

Can the Subaltern Game Design? An Exploratory Study About Creating a Decolonial Ludology Framework Through Ludonarratives

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we describe the framework we created to understand the communication process in gaming experiences and that we have used to elaborate an educational process for future game designers or teachers. This educational process uses ludonarratives as an object of both game research and production. Considering that contemporary Cultural Studies admits the possibility of a Decolonial Pedagogy, can we entertain the possibility of building a Decolonial Ludology through ludonarratives? We aim to identify some of the Eurocentric foundations in game design in order to look for Decolonial alternatives that improve diversity and, if possible, make these alternatives also seductive. We describe four actions in our exploratory research to this goal.

Keywords

Decolonial Ludology, Ludonarrative, communication process, game design, teaching

INTRODUCTION

In the last paragraph of chapter 24 of Understanding Media, Marshall McLuhan asked “Are games mass media?” to which he gave a positive answer, as he had already stated: “That games are extensions, not of our private but of our social selves, and that they

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are media of communication, should now be plain” (McLuhan 2003, 275). Numerous ontological and epistemological questions emerge as we try to associate the concept of gaming experience with communicational values – i.e., how do we stipulate meaning to something that involves numerous activities that are so diversified such as playing with computers, children’s games, or sports?

The concept of play outlined by Johan Huizinga gives us some clues about what we are dealing with: “Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life’” (Huizinga 2004, 33). Observing game sessions, we notice that ludic activities must always be in action – games only exist when players operate in it, accepting the rules and acting on them. Therefore, gaming experiences assume that:

- 1) play is always in movement;
- 2) play depends on information that is presented externally for actions, like rules.

These external information are what Gregory Bateson called some degree of metacommunication, “(...) i.e., of exchanging signals which would carry the message “this is play”” (Bateson 2006, 316). Thus we may infer that ludic action needs several external elements to happen. These elements may be physical, like graphical interfaces (digital games), equipment (sports), or toys (child’s play); they may also be immaterial, since as an element of culture (cf. Huizinga 2004) play is influenced by human society. Bateson states “(...) play is a phenomenon in which the actions of “play” are related to, or denote, other actions of “not play”. We therefore meet in play with an instance of signals standing for other events...” (Bateson 2006, 317).

In *An Introduction to Game Studies*, Frans Mäyrä offers a threefold division for these studies as:

- 1) researching games themselves;
- 2) researching the players;
- 3) researching contexts of game-players interactions.

He points out the importance of elements of culture in play stating, “A concept of games culture can help to bring into light the mostly unspoken backdrop against which games make sense for their players” (Mäyrä 2008, 14).

Espen Aarseth (2003) proposes three dimensions that characterize games: gameplay (player’s actions, motivations etc.), game structure (rules), and game world (fictional elements, game levels etc.). From a game design perspective, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003) want to understand how games develop a unique language, defining a primary schema: rules, play, and culture.

Based on these perspectives we may state that a gaming experience is defined not only by the relationship between players and the game itself, but also as a ludic activity dependent upon the communication process between players and the elements of a game. This communication process involves the immersion achieved through players ‘contact with gameplay, plus the production of meaning that happens during/from this activity.

From these discussions, we may define a framework inspired by Friedrich Kittler's media principles of storage, transmission, and processing (cf. 1999, 2010). We suggest a threefold principle for understanding communication processes in gaming experiences:

- Understanding, as we must apprehend rules, gameplay, and contexts of play;
- Applying, as we must use this newfound knowledge to act upon the fictional world of the ludic activity;
- Disseminating, as we must communicate our findings, learning, skills, and experiences within the game to other players, e.g. generating a metagame.

Thus, following the steps of other play/game scholars, we believe that gaming is “[...] a situation in which this behavior acquires a specific meaning. Therefore playing supposes communication and interpretation” (Brougère 1998, 191), and these communication processes in gaming may be used for transmitting messages for several purposes, as in education. With that in mind, we have used our threefold principle of *understanding*, *applying*, and *disseminating* to design an educational method to train future game designers or teachers. This research is still in its first exploratory stage and we present here our first investigations through projects done with game design students to find alternatives to eurocentric standards implicit in current design frameworks.

One could be curious whether the question is really "can the subaltern play?" and not "can the subaltern design?" So far we observed that lack of representation lames the very desire to play. And in order to design, one needs to play first. Therefore, further in this paper we discuss how playing decolonial games might, through representation, empower students to become game designers.

LUDONARRATIVES AS A METHOD TO TRAIN FUTURE GAME DESIGNERS AND TEACHERS

This threefold educational method uses ludonarratives as an object of both game research and proper game design.

We understand ludonarrative as a process through which a narrative is developed in a gaming situation. Our understanding of play is based in Huizinga's classic definition of play (2004), i.e., an activity with particular settings and defined rules, and Gilles Brougère's studies of play in educational settings (1998), which focuses on creating novel experiences for (social) learning. In addition, narrative is seen as a process of poetic configuration of themes, characters, setting and events, into units of action, time and place, which are developed through a cause-effect relationship (Ricoeur 1983; Barthes 1977).

