privacy and illegal data mining, it is important to not lose sight of the fact that the play world/colony was the first such data mine, where privacy could be violated at will in the name of scientific pursuit. The colony after all provided enough "'elbow room' for experimentation (and extraction) unavailable in Europe" (Prakash 1999, p. 46).

This brings us to the question of what differentiated the inhabitant of a divided world from the inhabitant of the undivided world. I suggest it was the player/colonizer's capacity to form a pedagogical relationship with the otherworld of play and colony. For instance, the colonial hunter could learn the values of fair play and obedience and bring back trophies and stories from the play world; he could also engage with and inform the disciplines of natural sciences, geography and colonial administration. The next section discusses how the status of a player is conferred upon those who are perceived to possess the ability to learn/extract knowledge from the otherworld of play.

3. Play World and Pedagogy of Cruelty

In light of the observations made earlier in the article regarding the native hunter and the colonial hunter, it can be said that games can teach everything except how to be a player. The question that concerns this section is the following: who is identified as a player in the internally divided OWW? As I have discussed earlier, in the discriminatory dual-world schema, the ability to follow rules, to play well and to inhabit the play world do not qualify someone as a player. I argue that the status of a player is reserved for those who can learn from the gameworld/play world, where the idea of learning is based on extractivism and exclusionism akin to what feminist decolonial anthropologist Rita Laura Segato in her *A Manifesto in Four Themes* has called the pedagogy of cruelty:

As a practice of expropriating jouissance made to serve appropriative greed. . . I use the phrase pedagogy of cruelty to name all the acts and practices that teach, accustom, and program subjects to turn forms of life into things. (Segato and McGlazer 2018, p. 202)

The classificatory practice of turning playmates into playthings is intimately related to the manner in which the play world is characterized in the divided world. Within the dual-world framework, the play world is valued only for its pedagogical potential, i.e., as a training ground for honing skills, values and for attaining moral, physical and psychological health or wellbeing. This is evident from the authoritative theoretical works on play and games and from the current fascination with videogames as a teaching tool.

3.1. Play and Pedagogy

Brian Sutton Smith, in his authoritative study of the Western discourse on play, identifies seven competing rhetorics (rhetoric of play as progress, as fate, as power, as identity, as the imaginary, of the self and rhetoric of play as frivolous) and argues that the ambiguity surrounding the concept of play results from this inter-rhetoric competition for hegemony (Sutton-Smith 2009). The discussions and nuances of this encyclopaedic text cannot be summarized here; however, for the purposes of the current argument, I would like to delineate a few points made by Prof. Smith regarding the Western discourse on play. First, pedagogical potential is identified as *Rhetoric of Play as Progress*—the most dominant rhetoric in the discourse. Second, he posits that all the six rhetorics can be read as a rebuttal of *The Rhetoric of Play as Frivolous*. I propose that five out of seven rhetorics proposed by Prof. Smith, including (1) *the rhetoric of play as progress* or a site for child development, growth and learning; (2) *the rhetoric of play as identity* or a site to form social norms and individual virtues; (3) *the rhetoric of play as power* or play as a site to learn the operation of violence and power; (4) *the rhetoric of the self* or a site to discover and articulate the self; and (5) *the rhetoric of self as imaginary* or play as a site to imagine, fantasize and create, are premised on forming a pedagogical relationship with the play world and hence can be collapsed into a single rhetoric namely, 'rhetoric of play as pedagogical'. This leaves us with two rhetorics that govern the Western discourse on play: the rhetoric of play as frivolous and the rhetoric of play as pedagogical. Based on this derivation, it can be argued that in the fractiverse of the West, once play is conceptualized as a different realm the choice, the question is not whether to consider the play world as frivolous or as a training ground but rather to give a utilitarian purpose to the frivolous. The non-seriousness attached to the play world is what makes it apt for pedagogy. However, the non-seriousness or silliness associated with the play world also makes it dangerous and therefore warranting taming via rationalization and monitoring.

