

The political economy of historical digital games

Emil Lundedal Hammar

The late science-fiction author Octavia Butler once wrote in her unpublished work Parable of the Trickster that: “There’s nothing new / under the sun, / but there are new suns.”

With this epigram, Butler was referring to the imaginary of science-fiction and the possible worlds that the literary genre provides readers with. While our current Sun shines light on a world fraught with oppression, poverty, injustice, extinctions, we can use our imagination to build abstract, metaphysical, immaterial worlds with different suns and different societal modalities. It is through these new suns that we allow ourselves to imagine a better world without pain and misery, and thereby shift our present world towards a better future. Simply put, Butler’s words highlight the fact that another world is possible.

But while Butler is referring to visions of possible futures, we can likewise attempt to imagine our past in different ways. What if History had turned out differently? What if, instead of South East Asia and Africa being colonized by European powers, the invaders had cooperated with and communicated as equals with the colonies? What if capitalism in the US and Western Europe had been dismantled and re-

placed with a more just economic system during the Cold War? What if Native North and South Americans had fought back and repelled the colonial invasion and the ensuing genocides?

Just at hinting at these questions, already our imaginations run wild with scenarios free of the grand histories we have been unquestioningly taught. No longer shackled by the history that brought us to this point, our imagination wrests us from a hegemonic past that binds our societies in traumatic legacies. Perhaps it is even fruitful to emancipate ourselves from the grand history and its reliance on hegemonic victors, who decided how the past should be retold in the future. Thus, we might follow Butler’s advice on new suns.

Yet, to imagine may require stimulation via communication – as literature and prose are used to stimulate our emancipatory imagination, so do film, monuments, archives, calendar dates, graphic novels, data networks, theatre plays, and games help us imagine differently. And with the proliferation of digital technologies among those of us with sufficient income and our neo-feudal national identity, we can virtually imagine and play with past suns.

This virtual historical imagination is evidenced in digital games (colloquially known as video or computer games). There, people are able



In Attila: Total War (Creative Assembly, 2015), players are able to command armies to defeat other nations in the historical period 395-453 in Europe.

to *play* histories and imagine new suns. While play has always been part of culture and even animal nature, it is also in relation to digital technology that games have been given a popular and highly commercial audio-visual form for some people to engage with.

In digital games, people are able to play historical scenarios where a past is usually depicted for the pleasure and stimulation of players. For example, they are able to command a medieval army in the European Middle Ages, they can build up Empires in the Middle East to conquer and dominate the known world, or they can traverse Italian renaissance architecture and encounter popular historical figures. Players are able to perform in these virtual environments where the computer (console/phone/digital device) acts as the mediator of the game rules and systems.

Thus, the popular genre of historical digital games gives players the opportunity to “play” with history, usually in either a bird’s eye perspective of historical processes or in a one-character perspective. In the former, players can establish empires under the chronology of (Western) history and change the direction their Empire will take when it comes to the development and conquering of other nations. In the latter, players play the past from the perspective of one or more historical characters, in which there is an emphasis on the audio-visual detail of the virtual environment and its reference to the historical period.

The fact that these virtual worlds have to be built entirely from scratch via software tools

ought to permit a wealth of creative and emancipatory new suns, which would be divorced from the oppressive conditions of our own sun. Yet, despite the possibilities of virtual environments, digital games are nevertheless still constricted by the context of production. Just as mass cultural films have to pass through a host of processes in order to end up on the screen, so mass cultural digital games require vast amounts of labour and approval through power relations.

Thus, the context of production constrains the meaning potential of historical games to the extent that these new suns are incredibly similar to our own oppressive sun: Most mass cultural games are US- and Eurocentric depictions of the past with largely hegemonic forces at large. To return to Butler’s quote: new suns are possible, but only once they have managed to navigate the various power relations and material conditions in contemporary society. For example, before a game even begins development, the decision-makers and those in economic power will doubtless ask: Does it sell? Who are its main demographic audiences? Are there prior examples of such a title selling? Will it generate any backlash?

Another problem is that the majority of the

The game Phone Story (molleindustria, 2011) highlights the four stages of production of game devices – from extraction of conflict minerals via slave labour to atrocious working conditions at Chinese labour camps to the consumerist demand for these digital devices to the toxic extraction of the dumped “obsolete” devices.



most popular and widely disseminated games are developed in North America and Europe with the (cheap) help of outsourced software development in South East Asia. The main development team will be comprised of similar identities across race, class, gender, nationality, and sexuality. This homogenous composition of Western developers likewise ensures that the people in decision-making positions are young, white, male, and heterosexual – thus, working environments of your common mainstream game developer primarily foster certain life experiences and attitudes divorced from the realities of others.

In turn, such environments are conducive to fostering certain visions of the past, while those in the margins are forgotten or ignored. We see this repeatedly, where historical digital games always centre on European or US-American cultures and viewpoints; the chances are that new suns are few and far between, if not non-existent.