We have started to incorporate our threefold method to classes for two undergraduate programs of the Institute of Arts and Design at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, Brazil: the Interdisciplinary Bachelor's Degree in Arts and Design and the Licentiatehip in Visual Arts (a degree for future basic education teachers). In these classes, the method is implemented by using the *Incorporeal Ludonarrative Platform*, created in 2013 by Eliane Bettocchi and Carlos Klimick, a Role-Playing Game (RPG)

system that combines *TIN* (Techniques for Interactive Narratives) and Poetic Design techniques for educational purposes¹.

In the *Understanding* phase we present concepts of Game Studies, Game-Based Learning and Narrative to the students, since “For learning to be critical as well as active, [...] the learner needs to learn not only how to understand and produce meanings in a particular semiotic domain but, in addition, needs to learn how to think about the domain at a ‘meta’ level as a complex system of interrelated parts” (Gee 2007, 25). At this point we reinforce the narrative powers as presented by Barthes (1977): *mathesis* (several kinds of knowledge intertwined) and *mimesis* (representation of reality), stressing its educational potential. Narratives allow the ludic meeting of several forms of knowledge in their production and reception, legitimating multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary work. In a narrative, many forms of knowledge can coexist and, as Barthes puts it, be “spun and savored”: *mathesis*. In its mimetic power the narrative can represent reality and make the applications of a concept or technique clearer for the student. The *mimesis* of Barthes does not limit itself at showing reality how it is (which it considers to be an impossible goal), but rather aims at showing how reality may yet be, assuming, therefore, a poetic commitment.

Secondly, we offer students options of themes that are present in different settings of the *Incorporeal Platform* for ludonarratives. We may consider each type of ludonarrative (gamebooks, boardgames, cardgames, videogames, tabletop RPG) to be a different media with its own symbolic system (code and repertoire), technology (material support) and reception mode (conditions of fruition); this is in accordance with the McLuhanian concept of Media Ecology, i.e., treating each medium accordingly to its characteristics, but understanding each role in culture and communication: “[Media Ecology] means arranging various media to help each other so they won't cancel each other out, to buttress one medium with another” (McLuhan 2005, 320).

Incorporeal currently has five different scenarios: *Arcadia*, using characters from Greco-Roman mythology; *Brasil Barroco*, exploring Brazil's colonial past; *Era da Escolha*, designed to provoke changes of thinking related to sustainability (e.g. ecology, economy, genre, and race); *Terra Nova*, a setting that started as a Tolkien-inspired “anthropophagic fantasy” combining high fantasy themes with the culture and mythologies of indigenous peoples of the Americas, as a metaphor for colonization; *Witchcraft Tales*, a scenario (in English) based on 19th-century Brazil, inspired by the fictional characters of Brazilian writers such as Machado de Assis, and European writers like Bram Stoker.

After the students have chosen the themes and setting, based on their interests and learning goals, and after also understanding mechanics and gameplay, we move to the *Applying* phase. First, players create their own characters playing a gamebook from the *Incorporeal Platform*. Then they experience a ludonarrative with their characters, using either TRPG, Larp, cardgame or a boardgame to play. Afterwards they create a text in the language of their preference. The text is incorporated into a website (<http://historias.interativas.nom.br/incorporaisrpg/>) thus expanding the setting. One example of this process was the first experience with the *Incorporeal Platform*, in 2013, in which the goal was to use the platform to help undergraduate students of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora to develop their competencies in creativity, ethics and management for the production of contemporary illustration art². At this phase, we

work with what we call *dynamis*, in which the gamer does independent of interface, graphics or story - the dynamics as the “forces or movements that characterize a system” (Morrison 1991, 2; Mäyrä 2008, 16-19).

In the *Disseminating* phase students must apply their experience with ludonarratives to some specific goal (educational, artistic etc.), or create their own ludonarratives. In both cases, the products created must be tested first within the group and, once developed into prototypes, with the users to whom they were designed. Through this process, we have produced cardgames, a boardgame, gamebooks and videogames for educational purposes; e.g. in 2019, scholarship students from the GET³ Program in Arts and Design developed a cardgame version of the *Witchcraft Tales* scenario for English instruction.⁴

Therefore using a communication theory perspective to game-based learning so far has been very productive for our research group. However, we still notice a problem of underrepresentation among the gaming community. This was noticed by one of the authors of this paper (who is a black woman), and also by most of our students at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora.⁵ Hence, our desire for creating decolonial games becomes the end result of our teaching-learning experiences. The perception of this underrepresentation problem may in itself be an indication that the colonization process is not able to destroy the imaginary of all colonized people all the time and these friction moments may well be the spring from which a decolonial perspective can grow.