Videogames as the newest play worlds have also attracted a great deal of interest because of their perceived pedagogical potential, one of the earliest expressions of which can be found in G.H. Ball's 1978 article. It argued that playing videogames increased spatial abilities, numerical concepts and reading comprehension amongst children (Ball 1978). Many other studies in the following decades of 1980–1990s concluded that videogames increase sensor motor abilities, visual capacities, problem solving skills, strategic thinking,

reflexes and responses.⁷ More recently, Marc Prensky has argued that videogames can be combined with a variety of educational content and, due to their goal-oriented and reward-based structures, can produce better results than traditional processes and methods of learning (Prensky 2001, pp. 145–47). James Paul Gee likewise argues that digital games improve cognitive capacities as they provide experience-based learning and encourage problem solving (Gee 2003, p. 45). These studies, often accompanied by warnings—“We can learn evil things as easily as we can learn moral ones”—videogames are seen as sites that foster violent, sexist and addictive behaviour. Considering that games are open to all forms of pedagogy and ideological propaganda, they do not mark an end to the process of rationalization and surveillance of the ludic. For the divided world, taming of play is a persistent and an ongoing project. The NSA document discussed earlier proclaims that “games, by nature are learning experiences”, as they provide opportunities for “active” and “passive” learning and “can captivate and engage target audience, and encourage” a return to “learning and conditioning.” However, given these qualities, games can just as well be used for terrorist pedagogy, orientation and recruitment and therefore must be subjected to acute monitoring, lest digital games create terrorists or other deviant, undesirable subjects.

3.2. *Player as a Status*

Play theorists have long imagined play as a creative/destructive natural force. The theorists have either celebrated the force as naturally serving humankind or have taken a more sceptical stance towards the natural and identified it as something in need of taming and supervision. If Huizinga, Fink and Schiller have shown extraordinary faith in the autopoietic capacities of play, Plato, Caillois and others have held that play is frugal only when supervised and controlled. Both groups have viewed play instrumentally and identified the value of play in its pedagogical potential. However, in the divided world, free play is perceived as a threat, and this generates anxiety. This is because, in its free state, play can produce deviant subjectivities, alternate knowledge systems, different bodies and even create novel institutions (as Huizinga would argue). As noted earlier, while discussing Roger Caillois’s thesis, the desire to tame, contain and direct play is a sign of civilization and progress in the divided world. In this sense, games represent a successful taming of the ludic, since play’s pedagogical potential becomes available for ideological propaganda and curricular control in games. For the same reason, games are closely guarded and thoroughly monitored. It is for this that, while Plato outrightly bans the poets from the republic due to the deceiving nature of their unfettered play, he takes a keen interest in the pedagogical potential of games, especially their regulation and maintenance. He goes as far as recommending the harshest punishment for anyone who changes the rules of games because such a change might lead to the creation of a different creature that might pose a threat to the republic. As a response to this threat, the divided world devises technologies of guarding and surveillance, like the imposition of a set of unwritten rules or moral codes of conduct over the game, as noted earlier in the case of ‘sportsmanship’, which makes the status of the player both exclusive and elusive. Thus, the practices of guarding and surveilling the world of play assist in gatekeeping, i.e., they keep out pedagogies and parental practices that form deviant subjects and also exclude and subordinate those identified as deviant.

Therefore, the opportunity to form a pedagogical relationship with the world of play is/was reserved for the inhabitants of the divided world; the mere entry or participation of the irrational or savage into the game was not indicative of him being recognized as a player or as capable of learning from the world of play. Learning morality from the world of play was contingent on the subject being always already moral; this resonates with the contradiction found in the colonial pedagogy where the native could be educated but only to an extent due to her alleged inadequate moral disposition. To take an instance, the British protested against the Ilbert Bill of 1883, which sought to allow senior Indian magistrates (educated in the British system) to precede over cases involving British subjects, by pointing towards moral shortcomings of the most senior native officials (Sinha 1995,

p. 43). The contradiction becomes evident in the dual role of sports in the imperial project. In the Victorian public school system of the metropole, they were to cater to the imperial ambitions of Britain by instilling the 'games ethic' in the future imperial officers. As J.A. Mangan has observed:

so-called 'games ethic' held pride of place in the pedagogical priorities of the period public school. And by means of this ethic the public schoolboy supposedly learnt inter alia the basic tools of imperial command: courage, endurance, assertion, control and self-control. . . It was widely believed, of course, that its inculcation promoted not simply initiative and self-reliance but also loyalty and obedience. (Mangan 1998, p. 18)