Then, when resistant voices and marginalized identities highlight and criticize this state of affairs and propose historical games that are diverse and multiple in the views and experiences they offer, they are met with lip service, denial or opposition by decision-makers and investors. Concurrently, they face a specific hegemonic consumer culture that has been constructed and cultivated via marketing efforts in the 1990s and early 2000s, where industry companies doubled down on assumed consumer preferences and fostered values, norms, and expectations in regard to who gets a voice, who gets represented, and whose viewpoint is important.

In turn, enthusiast game consumers implicitly identify their camaraderie, preferences, and values with multibillion companies. By extension, any criticism of the games and the company that produced them, becomes a criticism of themselves. This combination of identity-specific norms in the games (Western-centric white supremacist heteronormative patriarchy) and corporate identification (consumerism via capitalism), means that the discursive environment is explicitly hostile to criticism of any kind, especially if it originates from marginalized voices.

So, whenever journalists, critics, commun-

ity members, academics, etc. speak up about the injustices and silencing of other perspectives and voices during the production and marketing of historical games, they are faced with an organized collective of enthusiasts who sustain their hegemony, the multibillion companies, and the products that they identify with. This ensures stability for companies where they do not necessarily need to engage with criticism from minority voices and those at the periphery, and instead allow a hostile and reliable hegemonic consumer group to maintain the economically predictable status quo.

Thus, the possibility of creating and fostering new suns in the domain of digital games is a painful, terrorizing, and tough road that many have undertaken. This road to different pasts via virtual environments is predicated on economics, on identity-norms, on power structures, and fundamentally on the material and global networks that allow those of us with access to the infrastructure to play in these virtual environments.

Signs of change?

At the same time, there are glimpses of games that manage to escape the political economy of the games industry and consumer culture. In *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2013) players are able to take the role of a black freedom fighter from Trinidad, who violently opposes and attempts to dismantle the 18th century French colonial transatlantic slave trade in the Caribbean, thus echoing the Haitian revolution and liberation.

In *Mafia 3* (Hangar 13, 2016), players adopt the role of Lincoln Clay in 1960s New Orleans against the backdrop of the Civil Rights era in which systems of US white supremacy and black power movements are simulated and encountered. In *80 Days* (Inkle Studios, 2014), players are positioned as the Other when they travel across the world and come across a multiplicity of identities and cultures in a digital reimagining of Jules Verne's classic story.

Such games offer a historical virtual space that allows players to emancipate themselves from the usual hegemonic articulations of the past and instead to play with the past in such ways that im-



Set in 1960s New Orleans, Mafia 3 (Hangar 13, 2016) let's players fight against white supremacist law enforcement in the Southern USA with the help of a black liberation movement.

in identifying the one-dimensional actions in historical digital games, the optic of power relations still allows us to acknowledge the significance of allowing marginal positions to be enacted and performed via such digital games of Empire.

aginations of new suns are made possible. While different in budget and production scope, they nevertheless indicate an occasional willingness by creators and producers to break down the economic and demographic walls of hegemonic production structures. Although some of them might be criticized for having residues of contemporary power structures, they still allow players to play against History and offer individual and collective articulations of resistance via play.

This means that players are able to individually and collectively appropriate games for their own pleasure and preferences, even if the developers never intended such forms of play. The literary game scholar Mukherjee exemplifies such a strategy in the historical strategy game *Empire: Total War* (Creative Assembly, 2009) where Indian players play the Indian Empire and invade and conquer most of Europe and, more importantly, the United Kingdom.

Yet the possibilities in most major mainstream games are still those of Empire, i.e. while it might be possible in a few instances of resistance to take up the position of the subaltern or the historically oppressed as illustrated in the above examples, players are still constrained by the mechanics of games to perform Empire in the sense that only invasion, conquest, and domination of other spaces are possible in these games. Players still murder other people, they still invade other countries, and they still suppress and dominate other cultures.

Nevertheless, while this criticism is fruitful

If power fantasies are afforded to the hegemonic Europeans and Americans, why should fantasies of liberation and emancipation of the past not be promoted and available to those under the boot of capitalist, colonial, and racist power?

Being able to play out and appropriate such stories is predicated on their economic and material conditions – i.e. the question is not whether or not the subaltern can speak, but instead can it shop? Games like *Empire: Total War*, *Mafia 3*, and *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* are produced in relation to a number of factors, chief among them whether or not it is financially viable for investors to fund such games. Thus, our playing in new suns appears to be restricted by our own Sun and the economic and historic conditions in which we are embedded. ■

Emil Lundedal Hammar is a PhD candidate in game studies and coordinator of the ENCODE research network at the University of Tromsø, Norway. He holds a Cand. IT. in Games Analysis from the IT University of Copenhagen and a BA in philosophy from the University of Copenhagen. His research project focuses on the intersection between digital games, memory, hegemony, and race and he is currently co-editing a special issue on postcolonial perspectives in game studies for the Open Library of Humanities.