UNDERSTANDING THE DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

According to Anibal Quijano (apud Candau et al. 2010, 19), the colonizer destroys the others’ imaginary, while reaffirming its own. This process turns the others into colonized, making them believe that their own culture and identity is inferior and wrong.

Catherine Walsh (apud Candau et al. 2010, 33) states that to decolonize means a strategy beyond political freedom from colonization. It aims at a total rescue and/or reconstruction of the once destroyed culture and identity. But now we have a problem: our entire research and knowledge repertoire was built upon the colonizer’s foundations. In the field of Decolonial Pedagogy, Luis Fernandes de Oliveira (2010) asks how is it possible to apply a method with a theoretical and epistemological non-Eurocentric basis in a reality where most teachers have a practice based on theories and epistemologies that are fundamentally Eurocentric.

Gayatri Spivak (2010) asks, *can the subaltern speak?* Can the once colonized speak for him/herself using the very tools of the colonizer? Now, inspired by her, we may ask ourselves: *Can the subaltern design and play?*

Since then, we started to wonder if it is possible to enhance the above-mentioned framework with a decolonial perspective. Can we think, make and enjoy games from the so-called subaltern point of view? Considering that contemporary Cultural Studies admits the possibility of a Decolonial Pedagogy, can we entertain the possibility of a Decolonial Ludology?

In his preface for the book *Videogames and the Global South* (2019), Gonzalo Frasca tells that:

[...] when I was finishing college, I decided to write a dissertation about computer games. To my dismay, there was nothing filed under that category at the Uruguayan National Library...except for some booklets that I had written when I was twelve. They were filed under “Anonymous” because although I may have been twelve, I’d like to think I was old enough to know better than to leave my name written on any document. Since I had no game-related bibliography, I had no choice but to frame my early research with any theories that could help me better understand games. Thankfully, the Uruguayan National Library had plenty of books on French Narratology, which I devoured to make the point that games could be connected to interactive narrative. (Frasca 2019: vii)

In the same book, Phillip Penix-Tadsen also says:

During a field interview for an analysis of players’ habits in the Middle East, a twelve-year-old girl excitedly pulls researcher Helga Tawil-Souri aside in order to share what she describes as “the best game ever,” the first-person shooter *Special Force* (...) This player is highly familiar with games in this genre, having played games that position the player as part of a U.S. military force intervening in Iraq, Iran, Libya and Syria. The difference is that *Special Force* is a pro-Arab video game, indeed the very first (though not the only) game of this type that this Palestinian adolescent has encountered. In fact, she has never played a game set in the Arab world that would permit the player not to shoot at Arabs. As she explains to Tawil-Souri, prior to playing *Special Force*, “I always had to shoot at my own people.” (Penix-Tadsen 2019, 3)

Should we use non-European frameworks to analyze this girl's response to a game? Going deeper, are European frameworks sufficient to help us build decolonized games? Is it enough to paint and dress Eurocentric foundations with colors and clothes of different ethnic groups and cultures?

When referring to Decolonial Pedagogy, Candau and Oliveira (2010) state that colonialism created a kind of epistemic fetishism, meaning that the colonizer's ideas, behaviors and knowledge are presented in a seductive and very easy way to imitate. Referencing back to the discomfort that the black author and our students feel within the gaming industry and community, we aim to identify some of these Eurocentric foundations in game design in order to look for alternatives that improve diversity and, if possible, making these alternatives seductive.

To begin to explore this issue we started the development of a series of narrative games derived from the previously referred *Incorporeal Ludonarrative Platform*.⁶

APPLYING THE THREEFOLD METHOD WITHIN A DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE TO TEACH GAME DESIGN

This is a teaching-learning process that is taking place at the Institute of Arts and Design at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, involving a team of 10 undergraduate students with scholarships selected within the quota parameters of the university. This means we have a diversity of race, gender, sexuality and social status among our research team.

Beyond this team, we also apply the method to the Narrative Games Design classes for the Licentiate in Visual Arts course and evaluate the level of diversity we find in our students game briefings. So far, as expected, we have encountered more diversity in the briefings made by quota students, which does not seem to be a problem since we are talking about representation. The problem starts when we notice a quota student who does not know how to represent himself/herself or even any other representation different from the Eurocentric standard.

Please note that we provide a framework that cuts across all game genres although we are very aware that each genre (i.e., board game, VR etc.) comes with its own forms. We don't know if and how genres can support (or hinder) the development of decolonized ludonarratives. Although this is a very interesting question and would certainly render a relevant research, it is out of our scope for now. We believe that first we need to understand first how coloniality undermines the imaginary from where games emerge, look for decolonial alternatives within any kind of game and then try and identify if and how certain genres will or will not support a decolonial perspective.

As we stated before, the threefold framework is not decolonial *per se*. Therefore, we should connect the learning goals to the decolonial ideas presented in the paper. We understand that the very critique of existing eurocentric standards that drive game design practices is the main learning goal.