In contrast, in the colony, sports were introduced as a corrective to overcome the moral and physical shortcomings of the native. The native was thought of as incapable of learning self-assertion or how to command or lead or be self-reliant but could maybe learn obedience and loyalty. Sports were prescribed to the native as a therapy, that is, not as place to learn but as a place to unlearn. Unlike the colonial hunters who could perceive the hog as a worthy foe and transform the act of killing into a learning experience or the colonial administrators who could learn ways of ruling the colonies by playing rugby and cricket, the native could only remedy his supposed moral infirmities. In the colony, access to sports did not mean access to sportsmanship or status of a player. Postcolonial sports historians have argued that (1) the native's access to and participation in colonial sports enabled him/her to form indigenous variations of the game and that (2) sports have acted as sites of resistance; defeating the colonizer at their own game of cricket was a celebratory occasion: the 2001 Bollywood film *'Lagaan'* captures this sentiment accurately. I argue that these actions are important as may be to nationalist imaginations; they do not pose any ideological challenge to the colonizer and his divided world order because it views all indigenous changes made to a game as perversions and further proof of the unsportsmanlike disposition of the native, and it ascribes the victories of the native to his/her brute constitution rather than as evidence of her/his superiority or equality. The game could either help the native unlearn his/her savagery or expose his/her savagery. The native could only prove his savagery in both winning and losing a game. 'The heads I'm civilized, tails you're a savage' situation persists in digital gaming communities, where the extraordinary gameplay of the Asian gamers is either attributed to their nimble fingers (biological advantage) or addictive (moral inadequacy) gaming practices.

One of the many reasons, including lack of resources and access, that prevented the native from becoming a sportsman and what prevents the marginalized from becoming gamers is what Bernard Herbert Suits has called the "lusory attitude". It is presented as the defining feature of a 'player' who is distinguished from trifiers, cheats and spoilsports on the grounds "that trifiers recognize rules but not goals, cheats recognize goals but not rules, players recognize both rules and goals, and spoilsports recognize neither rules nor goals" (Suits 1978, p. 47). From this definition, it can be deduced that possession of a lusory attitude is dependent upon the subject's capacity to recognize and provide consent to the rules and goals of a game. Uday S. Mehta, in his discussion of Lockean liberalism, observes "consent as a fundamental ground for providing legitimacy to political authority", which in turn "requires acting in view of certain constraints, that can be designated by the law of nature" and "to know these laws one needs reason", and those "who permanently (madmen and idiots) or temporarily (children) cannot exercise reason', are therefore unable to give consent and 'can be ruled without their consent'" (Mehta 1999, pp. 59–68). The same white, liberal, capitalist, neurotypical logic that excludes the child, the lunatic and the native from participating in political constituency also excludes them from games. An irrational subject lacks the capacity to recognize and consent to the rules and goals of a game; hence, deprived of the status of a player, at best could be a trifler, a cheat or a spoilsport.

3.3. Pre-Rational Play

Both Brian Sutton Smith and Mihai I. Spariosu, in their analysis of the play concept in Western scientific and philosophical traditions or the OWW perspective, observes the existence of two opposing notions of play: the archaic and the modern or the rational and the pre-rational. Mihai Spariosu explains that the historical feud between different and often differing versions of these two forms of play concepts has led to a subordination of all play concepts in Western thought to a power principle; that is, Western thought primarily understands and presents play in terms of its relationship to power (Spariosu 1989, pp. 13–14). While both scholars do not explore the colonial implications of this figuration of the play concept, the observations in themselves are valuable as a starting point. I would argue that the ‘savage’s play’, or athletic feats, though appreciated and recorded, were always articulated in terms of pre-rational play or as biological exhibitions. The playing was perceived as primitive and violent because it was played with excessive seriousness, which was evidence of not being able to identify a game as a mere game. The pre-rational play in the colony becomes both an object of admiration and a marker of civilizational infantilism.

Identifying the pre-rational in the play of non-Western players continues in 21st century. Players are accused of violating the ‘the spirit of the game’ via their behaviour or their illegal styles. In the context of cricket, the aggressive appealing by Indian or Pakistani players, the act of *Mankadding*⁸, ball tampering, etc., are racialized and presented as against the ‘spirit of cricket’ (Williams 2003). In digital games, the colonial discourse on exotic physiology and its biological advantages finds expression in notions like ‘Asian hands’ (the alleged advantage Asian gamers have due to their small hands and quick reflexes) or, as Steve Choe and Se Yong Kim have argued in their discussion of the unfortunate death of a Taiwanese gamer, which was covered by the Western media in terms of the obsessive, addictive, unbalanced play of the Asian against the balanced gameplay of the Western gamer (Choe and Young 2015, p. 114). Analysis of style is often racialized. For example, the Sri Lankan cricketing legend Muttiah Muralitharan’s bowling action was accused of being illegal; he was called a ‘chucker’ by then Australian Prime Minister John Howard. Subsequently, his bowling action was scrutinized by the International Cricket Council twice, both of which he passed. While certain styles are perceived as cheating, others, by contrast, might be praised and celebrated for their display of barbarity, like the Mexican style of boxing which is respected for its forward moving aggressive play and its willingness to take damage.