In order to achieve this main learning goal we draw explicit connections to decolonial analysis in framing of understanding, applying, and disseminating. These connections will be better understood if readers click on the form (<https://forms.gle/sTRyvLJFNGu5xca17>) in order to follow the exercises we intend to apply to the students alongside the next items of this paper.

Understanding phase

In this phase, students will be introduced to ludonarrative and decolonial concepts in order to identify these concepts within games of their choices.

So we must first ask ourselves: what are these Eurocentric standards? So far we identified four Eurocentric standards in gaming and for each of them we are trying to propose a decolonial alternative. These are our current teaching/research questions:

1. *Minecraft and the metaphor of colonization*⁷: what decolonial possibilities could we propose for game mechanics/gameplay?
2. The *Hero's Journey* by Joseph Campbell and the Eurocentric *archetypal* point of view by Carl Jung as the main, and sometimes the only reference for contemporary game storytelling: what decolonial possibilities could we propose for character concept and motivations?
3. Messianism⁸ and Dualism cosmology⁹ as the main, and sometimes the only reference for contemporary games challenges and solutions: what decolonial possibilities could we propose in order to achieve better ludonarrative consonances?

4. The Fibonacci Number, the Vitruvian Man, and the Golden Ratio¹⁰, European references that are used as main references for visual representation: can we find beauty outside these standards?

Note that, apart from the first, all these references come from Wikipedia. We deliberately chose them to be as close as possible to the common sense conceptions that seem to guide the game design procedures we have witnessed throughout 20 years of experience in the gaming industry, and in 10 years of teaching.

Applying Phase

In this phase, the students will be invited to play a decolonial game designed to address these eurocentric standards and, after that, to imagine what they would change in the game they chose in the previous phase.

Civilize? Creating characters within a decolonial setting and rules system.

As we may see on the Minecraft video, one of the most common mechanics is the conquest and occupation of a territory implying the relocation of people and their consequent submission. What if we make a game in which the colonizer loses? What would happen if the Portuguese were expelled from Brazil, or the English from the US, by the Natives and Africans? You may say that did happen in the Caribbean – yes, it did. Why can't that be a model for a fantasy game? This is one of our settings in the *Incorporeal Platform: Terra Nova - Decolonial Fantasy*.

The Game Design Document of this setting states, as its High Concept: “Terra Nova is a setting of Decolonial Fantasy where the oppressive colonizer lost and the oppressed and enslaved colonized won.¹¹ The starting point was: what if in Brazil the quilombos had been victorious to the point that they were able to expel the colonizers and nowadays the quilombola¹² culture was dominant?”

In this setting, we offer a symbolic parallel between Europe and traditional medieval fantasy with elves, dwarves as the colonizers who brought dark skinned humans as slaves to explore and settle at the new “discovered” continent. When they arrived, they realized they had not discovered anything because the continent was already populated by powerful Native peoples. In a series of catastrophic wars the colonizers managed to destroy the great Native civilizations and started the process of cultural and identity annulment. However, the dark skinned humans allied with the natives and they began to fight back to rebuild their identities and culture. Assembled together in huge quilombos, they finally defeated the colonizers who were forced to retreat to a relatively small kingdom isolated in a cold region in the north.

As the game begins, there is no apparent great conquest to achieve or great evil to defeat. What is there to do? What is the fun? What is the challenge? What are the mechanics after all?

The challenge is the reconstruction of identities lost and the mechanics has to reflect this in terms of ludonarrative cohesion and resonance (or consonance).¹³ Instead of picking a ready-to-play template to conquer distant lands or defeat the great evil, the player first has to create a character based on loose professional concepts with no ethnic

limitations or “racial” advantages.¹⁴ Players must remember that the society of *Terra Nova* was not built upon rigid social classes or casts but upon reinterpretations of long lost ancestries, plus the need to survive a common enemy that wanted to enslave their ancestors.

In order to emphasize this very first challenge, we use the mechanic of solo adventures, or gamebooks, for character creation that rules all of the *Incorporeal system*. These gamebooks or solo adventures walk the player through the game mechanics, characters, narrative, etc. of the game, leading him/her to a Google Form Sheet with quantitative and qualitative parameters that can be manually transferred to a card, currently on a PNG format.¹⁵

Assemble? Different profiles and agendas working together for common goals.

This leads us to the second issue: Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*. In order to widen the possibilities of character's concept and motivations we went back in time and looked for help in Russian Formalism, but this is another Eurocentric reference. Nowadays, our aim is to go deeper into African studies in order to gather information about non-European imaginary.

As the High Concept of the *Incorporeal Cardgame* Game Design Document states¹⁶, our next step is to develop a cooperative cardgame that aims to symbolically simulate relational strategies through different kinds of narrative relationships based on the very concept of the *Incorporeal Game Platform* (op. note 4). Based on this concept, we intend to design a game mechanic that is flexible enough to work in all the settings of the platform, and to work with different graphic interfaces, thus preserving the aesthetic style of each setting.

Once created by playing the setting gamebook, the Player Character (PC) or protagonist will become part of the Characters Card Set and may be used as a Non-Player Character (NPC) by other players in their own games. Players will also be able to create their own item cards and action cards, which may be incorporated into the decks of Action Cards and Item Cards.

The cardgame begins with the Relationship Diagram of the *Incorporeal Platform*, where the relationships between the PC and NPCs are defined by the PCs or randomly selected using characters from the NPC card deck. The NPCs in the deck are characters created by members of the production team using the same gamebook process. The narrative relations are based on the narrative functions proposed by Vladimir Propp.¹⁷

The relationship mechanics will take into consideration the quantitative parameters *value, status* and *characteristic* Social Relations of the character.

The NPCs will have goals to help or hinder the PC. Later, the group of players randomly selects the relationships between their PC characters; these could be positive or negative relations, like the relationships with the NPCs.

The first digital version of the Relationships Diagram was built based on the printed version of the generic *Incorporeal System* using the *RPG Maker MV* engine.¹⁸ In the

digital version, the event cards can be randomly selected using a QRCode-based system, building a narrative sequence with challenges that can be solved by the PC group working together taking into account the relationships between them. Once the challenges imposed by the program are finished, the protagonists gain experience points to improve their competencies and level up, based on their ethical and relational decisions. The quantitative aspects of the relationships can be modified. The same can happen with the qualitative aspects that can change from positive to negative and vice-versa.

Therefore, the main objective of the game is to give the players a ludic simulation of the advantages of cooperative work, even between people that do not like each other or have different agendas.

Avenge? Different challenges for different people!

We arrive now at the third issue: the battle between good and evil. In order to try different possibilities for problems and solutions, we have *summoned* the help of the *Orishas*.

As the High Concept of *Cores Vivas* Game Design Document states,¹⁹ *Living Colors: what ship is this?* is a point-and-click game that consists of 16 mini-games that create different versions of a conspiracy against a group of activists from a fictional peripheral community at the city of Juiz de Fora, Brazil. The conspiracy involves opposition from politicians, businesspeople, media/religion groups and police-militias. At the end, there is a narrative hook for a future game.

The main objective is to simulate the experience of building an African-Brazilian identity from the concept of Orisha and from there to activism. Why start from the concept of Orisha? Because we aim to offer a symbolic alternative to the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman imaginaries' conceptions of character, hero and identity. From this starting point, the goal is to offer new worldviews and at the same time expose the ethnocentrism that permeate our western culture.

The thematic main objective is imbued in the specific goals of the mechanic and narrative in the form of two main challenges: one pertaining to the ethical parameter and the other pertaining to the conceptual parameter. Both parameters are defined by the regent Orisha of the protagonist character and by the type of opposition. This way, the game differential is to promote replayability through different perspectives to comprehend a complex event.

Look good? Different looks for different people!

Last but definitely not least, we address the issue of visual representation. Back in 2000, one of the authors was already concerned about the discomfort caused by the way women were portrayed in RPGs. In her Master's Thesis (Bettocchi 2002), she proposes that illustration in Role-playing Game (RPG) represents "windows" or "links" of information for the player about the setting where her or his own histories and images will be made; and that their possibilities of meaning seem to go beyond the information concerning the game setting. In order to analyze this ability, she developed a method to describe and analyze the visual syntax of Brazilian RPG characters illustrations, and then use it as a tool to uncover the recurring elements in female and male visual stereotypes embedded in these visual signs. At the end, she was able to shape these elements into three stereotypes: the curved decorative female, no matter what she did;

the squared/rectangular strong/agile warrior/rogue; and the pillar-slim wise male, scientist, wizard or priest.

Comparing statements in interviews and publications in the gaming media, Bettocchi concluded that these visual representations were shared between gamers and games through identification with an ideal male spectator who would desire to consume the females as objects and be the males as subjects.

Twenty years later, it is disappointing to realize that we still have a similar situation now with the representation of LGBTQI+, different ethnic groups and people outside of the beauty standards, staying as satellites orbiting the so-called “king consumer”: male, white, heterosexual, middle/high class, mostly Christian. The same profile shared with historical colonizers. However, it is a relief to know that now we can count on decolonial tools to help us entertain alternatives.

As stated in the previously referred game design documents, the *Incorporeal Platform* demands the creation of a Player Character card. As described in a previous paper (Bettocchi et al. 2019), the PC cards made during classes at the Institute of Arts and Design pass through what we call the *Decolonial Test*, where we evaluate:

- *Visual anthropophagi*: recombination of iconographic and stylistic repertoires of the setting with iconographic and stylistic repertoires that the participant mobilized and/or appropriated.
- *Narrative pillage*: recombination of narrative repertoires of the setting with narrative repertoires that the participant mobilized and/or appropriated.