The capacity to form a pedagogical relationship to play is upon being rational enough to consent to the artificial rules of the game and morally predisposed to access the code of conduct, both essential to navigate the world of play and resist the temptations of the play world. Thomas Hobbes feared for the individuals who were sent to the colonies (play world): unable to resist the temptations, they might go native like Conrad’s Kurtz would. One way to prevent such an outcome was to equip the rational player/colonizer with a code of conduct and set of rules, so that he could learn, extract, exploit, kill and return. The next section argues that the divided world expects the player to return to the real world, where the real is tied to the liberal notion of private property.

4. Home Coming

The imperial OWW view assumes a singular reality: it imagines the world as a container which holds all the peoples and resources; differences amongst people are understood in terms of culture as in cultural differences and not in terms of different reals. Given the belief that there is a common real, every other notion of real is classified as a belief, which can then be either false or false (Law 2015). I argue that being a player, a sportsman or a gamer is contingent upon returning to the singular reality of the OWW. This section discusses how the idea of real (as a point of return) is grounded in enlightenment liberal rights/responsibility formulations of freedom. The dual world play theorists, unanimously view the play world as free⁹; however, it is difficult to understand this position in the

context of games, given the restraints that the game imposes on the player. How can play be free when it is bound by rules?

Eugen Fink resolves this dilemma by suggesting that freedom in play is to be understood as *freedom from the real* rather than as *freedom itself*. He argues that play “liberates one from the work of freedom and restores to us a freedom from responsibility, which we experience with pleasure”. Thus, freedom is bound to labour and is associated with a historical understanding of responsibility, “a set of (free) choices that form an entire way of life”, “a way of life which was freely brought about” and “cannot be relinquished”; “we cannot rid ourselves of the burden of responsibility or skip over our deed but in the non-actual way in play” (Fink 2016, pp. 207–8). The way of life constructed via free, historical choices and work of freedom has in mind the Western enlightenment subject who inhabits a linear temporality, where free choices and work of freedom progressively add up towards a future of reason, freedom and equality. The point that Fink establishes is significant, as he locates ‘true’ freedom outside the play world; the play world merely offers *freedom from the responsibilities* that come along with true political freedom, a clear reference to right/responsibility framework of early liberal, enlightenment philosophers. The real, then, is constituted of work, rights and responsibilities. It is not to say that the savage or the native was not free: his freedom was often a source of nostalgic jealousy that sprouted from the perceived loss of an earlier state of being. The noble savage was free in the sense of ‘free from the responsibilities of freedom’. Stuck in a pre-rational state, without scientific method or the means to change the world via extraction, the native was free only as a slave to nature, that is to say, while the player enters the play world to seek freedom from the free world, the native finds freedom in the play world.

I have argued earlier that the player has the capacity to return from the play world, which also indicates that the player and non-player have different modes of immersion, i.e., the former with the possibility of return and the latter as permanent immersion. Eugen Fink explains that the difference between the player and the mad rests on the fact that the player can always return from the oasis of happiness, i.e., the play world (Fink 2016, pp. 25–26). The mad is in a state of “permanent liminality”, to use Bergson’s expression for the schizophrenic. A complete immersion is seen as pathological in the OWW because entering any world of play entails abandoning the ‘responsibilities of freedom’ that make the subject civilized and free to immerse completely; to go native means to abandon freedom over oneself and exist free as a slave. It is therefore paramount for the rational player to recognize games as temporary, meaning to always know when a game begins and when it ends.

The ‘real’ for the colonizer meant the metropole or acquired land—home—an idea that functioned as a failsafe against the colonial officer going native. For the rational subject, the idea of home was conceptualized in terms of the right to private property and settlement. In the philosophical treatise on liberalism, private property emerges as a foundational right, without which the rational subject is incapable of pursuing freedom and exercising reason. The right to private property ensures that one can pursue his entrepreneurial ambitions for the benefit of the community, nation and humanity. The idea of real, associated with the pre-rational, savage native, is both contrasting and conflicting to the idea of real as site of responsibility, rights and property. The idea of home that was governed by the seasonal rhythms and migration was contrary to the sedentary logic of the colonizer, so much so that it was used as a justification for expulsion, dispossession and genocide of the indigenous people (Nanni 2012). The notion of real, as associated with private property or means to create property, is central to the rational subject, player, sportsman and gamer. On a practical level, playing games is an economic affair which requires a stable and continuous source of income, but more than that, the player represents the balanced Western liberal subject, whose interaction with games is modelled on rational recreation and amateurism and whose immersion is only temporary and rejuvenating. The home, when tied to the idea of property, does not merely represent a place to live and stay in; rather, it is a point of accumulation and consumption in the larger network of capitalist flow of goods. The

expensive consoles and digital devices act like points of accumulation, where equally expensive digital games, tiring gameplays and hard built gaming profiles are all stored and shared.