With this test we aim to expose to future game designers, concept artists and art teachers the dominant Eurocentric structures beneath games as well as the “king consumer” for whom these structures are made.

Disseminating Phase

In this final phase, the students will be challenged to design a decolonial game from scratch under supervision. This phase will probably be divided into usual Game Design development steps: *Playtesting*, *Redesign*, *Alfa*, *Beta* and *Gold* versions.

However, students will be confronted by the first questions discussed in the understanding phase:

- Should I talk about something I don't KNOW?
- Should I talk about something I don't FEEL?
- If so, how could I do it in a respectful way?

One cannot design what one cannot play: as mentioned before, one of the authors of this paper experiences discomfort when attempting to create media in environments permeated by eurocentric standards. We agree that this discomfort is an essential proof that colonization is not capable of fully destroying the colonized imaginary, and is a hopeful site of rupture from which decolonization can bloom. That is why we think playing within a decolonial perspective will first open the students minds to this rupture from where they can see themselves as belonging to the gaming community. Once they understand they can play, they might accept they can also design.

One should not design what one cannot feel: at least not alone. Let us illustrate this situation with a conversation that took place in a *Whatsapp* group named *Ludus Magisterium*, where the members are researchers and teachers who work with tabletop games applied to education. For the sake of privacy, we shall name the members as *M1*, *M2*, *M4*, *M5*, *M6* and *M7*, all of them white people, and *M3*, a black person.

M1 shares an editorial article from a Brazilian newspaper written by a white person complaining about the difficulties imposed by the so called “cultural appropriation patrol” (this is a loose translation for a Brazilian portuguese expression).

Author Eliane comments on the article: “In my opinion the biggest problem with this text is in the concept of cultural appropriation used. Technically, cultural appropriation does not refer to ideas in general, but to symbols of resistance of a group. The phenomenon is negative insofar as it empties a symbol of its sense of resistance, transforming it into a fad, a joke, or, even worse, a symbol of the affirmation of a situation that such a symbol previously criticized. He is using it for cultural dissemination.”

M2 replies: “Agreed. At the same time, we have the problem of exaggerated criticism, when, as in the author of the article situation, an act of support is seen as appropriation, for example. Moreover, well-intentioned and positive actions can be inhibited by “friendly fire”. But the big problem remains, in any case, in the incoherent use of symbols of resistance, much more than in the second case (in the second case I say undue criticism, which is, after all, a much less frequent situation).”

M1 then posts: “Ooops, sorry about the aggravation. Although I think the patrol of cultural appropriation is going overboard, it didn't have much to do with the group here, it wasn't supposed to be posted here. On the other hand, there is really the question: can we make games where we have no place to speak? (another point where they sometimes cross the line).”

M3 joins the discussion: “Indeed, common sense is not normally distributed among the population ... In this time that we live, radicalism has affected all areas and people want to win everything no matter what ... if they find someone willing to dialogue, because they do not have arguments they usually curse or accuse people of intolerance ... Mediating conflicts today ends up being an impossible mission because nobody wants to compromise on anything ... It seems increasingly difficult to find a common point.”

M1 replies: “The positions are summed up in being against and not listening. And certain lines are automatically associated with radical positions. We ended up going for voting who is right and who is wrong, with deleterious effects on communication, instead of positions of consensus.”

M4 intervenes: “I'm too bored about people ... and to try to do that ... The person says what s/he thinks, I curse her/him mentally and try not to talk about it with the person anymore!”

M1: “My experience as a business person has shown, for example, that labor laws prevent jobs. But as long as one side wants to keep them all and the other wants to end all rights, there is no conversation. And there are simple things that are not done that would be very easy. There are a lot of ridiculous laws like having to have a sign in the bathroom indicating what sex it is for, even if it serves both (you have to put both sexes) that, in the end, hinder the business.

M4 replies: “While only one side has the power to change the laws, it is difficult to ask to trust, isn't it? Real power to change things.”

Author Eliane says: “I particularly feel uncomfortable when someone with no place to speak resolves to appropriate themes that I consider to be symbols of black resistance, such as Candomblé (an Afro-Brazilian religion, like Santeria). But it is my personal decision not to consume the product. Making this law is complicated without a very careful discussion. As I said above, it is essential not to confuse appropriation with dissemination. Are you in doubt? Ask the affected groups.”

Then, M1 replies: “Heck, Eliane, don't you have white people in Candomblé? I think there is a critical issue, which is how things are used. When a designer store in Ipanema (a rich neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro) launches a typical African turban for the upper class to buy, there are signs of cultural appropriation. When the white design student from the slums tries to make some money by making a turban for the periphery, it's another story. Likewise, a straight cis white teacher can (and should) create games that encourage acceptance of diversity by their students. How can we say that he has no place for speech so he cannot act in the search for a better ethical standard? I'll give you a personal example (although the event didn't happen and I don't know why), I was invited to speak at an event about women in the games (production, representation, whatever). My answer was: only if I am a minority among those who speak. I had something to say, technically, and I thought it would be productive, but I certainly couldn't be a protagonist.”

M5 joins: “Place of speech is a complicated matter... we have black racists and homophobic gays, so belonging to a minority does not mean that that person's speech is more valid and true just for that reason ... I think the question of the place of speech has more to do with listening than with speech itself: we must open spaces of voice and speech for people, and people in privileged positions should not use their privilege to override the speech of others ... I think a man can speak of feminism, and a white man can speak of racism, especially when they use their privileged places to propagate the previously silenced voices ... but then I can say that white people cannot speak of racism because they do not have "a place of speech" it's complicated ...”

M6 also joins: “This matter of place of speech is quite simple: just ask if it is or not :) I'm not against the above statement.”

M5 replies: “I understand ... mainly straight white cis men love to abuse their position ... it is not for nothing that we have the mansplaning so popular ...”

Author Eliane replies to M1: “Of course there are white people in the Candomblé. My husband is one of them. The difference is that for him Candomblé is not a symbol of resistance. For me, as a black woman, it is. It is a matter of feeling. I do think that cis white etc. people can make games out of their place of speech. But what is the problem of including someone with a speaking position in the team? This inclusion will increase the chance of avoiding appropriation. But as I said before, nobody is obliged to anything. Not the white to stop making, nor me, as a black person, to consume.”

M5 agrees: “Yes, that is right... In the epistemological sense I can even understand its place, but I will never be in it ontologically ... I am neither a woman nor a black and etc ... I think it is ‘mega blaster’ worth having people on the team .. I thought it was fantastic that there are natives playing games to tell their stories.”

M6 adds: “These are just symptoms.”

M7 joins: “My position on the place of speech is very direct: I try to give preference to people who speak for their own groups. In the absence of these people, if I am well informed, I express myself as best I can.”

Author Eliane adds: “Again, for those who haven't read it before, don't confuse appropriation with dissemination. Within decolonial studies, dissemination is a normal and healthy process of cultural exchange. Appropriation is a colonizing process of cultural erasure.”

After this last post, the discussion ended. We hope this discussion exemplifies these moments of friction in order to decentralize the eurocentric conceit of its own inevitability and pervasiveness.

One of our latest experiments, which are still being conducted at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, works with students from race quotas in which they use their own appearances to make their PC cards.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we presented the framework that we have created to understand communication processes in gaming experiences. Then we described how we have been using this process to prepare future game designers, teachers of game design and teachers that use games as learning tools. Through our experience as game designers, players and teachers, we have noticed the prevalence of Eurocentric perspective and models in the games we played and in the work many of our students produced. Hence the need to look for Decolonial alternatives to the Eurocentric ones. This line of research unfolded four Eurocentric paradigms: colonization metaphors like in *Minecraft*, plot and thematic models in *The Hero's Journey* and *Messianism*, and aesthetic pressures in the *Fibonacci Number* and the *Vitruvian Man*. There may be other Eurocentric paradigms, but in the exploratory phase of our research, we will concentrate on these four. Our main challenge now is to find alternatives to these Eurocentric paradigms. We have begun using ludonarratives and these settings in the Incorporeal Project. To the Eurocentric paradigm of *Colonization* we propose *Terra Nova* as an alternative, a Fantasy setting where the colonizer was defeated by the colonized; As a contraposition to the Eurocentric paradigm of the *Hero's Journey* we are developing the *Incorporeal Cardgame*, a cooperative cardgame where characters must develop their relationships with other characters. This perspective can be applied to any of the settings; As an alternative to the Messianic perspective of Good vs Evil for plots we are exploring *Living Colors: what ship is this?* a point-and-click game composed of 16 mini-games that allows the exploration of different points of view in a plot that deals with a conspiracy. Characters are created with basis on their *Orishas* as an alternative to the *Judeo-Christian* model. This gives a diversity of ethical and conceptual ways to solve the challenges of the plot adding to its replayability; Finally, we studied the stereotypes on character illustration in games that seem to put characters of different ethnic groups and people outside of the beauty standards, as satellites orbiting the so-called “king consumer”: male, white, heterosexual, middle/high class, mostly Christian: the historical colonizers. To create alternatives to raise awareness amongst our students about these stereotypes and stimulate the search for alternatives each character card they create has to undergo the Decolonial Test, as we explained above.

We are still in the initial stages of our research, but the results are promising, as our students, future game designers, have embraced this challenge with enthusiasm. We are hopeful that our research into Decolonial alternatives to these paradigms may help the subaltern to play, learn, but also create games.

ENDNOTES

1 For more information about the *Incorporeal system*: <http://historias.interativas.nom.br/incorporealproject/>

2 This experience is described in more details in the paper “The Incorporeal Project: Teaching through Tabletop RPGs in Brazil” (Bettocchi et al. 2019).