A similar logic of the real operates in the digital, even though the digital has transformed liberalism in fundamental ways. Aaron Perzanowski and Jason Shultz, in *The end of ownership: Personal Property in the Digital Economy* (Shultz and Perzanowski 2016) ask the following: do we own our digital copies, our music, e-books and games? They observe that the digital has changed the notion of ownership by converting purchases into rentals. One does not own a digital copy of the e-book or game but rather is licensed to use it after they agree to terms and conditions under EULA (End-User License Agreement). At first, these requirements of devices and licenses to play without owning the game might seem like unique features of digital games; however, these requirements are not without historical precedence, as they applied to the practice of colonial hunting and formation of game reserves, which was a policy designed to exclude the native hunter and his/her practices by classifying them as poachers and thereby illegalizing their ways and tools. Guns, like the console, were not available to the native; licenses to play/hunt were way too expensive and could be afforded only by the rich *sahibs*.

Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias explain how data colonizes every aspect of human life by converting reading habits, bodily mechanisms, purchases, browsing, travel and play into data, which is then cleaned, packaged and sold at high profits without the consent of the users. This data are then deployed for the exploitation of the very user it was extracted from, free of cost (Couldry and Mejias 2019). For this system of data colonialism to operate and expand in scope, it becomes essential to lure users into certain habits and glorify particular states of being like flow state. The market fetishes and encourages the gamers to attain complete immersion: 'becoming one with the machine', 'leave the flesh behind' are idioms denoting complete immersion or optimized performance. However, the problem with associating optimization with flow state is that flow state is also a state of absolute vulnerability. The gamer completely immersed can dehydrate, starve and die or can be robbed and murdered. Additionally, the pre-requisite for any flow state is a safe space. The digital, as we have seen so far in the essay, can hardly be considered a safe space; rather, it is the opposite. In this regard, Braxton Soderman's book-length study title, *Against Flow: Videogames and the Flowing Subject* (Soderman 2021), is perhaps the most significant point of reference, where he meticulously demonstrates the ideological function of the much cited (within games studies) flow theory by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He argues that under the guise of fun and enjoyment, flow theory in fact reinforces pro capitalist ideas by privileging the individual over the collective; intentional unified agents over fragmented subjects; accumulation over stability; self-determination over material determination; and action over critical examination. Soderman argues that Csikszentmihalyi's agenda behind developing the theory of flow was to provide a Western liberal democratic solution to the Marxist idea of alienation without resorting to communist revolution. 'Csikszentmihalyi imagined that flow experiences could reimmerge people in their own lives without the need for revolution, removing alienation by allowing them to experience the absorbing effects of play' (Soderman 2021, pp. 5, 27–63). Apart from its ideological grounding in liberalism, Soderman argues that flow theory seeks to create 'flowing subjects' which he likens to the neoliberal, self-optimizing, rational subject. From the perspective of the current argument, flow theory is another definition of play that defines and distinguishes the player from the non-player. Given that flow theory is associated with optimization, skill development and psychological growth, it retains the criterion of learning/extracting from the world of play. In effect, flow theory is a prescription for optimizing extraction. Further, due to a thin line separating flow state and addiction, the ideas of complete immersion and flow states are susceptible to racialization and neo-orientalism, as observed earlier in the case pertaining the death of the Taiwanese gamer. The same colonial criterions of who can extract/learn from the world of play and who can return, determine who is in flow state and who is an addict.