3 GET, short for *Grupo de Educação Tutorial* (Tutorial Education Program), is a scholarship for undergraduate students of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, which has the goal of training young researchers in several academic activities.

4 <http://historias.interativas.nom.br/witchcrafttales/>

5 According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 54,3% of the Brazilian population has declared to be of black, Brazilian native or *pardo* (multiracial) ethnicity (IBGE 2015), and a research from the National Association of Directors of Federal Higher Education Institutions asserts that 52,1% of the students enrolled at Brazilian Federal Universities in 2018 are black, *pardo* or Brazilian native (Andifes 2019).

6 The term “Incorporeal” here is being used with three main references:

- Stoic concept: “the stoics stated that only bodies exist (even the soul was corporeal, being a sutil and invisible breath, the *pneuma*). They also stated that there are certain things that do not properly exist, but rather subsist through other things, being incorporeal. Among the incorporeals they put the expressible, that is, language or discourse, and they put the study of discourse or of the logi in a special philosophical discipline, logic” (Chauí 2001, 192). See also: (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/stoicism/>).
- The definition of immaterial (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/incorporeal>);
- The act of incorporating, like joining, mixing, making part of (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/incorporate>).

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6i5Ylu0mgM>

8 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messianism>

9 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dualistic_cosmology

10 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_ratio

11 <http://historias.interativas.nom.br/lilithstudio/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/gdd-terranova.pdf>

12 A *quilombo* (Portuguese pronunciation: [ki'lõbu]; from the Kimbundu word *kilombo*, "war camp") is a Brazilian hinterland settlement founded by people of African origin including the *quilombolas*, or maroons and others sometimes called Carabali. Most of the inhabitants of quilombos (called *quilombolas*) were escaped slaves. A similar settlement exists in the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America, and is called a *palenque*. Its inhabitants are *palenqueros* who speak various Spanish-African-

based creole languages. Quilombos are identified as one of three basic forms of active resistance by slaves. The other two are attempts to seize power and armed insurrections for amelioration. Typically, quilombos are a "pre-19th century phenomenon". The prevalence of the last two increased in the first half of 19th-century Brazil, which was undergoing both political transition and increased slave trade at the time. See also: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quilombo>

13 For the common use of the terms, see: <https://www.lasertimepodcast.com/2014/11/23/3-ways-ludonarrative-consonance-makes-better-games-and-players/>; <http://www.mattiebrice.com/ludonarrative-resonance/>; <http://www.realityrefracted.com/2013/03/ludonarrative-why-it-matters.html>

14 In the 17th and 18th centuries, the main argument for the legitimacy of slavery of the African peoples was the religious motive. This religious argument stated that the dark skinned peoples of Africa, the so called "black race" were "cursed and without soul". This was based on an element of Judeo-Christian mythology, "the Curse of Caim and his descendants". This was the justification for the submission of these peoples turning them into objects and tools of work, depriving them of any subjectivity and from the right to their own bodies. In the middle of the 19th century, the religious-mythological argument lost its strength and the legitimacy of slavery became based on pseudo-scientific arguments. Alongside Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution and the positivism philosophy of Imperialist Europe, came the concepts Race and Eugenics. Without knowledge of the genetic code (DNA was only discovered in 1954), scientists devoted to positivism created theories, based on a distortion of Darwin's theory, proposed that humanity evolved from more primitive beings to lesser primitive ones reaching an evolutionary apex in the white Christian European peoples (even religions were classified this way: the more animistic, the more primitive it was. The most evolved religions were the monotheistic ones). This way these theories provided a perfect legitimization for the submission of non-white peoples by the white peoples, with the black being at the base of the evolutionary pyramid. Therefore, cultural assimilation and the erasure of subjectivity were viewed as a kind of "charity", a "duty" that the evolved white had to fulfill for the benefit of their poor and inferior servants. Eugenic appears, a concept of "improving the races" based on selective breeding (rape) between white males and their non-white female slaves. This led to the emergence of a desperate need from non-white to "breed" with light-skinned people to whiten their children, for this way they would have more chances of reaching better living conditions and of "evolving". This despair reinforced the erasure of subjectivity. Even though they had dark skin, these people tried to behave and dress as though they were white people, submitting their bodies and minds to all kinds of aesthetic and discursive violence, in search of acceptance. This concept of a symbolic "race" that comes from an imperialist pseudoscience under the service of a mechanism of oppression is what feeds Racism.

15 E.g., your choices may lead you to this Concept: <https://forms.gle/5vzjrWrhHTxqF9sZA>

16 <http://historias.interativas.nom.br/lilithstudio/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/gdd-cardgame.pdf>

17 <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/propp.pdf>

18 <http://www.historias.interativas.nom.br/incorporais/sorteadores/relacionamentos>

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