Digital games optimize the rationalization process of sports; however, they do so by compromising the (limited) democratic spirit of sportization. Unlike sports, in digital games the code or the rules are not discussed and decided upon by a collective body but are rather decided upon by the gaming company in a dictatorial fashion, a tendency which confirms Wendy Brown's observation of neoliberalism and neocolonial practices as a threat to democracy (Brown 2015). Digital games also act as pedagogical sites for neoliberal rationality, which is marked by its managerial attitude towards the self which includes engaging in a cost-benefit analysis of actions and forming instrumental relationships with people and activities. S.M. Amadae calls this calculating-to-optimize figure, the 'selfish subject', a subjectivity that according to her emerged from the Cold War and development of game theory (Amadae 2016). It is interesting to note here that videogames as media also emerge from the same Cold War nexus¹⁰ Game studies scholars, including Dooghan and Nick Dyer-Witthford and Greig de Peuter, have brought this to attention by demonstrating how game play makes neoliberal subjectivity fun. Game theory changed the idea of the rational subject but in a parallel move also changed (or had to change) the way we understand games. Under the rubric of game theory, games become a tool for decision making in every possible scenario; one finds the ultimate form of the instrumental/pedagogical/extractive relationship with the otherworld of play in game theory.

5. Conclusions

In an act of resistance towards the exclusionary forest acts of the British authorities, a local hunter named Diwan Banjara (from banjara community) turned arsonist and set fire to the forest reserve and eloped, never to be found again (Amin 2020, pp. 526–27). A radical spoilsport, in a final act of defiant play, chose to watch his world burn rather than to witness its transformation into a gameworld that excluded him and his ways of playing. Similarly, when the English peasantry was forced out of game reserves, they protested by poaching, maiming and mutilating the gentry's hounds and deer. Similar methods are available to the modern-day player, but these methods come at a high risk especially when one confronts the brutal techno feudalism of platform capitalism. In the essay, I have tried to demonstrate how three interconnected imperialist formulations inform the digital practices of world making, interaction and immersion. The aim of the article was to demonstrate that the task of postcolonial game studies includes the theorization of the dialectical relationship between the colonial in the ludic and the ludic in colonialism. To do this, it must be willing to temporarily step out of the history of videogames. This is necessary especially when thinking of decolonization of games. As a way of conclusion, I would like to acknowledge the urgency of decolonization of games and offer a few questions and suggestions. First, the idea of world making in videogames must move away from designing detailed spaces and trying to impose a generic mode of interaction upon that world. Perhaps indigenous ethnography, as suggested by Arturo Escobar, could be an important entry point to grasp how worlds are made of interactions and not different objects and environments. Second, play's capacity to teach is highly overrated; it must be pulled down from its pedestal. The only reason why such a view is retained is because it provides funding opportunities and a false legitimacy to the study, play and development of games. The questions relevant to decolonization of games is how we play, create, and study games after abandoning the pretension that games are pedagogical. Third, the celebration of immersion needs to be accompanied with a discussion of the digital as a safe space; immersive experiences must be resisted unless digital games are safe, and extraction of gaming data is compensated.

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Notes

- ¹ For a detailed overview, see (Murray 2018).
- ² For instance, videogames entered India in late 1980's and early 1990's, that is, only after India adopted neoliberal policies and opened its market. So, Arcade games, 8-bit NES clones, handheld brick-games, and Sony PlayStation arrived in India simultaneously and not chronologically.
- ³ Mark J.P. Wolf, identifies videogames as a site to study sub creation or world making, indicating that videogames are 'other worlds'. Likewise in *Gamer Theory*, McKenzie Wark has proposed that (video) games perfect world, in contrast to the imperfect outside world. Seth Giddings understands gameworlds as paracosm. Edward Castronova has called gameworlds of MMORPG, synthetic worlds.
- ⁴ It's important to note here, the discourse on nativity is extremely complex in the caste based Indian society. Caste practices are both indigenous and colonial. The example serves the purpose of showing the local populations incapacity to play.
- ⁵ NPC stands for Non-Playable Character and Non-Player Character; I work with the latter.
- ⁶ The colonial hunters in India self-identified as shikaris, in that sense they not only excluded the shikari and his practices but also took away her identity.
- ⁷ See, (De Aguilera and Mendez 2003) for a detailed literature review on early research on videogames and education.
- ⁸ *Mankadding* is named after and Indian cricketer Vinoo Mankad, running out a non-striking batter as they are leaving the crease while the bowler is in his final stride. The act is considered unsportsmanlike.
- ⁹ While some like Huizinga lament that excessive rationalization of the ludic has made play less free, others believe that since freedom is always conditional, processes of rationalization make games free and fair, others like Bernard Herbert Suits would argue that the true freedom associated with play is yet to come via techno- capitalism, where all ants(workers) would become grasshoppers (players).
- ¹⁰ For an exploration of neoliberalism and digital games, see (Baerg 2009). For, Cold War and video games, (de Peuter and Dyer-Wtheford 2013).

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